

# George MacDonald

## *Poet and Theologian*

MACDONALD IS PRIMARILY A theological thinker and writer. This seems surprising to many as he is mostly known today for his fiction and fairy-tales and his influence on the famous Inklings, especially C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. This book explores MacDonald's theological rationale for writing Christian fiction, arguing that it is precisely in his less overt theological works of fiction that one finds some of his most profound thinking on the lived dimension of Christian faith. When MacDonald has been considered as a serious theologian (as is the case in two of the most recent important works on MacDonald), his theology, and especially his theological understanding of the imagination, is not brought to bear upon his intentional creation of Christian fiction for expressing his theology.<sup>1</sup> Only when one considers both the form and the content of his works of fiction as theology does one come to a deeper understanding of his particular theology, a theology that aims at the participation and transformation of his literary audience. Many went before MacDonald and shaped him in profound ways, but the greatest influence upon MacDonald always remained Scripture. His imaginative engagement with the world, Scripture, and literature made him a unique voice within

1. It was Kerry Dearborn's groundbreaking doctoral dissertation that ushered in a new era in MacDonald scholarship from a theological perspective. See Dearborn, "Prophetic or Heretic." Her published work focuses on the theological importance of the imagination: Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*. Thomas Gerold's published PhD dissertation focuses on MacDonald's theological anthropology. Gerold, *Gotteskindschaft*. Both of these works are immense contributions to understanding George MacDonald as a theological thinker and writer.

his Victorian context, where story became a primary way to express his theology—a kinship that is ancient but often forgotten in our time, especially in theological circles. Today we would call George MacDonald a spiritual theologian because his primary interest was in the lived dimension of the Christian faith. All of his writings give witness to this pastoral concern, but his fiction does so in a unique way.

MacDonald employed a wide range of genres for his writing. Realistic fiction, mostly set in Scotland and England, make up the largest part of the MacDonald corpus. These novels are significant theologically, as MacDonald addresses many theological issues of his time in these novels, often employing the Aberdeenshire dialect Doric for his most important discussions.<sup>2</sup> MacDonald also wrote poetry and essays on literature, the imagination, and human development. He translated significant literary works from German, Latin, and Italian, including works by Novalis, Schiller, Goethe, Heine, Luther, and Milton.<sup>3</sup> He wrote and preached sermons throughout his life, and these sermons are an important key to understanding his theology. In what follows, we shall provide a brief introduction to George MacDonald that focuses on his Scottish theological background, his emerging interest in literature, and his call to pastoral ministry.<sup>4</sup>

## MacDonald's Scottish Background

George MacDonald was born in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, Scotland in 1824 to a financially struggling family, deeply steeped in rural culture with strong roots in Scottish reformed Protestantism. Like his mother, George MacDonald struggled with tuberculosis for most of his life but lived to the

2. Dearborn, for example, draws heavily on these novels for tracing MacDonald's theology. Dearborn, "Prophet or Heretic."

3. In *England's Antiphon* he discusses the history of English religious poetry. *Rampolli* contains many of MacDonald's translations.

4. Both Dearborn and Gerold provide careful introductions to his theological and literary background, though I shall offer some different perspectives to the Romantic influences in what follows. Due to the parameters of this book, we will not be able provide a complete biography of MacDonald's life. Important biographies include Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker*; Greville MacDonald, *MacDonald and Wife*; Raeper, *George MacDonald*. Raeper's biography is the most helpful introduction. Greville MacDonald's biography is important as he offers a wealth of information, but must be read with caution. His close relationship with his father makes him less critical, and at times one cannot be certain whether his writing reflects his or his father's opinions. Rolland Hein's biography is important because his access to unpublished MacDonald letters adds some helpful information on MacDonald's life.

age of eighty-one and died in 1905. While MacDonald's maternal grandparents were Catholic, the primary spiritual influence came from his paternal grandparents and his father, who were Protestant. MacDonald's mother died when he was only nine. His grandmother left the mainstream Presbyterian church to attend an independent church called "The Missionar Kirk," which split off from the mainstream Reformed church as a result of the Secession. The family ran a bleaching business but was financially burdened due to a family scandal. MacDonald's uncle Charles had fled the country after accumulating a high amount of debt in illegal financial affairs, and MacDonald's family was held responsible to pay back the debt. George MacDonald's grandmother, a strong and religiously fervent woman, believed that it was Charles's violin lessons that lured him into Satan's snares and resulted in his scandalous behavior. Not uncommon among Secession churches, she burned his violin, believing that music had a bad influence on her children.<sup>5</sup> We mention this particular incident as it shows that MacDonald grew up in a religious context that had at least a skeptical but sometimes even hostile attitude towards the arts. The novel *Robert Falconer* contains autobiographical references to this incident. Greville, George MacDonald's son, mentions that Secession churches on the Isle of Lewis burned pipes and fiddles. How was it possible that such a seemingly narrow religious context would produce one of the most creative and prolific spiritual theologians of the Victorian period?

### MacDonald's Theological Background: Scottish Calvinism

MacDonald grew up in a reformed Scottish church that was deeply steeped in scholastic Calvinism of the time. A one-sided emphasis on the sovereignty of God, double predestination, the wrath and judgment of God, and a highly mechanical, impersonal, and legal/contractual understanding of the atonement with a focus on humanity's utter depravity provided the seedbed for a spirituality that was fueled by fear and great uncertainty of one's election into God's kingdom. It also eclipsed God's great love and compassion for his creation. Good works were seen as a sign of God's sovereign election of the believer, and this belief developed into a severe and rigid form of legalism. Kerry Dearborn in particular

5. Greville MacDonald, *MacDonald and Wife*, 27–29; Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 19–20; Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker*, 30–31.

has gone to great lengths to show the kind of theory of atonement that MacDonald sought to critique and move away from.<sup>6</sup>

The character of Annie Anderson, an orphan child in MacDonald's adult novel *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, personifies the kind of terror a child would have felt by being continually exposed to this particular teaching. MacDonald provides a careful account of the preaching of Annie's local Missionar Kirk and her response to it. It is worth quoting MacDonald here at some length in order to demonstrate the pastoral impact of this particular teaching:

He chose for his text these words of the Psalmist: 'The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.' His sermon . . . consisted simply of answers to the two questions: 'Who are the wicked?' and 'What is their fate?' The answer to the former question was, 'The wicked are those that forget God;' the answer to the latter, 'The torments of everlasting fire.' Upon Annie the sermon produced the immediate conviction that she was one of the wicked, and that she was in danger of hell-fire . . . A spiritual terror was seated on the throne of the universe, and was called God—and to whom should she pray against it? Amidst the darkness, a deeper darkness fell. She knelt by her bedside, but she could not lift up her heart; for was she not one of them that forget God? And was she not therefore wicked? And was not God angry with her every day? Was not the fact that she could not pray a certain proof that she was out of God's favour, and counted unworthy of his notice? But there was Jesus Christ: she would cry to him. But did she believe in him? She tried hard to convince herself that she did; but at last she laid her weary head on the bed, and groaned in her young despair.<sup>7</sup>

MacDonald's theological and pastoral response to this one-sided and at times distorted theological perspective of this particular scholastic Calvinism was a nuanced one. He continued to affirm the sovereignty of God, rejected double predestination, and focused on the love rather than the wrath of God as the primary motivation of God's redemptive work. He developed a strong emphasis on Jesus, the atoner himself, and his work of reconciling his creation to a loving and forgiving Father. Annie's discovery of the Parable of the Prodigal Son later in the novel gives expression to

6. Dearborn, "Prophet or Heretic," 100–129; idem, *Baptized Imagination*, 10–14. For a helpful introduction to the development of Calvin's thought into scholastic Calvinism of MacDonald's time, see Hart, "Reformed Theology."

7. George MacDonald, *Alec Forbes*, 114–16.

MacDonald's theological and pastoral emphasis: it is the love and compassion of God the Father that motivates him to redeem his creation in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Gerold's careful systematic study of George MacDonald's theology highlights and explores this important emphasis.<sup>9</sup> Surely MacDonald's strong and loving relationship with his own father was a major influence and inspiration in this regard, as well as other contemporary theologians like Thomas Erskine (1788–1870), John McLeod Campbell (1800–1872), and F. D. Maurice (1805–1872).<sup>10</sup>

MacDonald also never lost his love and concern for the physically and spiritually poor, another important heritage of his Scottish Calvinist upbringing. His social consciousness continued to develop under the influence of the Christian Socialist Movement, a movement that found its beginning within the Church of England in the mid-nineteenth century pioneered by such figures as J. M. Ludlow, F. D. Maurice, and Charles Kingsley, the two latter ones personally known by George MacDonald.<sup>11</sup> Industrialization brought with it an urbanization of society and incredible poverty amongst the working class masses in the cities. Peter Jones bemoans the “social complacency” of much of Victorian religious society, and it was a complacency that MacDonald found intolerable and in contradiction to his understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

For MacDonald the gospel must reach into all spheres of life, including the social dimensions, and F. D. Maurice was a great inspiration for him in this regard. This dual emphasis on personal formation and social concern for the poor was an important corrective to a spirituality that tended to emphasize the perfection of the individual, especially popular in the Evangelical party of the Church of England that had been strongly influenced by the Puritan teachings on holiness.<sup>13</sup> An important way the Christian Socialists sought to help the working class was through providing education. Mac-

8. *Ibid.*, 361.

9. Gerold, *Gotteskindschaft*.

10. See here especially Horrocks, *Laws*. For the influence of F. M. Maurice on George MacDonald, see Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 48–65. For MacDonald's relationship with his father see the many personal correspondences in Sadler, *Expression of Character*.

11. Jones, *Christian Socialist Revival*.

12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. Woodworth, *Christian Socialism*, 17–18. George MacDonald's adult novel *Robert Falconer* is a profound reflection on this important dual emphasis in Christian spirituality.

Donald became involved with Bedford College, London teaching English literature, the first British institution to offer higher education for women. MacDonald's affirmation of and concern for women is not rooted in his Scottish heritage but seems to have emerged out of his own understanding of a personal God who has both masculine and feminine attributes and the many female characters that play significant roles in the Bible.<sup>14</sup> MacDonald did not believe that women were the weaker sex, and his choice of female figures for personification of divine attributes in many of his novels and fiction expresses this conviction.<sup>15</sup> The great-grandmother Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* is surely one of the most powerful and beautiful examples: exuberant in femininity, gentleness of spirit, strength, wisdom, and truth.

## George MacDonald, Scripture, and the Parables: Some Introductory Notes

A profound impact on MacDonald's life was his daily exposure to and profound knowledge of Scripture. Raised in a rural Scottish village with a family deeply committed to the Christian faith, his growing up years were marked by daily readings of the Bible. At the age of forty-two, he writes that he has studied the Gospels more than any other book.<sup>16</sup> MacDonald's theological training further contributed to his knowledge of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> In several adult novels MacDonald depicts the importance and centrality of Scripture in the rural Scottish Presbyterian tradition of his day. Janet and David Elginbrod in *David Elginbrod* (1863), Janet Grant in *Sir Gibbie* (1879), and John McLearn in *Salted with Fire* (1897)

14. Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 113–14. Surely his study of women in the Bible was a major inspiration. See his collections of poems on “Gospel Women” in George MacDonald, *Poetical Works*, 1:221–47.

15. It is obvious in the short story “The Day Boy and the Night Girl” that the girl Nycteris has a stronger character than the boy Photogen. See George MacDonald, *Fairytales*, 304–41.

16. As one would expect of someone who reads the Bible throughout life, MacDonald not only enjoyed reading Scripture but also wrestled with its content. See his various comments on this subject matter in his letters in Sadler, *Expression of Character*, 17, 22, 59, 62, 153–54, 156, 170–71, 179, 275–78, 284, 292, 301. MacDonald read both the NT in Greek and the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures.

17. To what extent this was so, we cannot say as there are no records available on his time spent at Highbury College. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 63–64; Greville MacDonald, *MacDonald and Wife*, 118.

are all characters that exemplify this deep commitment to reading and knowing Scripture within the family context. MacDonald's many sermons also show his careful engagement with the Bible, focusing primarily on the New Testament (NT).

The parables of Jesus play significant roles in MacDonald's adult fiction and in the spiritual development of his characters. The Parable of the Prodigal Son features prominently in *Robert Falconer*, and Robert and Janet Grant read the Parable of the Prodigal Son to Sir Gibbie in *Sir Gibbie*. Hearing this parable provides a turning point in Annie Anderson's life in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*. Dearborn argues that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the most important parable in the MacDonald corpus and shaped his theology in considerable ways.<sup>18</sup> MacDonald's short story "The Castle: A Parable" bears significant similarities to the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12 par). Rector Wingfold in *There and Back* reverts to the model of parable speaking in seeking to imitate his Lord. In *Adela Cathcart* the curate Ralf Armstrong employs parable speaking. MacDonald's careful engagement with the Bible can also be seen in the many Scriptural references and allusions that are woven into his fairytales and fantasy novels. This aspect of MacDonald's writing is often neglected by MacDonald scholarship, but we shall pay special attention to it in our discussion of *Lilith*.

## Literary Influences and the Shaping of MacDonald's Pastoral Imagination

Another important influence upon MacDonald is his interest in and knowledge of literature in general and the German and English Romantic tradition, with its emphasis on aesthetics and poetics as a way to approach mystery, in particular. It is remarkable that MacDonald, despite the prevalent suspicion towards art in his own tradition, began thinking about the importance of poetry and the imagination at an early age. Surely his exposure to the Bible (King James Version) with its poetic aspects and the Celtic tradition in childhood paved the way for a more conscious engagement with poetics at a later stage in his life. George MacDonald's maternal uncle George MacKay was a Celtic scholar and a friend of Sir Walter Scott. Due to his ill health in childhood, George MacDonald spent

18. Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 113.

many a summer holiday with his uncle's family by the coast.<sup>19</sup> MacDonald started reading German literature some time during his college years at King's College in Aberdeen and must have taught himself to read it.<sup>20</sup> At the age of twenty-six, he was able to give an impressive translation of Novalis' "Spiritual Songs," taking his introductory notes from Tieck's writings on Novalis. It was of importance for MacDonald to keep "the rhythm and rhyme of the original" as much as possible.<sup>21</sup> This is remarkable because MacDonald never took a degree in literature or German, and yet his grasp of the German language with its poetic nuances is impressive. To this day, his translations of Luther's hymns are the choice translations used in the American Edition of *Luther's Works* because they capture the rhythm and rhyme of the original so well.<sup>22</sup>

MacDonald's studies at King's College Aberdeen included classical languages (Latin and Greek) and the sciences (mathematics, physics, and chemistry). In preparation for becoming a pastor, he went to study theology at Highbury Theological College, London. It was during this time that he was exposed to lectures on literature by A. J. Scott at Marylebone Institute.<sup>23</sup> It was most likely Scott's passion for both theology and literature and his wide range of interests in general that shaped MacDonald's journey in a significant way.<sup>24</sup> Scott was friends with Thomas Erskine, F. D. Maurice, and John Ruskin, and he opened many doors for MacDonald. Under the influence of Scott, MacDonald also turned to lecturing on literature as early as 1853, and his talks included lectures on Dante,

19. On MacDonald's Celtic roots see Greville MacDonald, *MacDonald and Wife*, 38, 44, 46–47. Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 14–17. Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker*, 39.

20. Greville suggests that MacDonald came across a whole range of romances and German classics while cataloguing a library in the north of Scotland during his summer break in 1842. Greville MacDonald, *MacDonald and Wife*, 72–73.

21. George MacDonald, *Spiritual Songs*, vi.

22. Leupould, *Luther's Works*, 189–94.

23. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 43, 67–68.

24. MacDonald dedicated his novel *Robert Falconer* to Scott and writes: "To the memory of the man who stands highest in the oratory of my memory, Alexander John Scott." Thomas Erskine, a close friend of Scott's, writes about Scott in the preface to one of Scott's books: "I often wondered . . . at the number and variety of matters in which he took interest, and which he had made himself master of; and yet I always felt that he never lost sight of the relation of each department to the great whole, the place which it held in the hierarchy of things." Scott, *Discourses*, xvii. See also MacDonald's many comments on and letters to A. J. Scott in Sadler, *Expression of Character*. For a sample of Scott's lectures on literature see Scott, *Vernacular Literature*.



Shakespeare, Milton, Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, Tennyson, Wordsworth, and Shelley.<sup>25</sup>

## The Call to Pastoral Ministry

Another shaping force was MacDonald's strong sense of call to pastoral ministry. His first intention was not to become a writer. He had set his heart on becoming a minister, and his official training had prepared him for this vocation. His employment as a congregational minister in Arundel, a small town south of London, did not, however, last very long. Soon his orthodoxy was questioned, as MacDonald believed that animals would go to heaven and that "heathens" would be given another chance in the afterlife. He was also accused of being "tainted with German theology," which was probably related to MacDonald's recent private publication of Novalis' "Spiritual Songs." He was forced to resign his office in 1853 after being a minister to this congregation for less than three years.<sup>26</sup>

What is significant at this point of MacDonald's life is that he had no intention to lay down his calling as a preacher of the gospel. In March 1853 he writes to his brother: "My desire from God is that he would give me a place to speak freely and work freely in." Similarly, he writes to his father the same year: "Do not think I intend giving up preaching—but I shall be very happy not to be dependent on it—if so it pleases God. Preaching I think is in part my mission in this world and I shall try to fulfil it."<sup>27</sup> The writing life that unfolded before MacDonald, sometimes under the most painful circumstances of vocational uncertainty, physical suffering, financial poverty, and the loss of many loved ones, became the context in which he was able to speak and write freely. The pen, as Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson puts it, became his pulpit.<sup>28</sup> Ronald MacDonald, MacDonald's son, asserts that

Because his religion was his life, he could no more divide the religious from the secular than a fish separate swimming from water . . . I have heard of men whose whole lives were coloured by religion. But George MacDonald's life *was* religion . . . his

25. Amell, *Art of God*. Amell introduces this collection with a helpful essay on MacDonald's development as a lecturer under the influence of Scott.

26. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 90–95. Greville MacDonald, *MacDonald and Wife*, 177–80.

27. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 94. Sadler, *Expression of Character*, 67.

28. Johnson, "Sacred Story," 35.

imaginative faculty was a prism, falling through which the Great White Light was disparded into seventy times seven hues of human delight.<sup>29</sup>

While MacDonald scholarship is in consensus that this might be true for his adult novels, poems, and written sermons, there is less agreement about his fantasy and fairytales and to what extent these are theological and were written in the service of the gospel. By looking at George MacDonald within the parabolic tradition of the NT and the subversive poetics of the Romantics, we seek to shed new light on this very important question and reconsider whether Ronald MacDonald's assessment that MacDonald could not "divide the religious from the secular" is indeed correct.

In the following chapter we shall look at the parables of Jesus. There is considerable confusion over what parables actually are and how they function. Drawing on the philosophy of language will shall explore the nature of the parables of Jesus. This discussion will become very important for understanding MacDonald's use of poetic language and parabolic patterns, and it will provide new insight into one of MacDonald's most difficult works of fiction: *Lilith*. It is remarkable how much contemporary discussions on the philosophy of language resonate with George MacDonald's understanding of poetics and the imagination.

29. Ronald MacDonald, "George MacDonald," 112–13.