

Straddling Boundaries: *Gutta Percha Willie* and the 1870 Education Act

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George MacDonald's *The History of Gutta Percha Willie*, also known as *Gutta Percha Willie, The Working Genius*, generally is categorized as one of MacDonald's three realistic children's novels. Written in the early 1870s—it was serialized in 1872 before being published in book form in 1873—the book presents a romanticized, idealized view of childhood, or, more accurately, of the journey from childhood into adulthood. Set not quite in the realm of reality and not quite in the realm of the fantastic, *Gutta Percha Willie* straddles a number of boundaries. For example, while the book lacks the out-and-out didactic tone of some other 19th century works for children, as MacDonald does not use what Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros terms the “common device in didactic fiction [which] is to contrast an ideal character with one whose actions disagree with the model behavior” (874), MacDonald's topic clearly is the education of children. After introducing, in the first chapter, Willie and his home, MacDonald titles the second chapter “Willie's Education” and, in the first paragraph, tells the reader that Willie's “father had unusual ideas about how he [Willie] ought to be educated” (7). The remainder of the book follows Willie as he learns a variety of physical and mental skills. While Willie's father may have had unusual ideas about his son's education, MacDonald does not resort to dispensing formulaic rules through a “paternal . . . mouthpiece” (874), as Lecaros found was usually the case when writers tried to couch in fictional form how children “ought” to behave. Rather, MacDonald “makes a story” (6) of Willie's education, leaving the reader to decide whether and how to apply the ideas.

The inciting incident for the story, however, may have occurred far from the fictional village of Priory Leas and may have had as much to do with contemporary disagreements over politics and religion as with education. *Gutta Percha Willie* may have been MacDonald's response to the political discussion in the British Houses of Parliament surrounding the 1870 Education Act, an act which mandated school attendance for children ages five through twelve. The precepts and consequences of this and similar acts still generate heated debate on both sides of the Atlantic almost a century and a half later. In this paper, I briefly recount the history of Western thinking about education, then examine the context in which the 1870 Act was set, and, finally, discuss MacDonald's attempts to reconcile disparate perspectives about education in *Gutta Percha Willie, The Working Genius*.

The Historical Context

How children should be educated has occasioned dialogue since the first generation produced the second and was faced with the task of taking squalling, helpless infants and turning them into self-reliant, socially productive adults. Add to these temporal considerations the larger questions of how to help the next generation find answers to questions of ultimate meaning and of the eternal versus the temporal, and the dialogue takes on greater significance. No culture or historical era has produced a surefire list of do's and don'ts, which, when followed, guaranteed a satisfactory outcome—but the thinkers of every culture and historical era have contributed to the collective child-rearing wisdom.

John L. Elias, writing in *A History of Christian Education: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Perspectives*, notes Christian education—and, one might argue, much of all Western education—“developed in relationship to the education prevalent among Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans” (1). In today's largely secular world, our awareness and understanding of the spirituality inherent in all three cultures, which affected both the motives for educating children and the processes by which such education was accomplished, has faded. But this spirituality, an intrinsic part of the written material produced by each of the three cultures, gave rise to a tension between the temporal and the eternal that has persisted, in varying forms, until even today.

In its earliest form, Elias writes, the tension for Christians largely was due to belief in the immanent return of Christ to the earth. The implicit question was whether Christians were just passing through this world and ought to “shun such activities as politics, education, and the military” (citing Barclay, 24)—and, presumably, the education necessary for participation in such activities—or whether Christians were responsible for imbuing the affairs of the world with spiritual thinking and, therefore, must educate themselves accordingly. Over time, this led to disputes over whether the classical Greek and Roman literature, with their pagan perspectives, ought to be taught alongside the Old and New Testament Scriptures (25). Medieval education debates were “over the nature of education as rational or mystical,” with the rational thought predominating by about the end of the thirteenth century with the rise of Christian humanism (65). Not to be confused with the modern use of the term, the humanism of the early Renaissance said people, primarily men, should be trained “for the betterment of [human] society,” as opposed to being trained toward eternal goals (68). It is in this sense of the word that today's Colleges of Arts and Sciences teach the humanities, which include the subjects of both literature and chemistry, for instance, with religion included as one subject among many.

Humanistic thinking in England, writes Elias, was shaped by two non-English thinkers, the Hollander Erasmus and the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives, both of whom influenced and were influenced by Thomas More. More's 1516 *Utopia*, as described by Elias, is worth noting here, as its possible influence on MacDonald's thinking will be discussed later in this paper:

More presented the goal of life in terms of making people happy not by satisfying their wants but by helping them curb their greed and pride. Utopians are seemingly happy because they live a life that is natural, disciplined, rational, and virtuous. In Utopia there is neither war, nor poverty, nor religious differences, nor private property. In this work More expressed his strong conviction that the world could be reformed through education. While he recognized that for some people in society intellectual pursuits were an all-important activity, he realistically knew that many preferred to occupy themselves with their trades or practices, which he also considered useful for the common wealth. (83)

Despite More's utopian visions for life on this earth, he also "struggled greatly with the ongoing humanist debate over the relative advantages of the active life and the contemplative life" (83).

The Reformation thinkers, "emphasizing as they did the necessity of divine initiative and grace for all worthwhile human activity" (86), reminded the humanists that, doctrinally, apart from a change in human nature, utopian visions were mere pipe dreams. That does not mean, however, that the reformers eschewed education as being futile. Elias notes that Martin Luther's writings include essays on the education of children and that the reformers promoted nationalized systems of education available to people of all classes (86-87). The "educational reconciliation of religious faith and human reason" remained a focus of debate, but the discussion began to turn more towards *how* children ought to be taught as opposed to what.

In particular, John Comenius, the Czech Bohemian Brethren leader and creator of the first illustrated book for children, *Orbus pictus* (1658), also wrote *Janua linguarum reserata* (1629-1631), a language textbook for children and youth, because of his conviction that pedagogies developed for teaching adults were not appropriate for teaching children. Elias notes that Comenius is "considered by some the founder of modern educational theory" because he recognized that children's minds are different from adult minds and that the methods by which children are taught must differ according to their development (109). Howard Louthan and Andrea Sterk discuss this more fully in their introduction to their translation of Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, writing that

Comenius “argued that methods of rote memory and recitation should be abandoned in favor of more natural means. He noted that the mind of the child is more concerned with concrete objects than with the more abstract notions of grammatical construction” (18). Comenius’ *Didactica magna* (1638) discusses in detail Comenius’ understanding of the stages of human development, the appropriate pedagogies—the more natural means—for each stage, the recognition that each child has a particular natural inclination, and the ordering of the classroom and schools in which to implement such an education (Elias 111). Comenius’ work, also, will be discussed in relation to MacDonald’s *Gutta Percha Willie*.

Finally, the Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century tipped the scales toward “human reason and not faith nor tradition as the principal guide for all human conduct,” and its proponents “replaced this otherworldly view with a natural religion or deism that limited God’s activity to creation and providence” (Elias 128). Such tipping led to the virtual shattering of several long-held assumptions about the way humanity works. John Locke’s ideas led to “the rejection of the divine right of kings, [the] lessening of the authority of the church, and the advance of religious toleration” (129). Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideas led to “a secular understanding for the origin of societies and nations” (129). Adam Smith’s thinking suggested a “human reliance on a free market that would ensure the happiness of all” (129).

Universal education came to be seen as the way to accomplish these goals of self-governance and self-provision, but the pedagogical methods propounded by Locke and Rousseau varied dramatically. Locke, who saw the Bible as providing moral direction, stressed providing reasons for everything, even to very young children, with discipline administered as needed to correct errant behavior (Elias 134-135). Rousseau, on the other hand, saw experience as the teacher of morality and felt “[l]earning came naturally through play and observation. The role of the teacher was not to direct or instruct but to aid children to learn from experiences” (Elias 136). Other thinkers of the Enlightenment provided variations along this continuum of learning through another’s reasoning—as opposed to another’s authoritative and dogmatic preaching and teaching—and learning through one’s own experiences; they also continued to debate the roles of religion and of government in education.

As rational and reasonable as all of this sounded, these ideas led to more than just a verbal sparring match. The Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, ended with the bloody French Revolution followed by the Napoleonic Wars; just prior to these continental wars, the American Revolution began the slow dissolution of the British Empire. Additionally, the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and the development of empirical

science brought rapid change to Western economies and shifts from rural to more urban societies, where workers were exploited as ruthlessly—maybe more so—as serfs had been.

What followed in the nineteenth century was the development of Romantic thinking—a time of looking back to an idealized world that seemed simpler, more attuned to nature, less dependent on human abilities to observe and reason and more aware of what lay beyond human comprehension. Throughout the nineteenth century, proponents of Enlightenment thinking and adherents to Romantic thinking both challenged defenders of the established governments and religions, and both saw the mass education of future generations—not just the teaching of trades, but the teaching of ideas—as the key to progress. If neither monarchies nor churches were to tell people what to do and how to live, if people were to govern themselves, then—for the good of everyone—people needed to be taught how to make wise decisions based on the wisdom of the ages. Major changes in the philosophies of education were about to take place. Of Britain, in particular, Ellis writes:

While Enlightenment political ideas did not succeed in establishing a republic in regal England, they did serve to loosen education from the control of the Anglican Church and the middle classes and to extend education to poor children throughout the country. Education in early nineteenth-century England was caught in crossfire between the defense of ecclesiastical and bourgeois privilege and the liberal, Enlightenment-inspired programs for mass schooling. (149)

This, then, in very simplified form, was the state of thinking about most Western education at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the century into which George MacDonald was born and in which *Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* was written.

The 1870 Education Act

In placing the 1870 Education Act in historical context, D. A. Turner credits Scotsman Robert Owen, half a century before, with the idea of providing formal education for infants—ages three through seven or nursery through the early primary grades. As has been shown, the ideas for such early education long preceded Owen, but between 1819-1820 Owen began putting the ideas into practice. Owen established what was called an infant school, one of many socially progressive programs he espoused, in a planned industrial community in southern Scotland. Owen's theories, Turner writes, were “a radical approach to the education of young children,” where education was presented as “a source of pleasure and amusement,” the “social elements such as learning to live in a community in harmony” were stressed,

and “[c]ompetition was . . . eliminated, with no rewards and punishments” (153). More time was spent playing on outdoor playgrounds and learning through indoor art and music activities than in reading and writing—but it was expected that children could and would learn to read and write. In using these methods, Owen reflects more of Rousseau’s thinking than of Locke’s—but there are echoes of Comenius, More, and other, more ancient, thinkers.

A number of educators studied Owen’s methods and established other infant schools throughout Scotland, Britain, and, later, Ireland—and these schools were intended as “a regular pattern of education for the working classes” (Turner 157). Turner notes that, fifteen years later, “some of the purity of the system had been lost” and the schools had become “training grounds for the lower classes, to accustom them to good habits and industry and to prepare them for National or British schools” (158). Still, the ideas survived that very young children could learn in a formalized setting, that such learning should be from love and not from fear, and that play was an important part of learning. Just how quickly these ideas gained acceptance is apparent from the numbers Turner cites: “Before 1819 there had been no infant schools as such in England, but by 1836 there were almost 3,000, catering for 90,000 children” (158).¹

British schools received some state support and were inspected by national inspectors to be sure they were complying with Owen’s principles and had not fallen into “mere dogmatical teaching” (159). Turner also notes the remarkably “liberal non-denominational nature of its Christian teaching, especially in comparison with the instruction available in other schools” (161). By the 1850s, however, the infant schools were competing for teachers—both male and female—with higher-paying schools catering to older children, as “too many felt they [infant school teachers] needed to be less intelligent or that teaching older children was ‘the more honourable post’” (162). Certification programs were begun and scholarships were offered, but public perception continued to be a problem.

Here, at last, however, we begin to make personal connection with George MacDonald. For one of the staunchest supporters of the system of infant schools was an inspector named Fletcher. When Fletcher died in 1852, Matthew Arnold, later described by MacDonald’s son, Greville, as “ranked among [his parents’] intimates” (300), took Fletcher’s place (Turner 163).

By the 1860s, the effect of inspectors, a system of examinations for infant school teachers, and grants to fund various types of materials caused “indirect effects” in the classrooms (164). Turner quotes an Inspector Mitchell as writing, “The grand object now is to make children read and write and cipher so as to secure the extra grants for these subjects, thus there is no time left for songs, lectures or handclapping or kindergarten” (164). Regardless, infant schools existed in many regions throughout Britain and

served thousands of children, some as young as two years of age, paving the way in the next decade—with the passage of the Act—for “a unique system of state provided obligatory education for a younger age group than anywhere in the world” (165).

However, education still was not compulsory, and that troubled many of the social reformers of the day who realized, as Peter Cunningham noted, education “concerns the distribution of life chances” (qtd. in Baker 211)—chance being what is left when deity is relegated to once-upon-a-time creation and random providential acts. Education, thinkers across the ages have agreed, improves people’s chances at moving from unproductive poverty to productive self-reliance.² Gordon Baker traces the spiritual lives of the three framers and foremost promoters of the 1870 Education Act, sometimes called the Forster Act—Edward Forster, Earl de Grey and Ripon, and Henry Austin Bruce—and notes their “almost identical perspectives on the ‘condition of England’ question” (214). Baker asserts each man’s conclusions were formed independently of the others before they met in 1847 and that “their common philosophy remained essentially intact during the subsequent two decades” (214). Specifically, their philosophy was “a peculiar hybrid of social romanticism and political radicalism,” fostered by the thinking of such romanticists as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Their philosophy included Christian Socialist views, and—although they eschewed utilitarianism, which propounded that a government should, as Jeremy Bentham urged, legislate in favor of whatever benefitted most of its citizens—borrowed “specific elements of Bentham’s philosophical radicalism,” such as universal manhood suffrage (Baker 215, 223).

The result was a proposal that engendered controversy along “[t]hree interconnected issues of great significance . . . : the principal of local rating; the role and form of Christian teaching within the curriculum; and the administrative and financial tensions between the existing voluntary and the new [state-mandated and state-supported] arrangements for working-class schooling” (Baker 229). The issue of local rating entailed the radical notion that local citizens could elect their own school boards to oversee local schools (229). The issue of Christian teaching revolved around the idea—in a country with a closely entwined Official Church and State—that denominational differences were irrelevant when it came to educating Britain’s children (230-231); and the financial tensions centered on the fact that, under this plan, government money might actually be used to fund schools of dissenting denominations (232).

These were the issues of the late 1860s, the issues that were being debated on public stages and in private homes. What is significant to this paper, is that Forster, de Gray, and Bruce, while not specifically mentioned in any of the biographies consulted for this paper, can be tied in more than just

general terms to George MacDonald. Baker writes that the three “attributed many of their intellectual foundations” to the “disciples” of Coleridge—namely, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Arnold, and F. D. Maurice—whose writings inspired the Christian Socialist movement (215). MacDonald, too, drew inspiration from Coleridge and Maurice, attending, in 1854, the latter’s “inaugural lecture at the Working Men’s College”²³ (Raeper 104); receiving a letter from Maurice a year or so later (Raeper 131); becoming a parishioner at St. Peter’s, Vere Street, where Maurice preached from 1860-1869; and, in 1864, naming his ninth child after Maurice and asking the theologian and writer to be godfather to the child (Raeper 224). Additionally, in 1850, Forster married Thomas Arnold’s daughter, Jane—sister to MacDonald’s friend Matthew Arnold. Given MacDonald’s fame as a writer and speaker, it is not unlikely that MacDonald knew Forster and may have known DeGray and Bruce, as well. Certainly, they were alike in their thinking, although MacDonald generally did not address political issues directly as did Forster, DeGray, and Bruce. And, while MacDonald may not have addressed political issues directly in his writing, such issues as education and women’s rights were discussed in his home (Greville MacDonald 300). MacDonald was in the thick of the thinking, if not in the thick of the debate. It is his thinking, as glimpsed in the pages of *Gutta Percha Willie*, to which we turn next.

Straddling Boundaries in *Gutta Percha Willie*

In this final section, I discuss MacDonald’s attempts to reconcile his own disparate perspectives about education as reflected in his not-quite-real, not-quite-fantastical novel, *Gutta Percha Willie*. I first trace the intersection of genres and ideas found in the story back to some of their historic pedagogical roots, then consider the names given Willie and how they reflect MacDonald’s thinking about education, and finally discuss the question of motive and how the historical tensions between religion and education are illustrated in the story.

Intersecting Genres and Ideas

While most often categorized as a realistic novel, *Gutta Percha Willie* contains elements of several genres, including the realistic, romantic/ idyllic, allegoric, didactic, and fantastic. MacDonald took elements of each and wove them into a shimmering web of many colors, as it were. Depending on the angle at which the web is viewed, it might appear more one color than another. Then, again, it may be that, at their extremities, genres themselves blend into one another—and it may be that, through this blending of genres, MacDonald was demonstrating the interconnectedness between the temporal and the eternal.

J. A. Cuddon calls realism “[a]n exceptionally elastic critical term,”

but defines its literary essence as “the portrayal of life with fidelity. . . .not [being] concerned with idealization” (728-29). Examined in this light, *Gutta Percha Willie* stretches the boundaries of realism in both its setting and its characters. MacDonald places Willie in a small village “in a valley in the midst of hills” (2) and populated with such tradesmen as might actually live there. The winter weather is bitter (3), people must work for their living, the town has a “house occupied by several poor people” (9), people become ill and age.

MacDonald heightens the sense of a realistic setting by showing readers, in detail, the tools and processes each tradesman uses to complete his or her tasks, ones with which readers of the day would be very familiar. Willie watches the blacksmith and his helper wield sledge hammer, pincers, and punch against an anvil to bore a hole in a four-inch slab of iron (22), and he learns how to measure the “length and breadth and roundabout” of a foot in order to make a pair of shoes (46). One almost can envision readers nodding in agreement as MacDonald’s narrator explains the particulars of each craft.

More, MacDonald dubs Willie with the odd title *Gutta Percha*, which refers to a natural latex produced by a type of evergreen tree found near Singapore and in other East Asian lands. (I will expand on the symbolic meanings of Willie’s names in the next section.) Felter and Lloyd relate that, in 1842, a British army surgeon found gutta percha useful for covering various types of wounds (967)—it is still used today in dental surgery—and the product soon was exported to other parts of the British Empire, where it was used to make everything from jewelry to golf balls (“*Gutta percha*” par. 2-3). *Gutta percha*, being impervious to water, also was used as an insulator for telegraph cables and made possible the first underwater telegraph cable, which was laid under the English Channel in 1851 (par. 3). In referencing *gutta percha*, MacDonald clearly intended the reader to understand the story as set in a real, contemporary time period. In these respects—the use of a natural and familiar setting, the use of specific occupational details, and the mention of a product whose usefulness the British had only recently discovered—MacDonald’s setting and characters faithfully depict later-nineteenth-century life in rural Scotland or England.

However, some aspects of the novel seem idealized to the point that readers might question how realistically lifelike a portrait MacDonald has painted. Willie, for instance, never misbehaves and never encounters any significant obstacles. Any apparent infractions, such as his endangering the house with a small flood (94-95), quickly are remedied by Willie’s attention and determination. It is at this point that the weave of MacDonald’s web acquires an idyllic—an “environment which is remotely attainable and idealized”, according to Cuddon (412)—and romantic tinge.

Cuddon calls romanticism “a word at once indispensable and useless” (767) because it has acquired so many connotations it has lost any sense of what it denotes. He suggests, however, a number of characteristics of eighteenth century romantic literature, including “an increasing interest in Nature, and in the natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life” and, of particular interest to *Gutta Percha Willie*, an “increasing importance attached to natural genius and the power of the imagination” (769). While the words primitive and uncivilized seem not to apply to Willie, his childhood follows an unregulated, apparently more natural pace than that of many children, and Nature supplies the backdrop for much of his childhood. We first see him taking the weather “as it came. In the hot summer he would lie in the long grass and get cool; in the cold winter he would scamper about and get warm” (3), and many scenes take place in the Priory garden behind Willie’s house.

MacDonald’s natural setting reflects the ideas of early nineteenth century Romanticism, and his emphasis on Willie’s natural mental acuity deepens the connection. From a very young age, Willie “would sit listening intently, trying to understand what he heard” of the adult conversations around him (8); he “looked about him and saw” various things, i.e., he was observant, so much so that, by age nine, “he knew every man of any standing in the village by name and profession (23); and he lies awake at night puzzling out ways to solve practical problems (27). More, MacDonald subtitles the novel *The Working Genius* and writes plainly:

[G]rowing is far from meaning only that you get bigger and stronger. It means that you become able both to understand and to wonder at more of the things about you. There are people who the more they understand, wonder the less; but such are not growing straight; they are growing crooked. . . . Those who are growing the right way, the more they understand, the more they wonder . . . (37)

Willie is growing the right way. He wonders, he understands, and he “was very fond of dreaming” (97), which, as Michael Düring notes, “as an activity of the subconscious, is in [Willie] united with the conscious working of the technical imagination” (16).

Willie’s father facilitates Willie’s “natural” development. At the beginning of Chapter II, the reader learns that Willie does not learn to read until he is “a good deal more than nine years of age,” but it was “not that he was stupid . . . but that he had not learned the good of reading, and therefore had not begun to wish to read” (7). Willie’s father is named as the source of this apparently unusual idea, and the narrator says, “[h]e would no more think of making Willie learn to read before he wished to be taught than he would make him eat if he wasn’t hungry” (7). What causes Willie to wish to read is not for the sake of reading itself but for the sake of being able to read to the

cobbler, Hector, who hasn't the time nor the eyesight to read any longer for himself.

Willie asks his mother to teach him to read, but she, occupied with a new baby and other household matters, cannot accommodate him right away. So Willie proceeds to teach himself to recognize words by using a children's hymnal to reason out the shapes of words to a poem he knows by heart (58-60) and from there to learn more words by applying those to a poem he does not know. However, when his mother is able—"a fortnight after he had begun"—to work with him, "she found, to her astonishment, that he could read a great many words, but that, when she wished him to spell one, he had not the least notion what she meant," having learned neither the concept nor the names of letters (61). This pattern of idealized, romantic goodness of character leading to more exhibitions of both perseverance and natural genius continues throughout the book and plays out against MacDonald's realistic, if romanticized, setting. The addition of quasi-elements of fantasy—Agnes' half-dream of being a bird (187) and Willie's own dream/vision (200-02)—heighten the idyllic depiction of human potential as both soaring upward and as being blessed from above.

Willie's journeying from one townsperson to another to observe and to learn, culminating in a celestial vision of sorts (202)—suggests the genre of allegory and Willie as a type of Everychild living in an Everyplace. Certainly MacDonald's ideas seem to agree, in some respects, with those described in More's allegorical Utopian island community. Willie may not live on a literal island, but the setting MacDonald creates is isolated from the outside world and appears to be self-contained. MacDonald balances the "intellectual pursuits" with those craftspeople who "preferred to occupy themselves with their trades or practices . . . also considered useful for the common wealth" (Ellis 83). MacDonald also seems to be echoing and answering Comenius in his allegory, *The Labyrinth of the World*. Compare these two passages:

When I had reached the age when human reason begins to discern the difference between good and evil, I saw the various estates, classes, callings, occupations, and endeavors in which people engage. It seemed important to me to consider well what group of people I ought to join and with what affairs I should occupy my life. . . . After much struggle and inward deliberation, I came to the decision that I would first observe all human affairs under the sun. Then, after having wisely compared one with another, I would choose a profession that would somehow provide me with what was necessary for a peaceful and pleasant life. (*The Labyrinth of the World*, Chapter 1, 1)

. . . He soon came to know . . . that his father had to work hard to get what money they had. . . . He learned, too, that there was a great deal of suffering in the world, and that his father's business was to try to make it less . . . and this made him see what a useful man his father was, and wish to be also of some good in the world. Then he looked about him and saw that there were a great many ways of getting money, that is, a great many things for doing which people would give money; and he saw that some of those ways were better than others . . . (*Gutta Percha Willie*, Chapter 2, 9)

But is Willie an Everychild? Just as MacDonald straddled the boundary between Realism and Romanticism, so he also walks a fine line between allegory and mere symbolism. If Willie were an Everychild, then this means of allowing learning to occur unforced and according to each child's own timetable ought to work for every child and MacDonald ought to have unapologetically allowed the allegory to stand on its own. Instead, MacDonald argues the other side of the compulsory education question, having his narrator address the reader directly:

Now I am not very sure how this would work with some boys and girls. I am afraid they might never learn to read until they had boys and girls of their own whom they wanted to be better off than, because of their ignorance, they had been themselves. But it worked well in Willie's case, who was neither lazy nor idle. (7-8)

MacDonald repeats this thought later in the passage about growing the right way—in understanding, in the capacity to wonder, and in the desire to act (37)—saying, “Willie was a boy of this kind. I don't care to write about boys and girls, or men and women, who are not growing the right way. They are not interesting enough to write about” (38). However, a government seeking to transition from autocracy to democracy and an economy transitioning from inherited wealth trickling down among all levels of humanity to industrialized self-provision cannot wait for people to want to learn or to become industrious and motivated to work. Again, MacDonald anticipates this objection—his Willie may not learn to read right away, but, in the meantime, he learns other skills. In short, Willie learns what Everychild ought: how to be useful.

Willie's names and MacDonald's Pattern for Educating a Child

Within this web of genres, the structure of the book suggests MacDonald's beliefs about the order in which children ought to learn about the world and their place in it—the education of being useful—and MacDonald's names for his protagonist reflect this pattern. The book opens

thus: “When he had been at school for about three weeks, the boys called him Six-fingered Jack; but his real name was Willie” (1). At this point in the story, the reader does not know the child has not followed the usual pattern of education and has been schooled differently, nor does MacDonald provide an immediate explanation of the Six-Fingered Jack appendage. MacDonald finds other ways to strongly suggest that the child’s ability to work with his hands precedes and informs his ability to succeed at what is more typically thought of as education. Consider this list of MacDonald’s first seven chapter titles and brief synopses of each, for instance:

Chapter I: Who He Was And Where He Was (*Willie in a natural setting*)

Chapter II: Willie’s Education (*Mrs. Wilson spins stories; Willie, age seven, thinks about being useful*)

Chapter III: He Is Turned Into Something He Never Was Before (*Willie, age nine, becomes a big brother and learns to think of others first*)

Chapter IV: He Serves An Apprenticeship (*Willie becomes baby Agnes’ night nurse*)

Chapter V: He Goes To Learn A Trade (*Willie learns to make a pair of boots and learns to honor the person for whom they are made*)

Chapter VI: How Willie Learned to Read Before He Knew His Letters (*Willie, age nine, teaches himself to read in order to read to someone else*)

Chapter VII: Some Things That Came of Willie’s Going to School (*Willie discovers books contain what other people have learned, makes friends with the carpenter’s son, and learns to use carpentry tools*)

Willie learns to want to be useful first, then learns skills, then learns to read, then goes to school where he is introduced to more hand tools. In school, after three short weeks, he acquires the nickname Six-fingered Jack, Jack referring to a sort of Everyman in the way we use John Doe or GI Joe; and his grandmother implies this means he is “the little man that can do everything” (131). To his schoolmates, it must have seemed as though Willie could do anything. Unlike the carpenter’s son, who likely only learned carpentry, Willie had learned the basics of knitting, shoe repair, smithing, masonry, carpentry, furniture repair, clock repair, and more (150-51). Lest the reader not absorb this message, MacDonald states plainly,

[Mr. Macmichael] believed that nothing tended so much to develop common sense—the most precious of faculties—as the doing of things with the hands. Hence he not only encouraged Willie in everything he undertook, but, considering the five hours of school quite sufficient for study of that sort, requested the master not to give him any lessons to do at home. So Willie worked hard during school, and after it had plenty of time to spend in carpentering, so that he soon came to use all the

common bench-tools with ease (74)

Not only does working with the hands develop common sense, MacDonald claims, it also aids in the absorption of academic lessons—“the constant exercise of his mind through his fingers, in giving a second existence outside him—that is, in his mind, made it far easier for him to understand the relations of things that go together to make up a science” (149). Euclidean geometry is easier for Willie, who had built boxes and other objects and who, therefore, has an “idea of the practical relations of the boundaries of spaces” (149). Likewise, the creation of a geared waterwheel prepares Willie to understand the “interdependence of the parts of a sentence” (149), and the dovetailing of wooden joints for the declension of Latin (150). MacDonald clearly couples the manual and mental abilities in this passage:

“It was not from his manual abilities alone that his father had given him the name of Gutta-Percha Willie, but from the fact that his mind, once warmed to interest, could accommodate itself to the peculiarities of any science, just as the gutta-percha which is used for taking a mould fits itself to the outs and ins of any figure.” (150)

Six-fingered Jack, then, refers to the external abilities Willie develops as he learns the rudiments of many trades. Gutta-Percha, on the other hand, refers to the inner malleability of Willie’s soul and spirit that allowed his thoughts, once heated by curiosity, to puzzle their way into the recesses of his soul so that he, himself, became molded into a useful vessel. Any disinterest or resistance on Willie’s part could have halted the process, and it is to this question of motive or will and of the historical tensions between religion and education that we now turn.

The Spanner (Wrench) in the Works or the Question of Motive in Religion and Education

In the first section of this study, I traced the change over the centuries in the emphases on, first, what was taught and, later, how and to whom. The question of whether such change reflects progress or regress is a question for another forum, but the tension exists and can be seen in *Gutta Percha Willie* as the question of primacy of an education of the hands, an education of the mind, or an education of the spirit. More, the underlying question of motive or will runs through the work like a solid bass line, recurring at intervals to provide a steady beat.

I have already established MacDonald’s belief that an education of the hands ought to precede and would inform strongly an education of the mind; however, that is not to say that MacDonald discounted the education of the mind. Willie does go to school, where he “began by trying to get at the sense of [the subjects]. This caused his progress to be slow at first, and

him to appear dull amongst those who merely learned by rote; but as he got a hold of the meaning of it all, his progress grew faster and faster, until at length in most studies he outstripped all the rest" (149). At some point, after conversations with his grandmother (160-64) and with Mr. Shepherd (166-75) in which he determines to become a doctor, he "left his father's house . . . and went to a great town, to receive there a little further preparation for college. The next year he gained a scholarship . . . and was at once fully occupied with classics and mathematics, hoping . . . the next year, to combine with them certain scientific studies" (175).

MacDonald does not follow Willie to college, but instead shows, in the way Willie spends his summer, what he sees as the difference between the formal, other-directed college education of the head and the natural, self-directed education of hands and head—for it would be a mistake to think that working with the hands does not also entail mental work: "Of course, while at college he had no time to work with his hands: all his labour there must be with his head; but when he came home he had plenty of time for both sorts" (177). There follows a description of Willie studying "a couple of hours before breakfast," then working "another hour or two" in his father's surgery or in a laboratory he had built in part of the ruins behind the house where he had previously built himself a bedroom (177). After this time of working with his hands in the sciences, he would "give an hour to preparation for the studies of next term, after which, until their early dinner, he would work at his bench or turning-lathe . . . or do a little mason-work among the ruins . . ." (178) Afternoons were given to reading "history, or tales, or poetry; and in the evening he did whatever he felt inclined to do" (179).

Overlaying the education of hands and head, however, is the education of the spirit, which produces the sense of "wonder" that MacDonald says is part of "the right way of growing" (37). John Pridemore, in his review of the debate over how English and Welsh schools ought, as required by the 1944 Education Act, "to promote the spiritual development of their students" (23)—inspected and reported on, of course—argues that MacDonald's writings reflect a sort of "bilingualism" in that he is "eloquen[t] in alternative but complementary discourses, both theistic and non-theistic" (28). Pridemore refers specifically to MacDonald's ability to write theistically in explicitly realistic works and non-theistically in fantastic works, primarily fairy tales, which present spiritual development as "a process in which the individual responds to the beckoning beyond" (30).⁴ While Pridemore sees these works as separate one from the other, I would argue that *Gutta Percha Willie* contains elements of both explicit theism—as reflected in the conversations about the nature of God that Willie has with various adults—and of non-theism—as reflected in the implicit "beckoning beyond" contained in the passages describing a night world come alive (108-12) and

Agnes' night walk through the treetops (186-88). The beckoning beyond contained in these passages may not be to fairy lands, per se, but they do invite the reader to look beyond literal reality to other possible worlds.

In both types of scenes, MacDonald refuses to privilege one pedagogy over another. The theistic conversations Willie has with various adults (see, for example, 12-15, 17-18, 23-27, etc.) are as reasoned as Locke could wish; the episodes of play and discovery recall Rousseau and the earlier Comenius. His continual emphasis on the ultimate usefulness of whatever one does—Willie's father "always talked about *using*, never about *spending* money" (196)—recalls Bentham's utilitarianism, but MacDonald frames utility in both temporal and eternal terms. Willie's discussion with Mr. Shepherd revolves around the question of who is the more effective healer—Mr. Macmichael, who heals people's bodies with his medicines and may heal their souls with his words, or Mr. Shepherd, whose words may contain "stronger medicine" but which not all are willing to consume (174-75). Again, however, MacDonald refuses to privilege one calling over another, recounting again and again how each person plays a part in the good of the whole (24-7, 51-5, 160-64, 170-75, among others) and, at the end, sending Willie a dream in which his father and Mr. Shepherd appear in equal glory (200-02).

Underlying all is the question of the will and of what motivates a person, for Willie must choose how to spend his time, how to respond to the opportunities he is given, and how to respond to that which challenges him. Here, MacDonald seems to suggest the very young Willie is by nature "neither lazy nor idle" (8), can discern between right and wrong (12-13), and chooses to begin working because "if God works like that all day long, it must be a fine thing to work" (18). MacDonald frames work in the positive light of emulating goodness, rather than in the negative, and erroneous, light of work being part of the curse that came as a result of the Fall, implying that right and reasonable teaching produces willing hearts and hands. MacDonald also uses the adults in Willie's life to help him see work as more than just getting a job done—Willie's father, for instance, points out to Willie that the blacksmith who fixes the door lock to keep the cold weather from creeping into Willie's mother's room "did more for your mother in those few minutes than ten doctors could have done. Think of his great black fingers making a little more sleep and rest and warmth for her—all in those few minutes" (26). Later, Willie sees how "kind" everyone has been in teaching him how to do things and comes to the realization that "he, so far as he could think, did nothing for anybody! That could not be right. . . . This must be looked into, for things could not be allowed to go on like that" (57). From this realization, Willie is spurred to find his own work.

Never is there a sense of struggle, of Willie wanting to do anything

other than what he ought; never does Willie misconstrue anything that is told him. Only twice do the adults around him misspeak, as when Mrs. Wilson tells him a fairy story where the magic is used to cheat rather than to aid (11-14) or when Mr. Shepherd's logic fails him briefly (171-72). In both cases, it is Willie who corrects the adults. He, himself, never needs correcting. Even when, in order to test his motives, his parents insist that his grandmother stop paying him to perform certain chores for her, Willie only is "afraid poor grannie had been too liberal at first, and had spent all her money upon him; therefore he must try to be the more attentive to her now" (136). Twice, MacDonald suggests Willie is, as all people are, subject to conflicting desires. The first comes when he is still a child and he "wish[es] to be pure in heart" (107), implying, perhaps, that he isn't entirely. The second occurs when Willie is at college; then it is Willie's own goodness that enables him to choose correctly: "When he was tempted to any self-indulgence, the thought would always rise that this was not the way to become able to help people . . ." (176).

Willie seems entirely self-motivated, self-corrected, and, if not fully self-actualized—the dream confers a blessing and joy, which seem to come from outside Willie (200-02)—at least the initiator of the cause of blessing: "[Willie] had long ago seen that those who are doomed not to realize their ideal, are just those who will not take the first step towards it. . . . The people . . . who want to be noble and good, begin by taking the first thing that comes to their hand and doing that right, and so they go on from one thing to another, growing better and better." (203-04)

Such thinking seems to anticipate Alfred North Whitehead's (1861-1947) process metaphysics, by which Bernard Loomer (1912-1985) developed process theology, which asserts the "central motivational factor in the cosmos is God—as persuasive love not coercive power" (Goggin 1995, 127). Willie's motivation, MacDonald seems to suggest, agreeing with long ago Reformation thinkers, begins with God's motivating him by providing an opportunity to do, gains momentum with his responding by doing that which he finds at hand, and continues cyclically.

MacDonald may have had something of the sort in mind when he describes Willie's inventing a means of his being awakened in the middle of the night so he can see the beauties of the moonlit world. To create some sort of alarm using the household clock would, of course, disturb the entire household. Instead, Willie is "struck" by the thought that "he had another motive power at his command. . . . His motive power was the stream from the Prior's Well, and the means of using it for his purpose stood on a shelf in the ruins, in the shape of the toy water-wheel which he [had made and] had laid aside as distressingly useless" (99). The "motive power" does not originate

from Willie, it comes from without; but without Willie's water-wheel, the motive power flows on by without activating itself in Willie's life. The water-wheel does not insert itself into the stream; Willie must do so, and he must make adjustments until the apparatus flows smoothly (100-05).

Conclusion

As with discussions surrounding education in our own day, the political debates surrounding the 1870 Education Act, which mandated compulsory education for every child ages five to twelve, were contentious and polemic. The discussions, then as now, have roots extending far back into human history and concerning questions of life beyond this life as well as the life of the immediate and the seemingly urgent.

Then, as now, the discussions could be construed as being waged by adults focused on educating a demographic in order to perpetuate a society rather than on helping individuals "take [their] share in the general business" (207), as MacDonald put it, or to find their place in the world and be fitted to fill it, as we might say today. It should be noted that MacDonald practiced what he preached, at least in some fashion. His own children—eleven in all, plus two adopted later—experienced an education similar to that described in *Gutta Percha Willie*. Greville MacDonald, born in 1856 and the first son after three daughters, writes, "I had no schooling till I was eleven, and could then barely read. But my father would from time to time give me and my sister Grace lessons in Latin and Euclid. They were not successful" (362). Greville indicates his younger brothers and sisters "fared better, as also my two eldest sisters, to whom my mother could give more time...." (362). Greville is careful to acknowledge his father's better knowledge of what spiritual food would attract and nourish a child and to acknowledge the "inestimable privileges of home-life" (367), but he also recounts how "one of these sons found himself at school for the first time, and a wretched ignoramus, in a class of thirty-two boys a year or two younger than himself" (367). Greville went on to become a doctor, but the implication is that it was no thanks to the preparation his early years afforded him.

Nevertheless, MacDonald's *Gutta Percha Willie, The Working Genius*, in all its romantic, at times fantastic, idealism adds an important solo voice, singing a reminder of the full purpose of education in the life of each individual—a lone counterpoint to the rumbling chorus of voices intent on marching society *en masse* through an assembly-line process of being taught at, lectured to, tested, assessed, stamped, and certified as being what some regulating body has determined is educated. We could do worse than to listen.

The author first encountered MacDonald's story about Gutta-Percha Willie in the early 1980's through the efforts of Dan Hamilton, who, in the days before

the Internet and print-on-demand, brought several of MacDonald's stories to the attention of a new generation of readers. The story stuck in her mind and, decades later, spurred her to study MacDonald, his world, and his work.

Endnotes

1. There may have been “no infant schools as such” prior to Owen’s work, but Turner mentions “dame schools” (152), an early form of daycare generally held in the home of the teacher, with instruction ranging from manners to basic academics. R. D. Anderson mentions church (parish) schools and private schools, where working-class parents paid tuition (518). According to Anderson, “from the 1820s the church schools were expanding at the expense of strictly private schools, and it was they which received state subsidies after 1833” (519).
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his introduction to a series of lectures titled “On the Future of Our Educational Institutions,” articulated a counterview, arguing that the state’s attempt to provide education to the masses ultimately would dilute that education to the point it would lose any value it once had (par. 6).
3. The Working Men’s College, founded by F. D. Maurice, was another attempt of social reformers to provide educational opportunities to adults. The College consisted of a series of free lectures on various topics open to the public.
4. It is important to acknowledge here the inability of some people to imagine a beckoning beyond. Fowler suggests “the opposite of faith... is not doubt. Rather, the opposite of faith is nihilism, the inability to image any transcendent environment and despair about the possibility of even negative meaning” (31). Whether this inability is inherent (placed there by God) or is deliberately cultivated by willful disbelief—resulting in a refusal to respond—is a matter of discussion for another forum.

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