

The Stages in Adela Cathcart's Cure

compiled from notes by Nancy Mellon¹

George MacDonald, in an undated letter about *Adela Cathcart* (1864)² written to A. J. Scott,³ after remarking how: “The name of it is stupid, but that is my publisher’s fault, not mine,” goes on observe that: “I don’t think you will consider it careless.” Nevertheless, nearly all critics have regarded it as merely a ramshackle vehicle to carry all the short stories MacDonald had written prior to that date. And they have not appreciated that these stories were created for reading aloud and should be evaluated accordingly. Twenty five years ago Richard Reis recognised that “the therapeutic value of the interpolated fantasies” can provide “a healthy Christian therapy more effective than any ordinary novel.”⁴ MacDonald’s ideas are similar to—and in many ways much in advance of—present-day thinking on the therapeutic uses of fairy tales.⁵ Yet, despite this, only Hal Broome has begun to explore how the included tales help us to understand the theme of the book—that is to say, to understand Adela Cathcart’s cure.⁶

The narrator, John Smith, and the doctor, Harry Armstrong are the only two characters in *Adela Cathcart* who can create fairy tales: the other characters are much too one-sided for this. Adela is depicted as suffering from what an earlier century termed “the wanhope,” and on perceiving her condition Smith instantly decides to take “the homoeopathic system—the only one on which mental distress, at least, can be treated with any advantage” (13). Doctor Armstrong’s method of diagnosis suggests that he too is a homoeopath, although this is not overtly stated. Adela’s condition seems to be essentially what homoeopaths would term a sepia depression. That is to say, it resembles that of the squid, which hides from oppressors behind a black cloud and so has to view its world through this black cloud. Thus the basic medicine which she is given is probably sepia (squid ink) at the appropriate potencies. The crucial point for MacDonald is that the homoeopathic approach is a Christian one—it assists people to overcome out of their own resources, leaving them in perfect freedom.

Broome dates MacDonald’s introduction to homoeopathy to his second attack of lung haemorrhage:

Greville MacDonald relates how [his father] lay on the border between life and death, and was only saved when Dr. Harrison, a homoeopath, bled the dying man in the arm. Thereupon

followed a seemingly miraculous, if slow, recovery, which gave MacDonald decidedly more faith in homoeopathic principles.

For a second opinion, he consulted **[end of page 26]**

Garth Wilkinson, a Swedenborgian and friend of Thomas Lake Harris and Margaret Oliphant (see Robert Lee Woolf's *Strange Stories*). These were not the only homoeopaths that MacDonald knew. When he became interested in something he seems to have always gone straight to the top of the field Now he became a friend of one of the three founders of *The British Journal of Homeopathy*, a Dr John Rutherford Russell. Dr Russell died on 2 Dec. 1866, and in an obituary notice a "D.M." wrote that in Leamington, where the Edinburgh native Russell had moved in 1853, there often gathered "Mr Alexander J. Ellis the Philologist, M.E.S. Dallas, Signor Saffi, and the poet and novelist, Mr George MacDonald, one of whose works is dedicated to him." This work was the second volume of *Adela Cathcart*, which was in the process of being written when Russell died.⁷

One cannot but be astonished at the parallels between this Leamington group and the group which gathered at the house of Dr James Hunt the philologist in Ore in 1858 and included MacDonald and his homoeopathic doctor, Dr Hale (and also an unknown mathematics lecturer from Oxford named Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). The sorts of ideas discussed within these groups were central to MacDonald's thinking around this period of his life.

The scope of Brome's researches permitted him to study only the contemporary physiological/psychological theories behind Adela's treatment. He was not able to examine MacDonald's other aims in writing the book. A joint MacDonald Society/Hearthrose study-workshop on *Adela Cathcart* held in Massachusetts in the summer of 1995 undertook a wider study. We examined MacDonald's spiritual-therapeutic intent and explored in a direct practical way the relevance of his insights to emotional sicknesses which afflict many people at the present day. The results of the second part of the programme were very encouraging, but, as it was a pioneer project, publication at this stage would be inappropriate. Thus only the discoveries which relate to the book itself are described in the present paper.

We discovered that, as well as depicting the stages of Adela's cure, MacDonald has the further aims of establishing a British equivalent of the German *Kunstmärchen* (a literary fairy tale with a social purpose), and

showing the infinite relevance of the Christmas message to our everyday lives. The content and the position of the included stories in *Adela Cathcart* turn out to be highly significant for Adela's cure. MacDonald is anxious to make us aware that both sophisticated fairy tales and simple stories are necessary to this cure, and that all the stories are offered out of love. He is not so cruel to his heroine as to permit a story to be told to her by an unloving person, but he makes it clear enough that such a story, however apt in itself, would have no [27] positive effect upon her. (In *Castle Warlock*, published in the same year as the second edition of *Adela Cathcart*, he repeats this point about the necessity of a loving reader in respect of the—far less effective—practice of reading books to a sick person. When the hero Cosmo lies sick, the insipid but loving heroine who “did not know much about books” reads to him. And MacDonald remarks that it did not matter if “the book she read were foolish, not the less would he mingle it . . . with his own livelier fancies into harmonious and healing dreams.”)⁸

All the stories for Adela, with the exception of “My Uncle Peter,” are described as written or adapted specifically for her. Two stories, however, are not gifts to Adela, although she is present at their telling.⁹ “The Giant’s Heart” is told for a group of children, and the closing story, “The Castle,” is told after Adela’s cure is completed, as a gift to the story-telling club.

The traditional view has always been that stories spoken aloud should be recreated from memory, not read out. But this is primarily so that old tales may be adapted to the needs of each new audience. MacDonald apparently felt that, with inexperienced story tellers, the greater precision achieved by reading out the stories more than compensated for any loss of spontaneity. None of the stories would be of any value to Adela if she merely received them passively. Broome describes how MacDonald is careful to bring out the details of her very positive responses, even though these are sometimes only perceptible to the trained eye. Present-day story-telling therapy usually avoids the danger of useless passive acceptance by encouraging people receiving therapy to create some stories for themselves. Adela’s mental state for much of the book would totally prevent her doing this. And a danger with such an approach is that people may utilise the opportunity to indulge their egoism. But when they can create positively their spontaneous stories are often astonishingly similar to those told to Adela. A high proportion resemble fairy tales (because ordinary people employ the traditional archetypes as a matter of course), the rest tend to be autobiographical accounts of simple events which aroused strong positive emotions. From this point of view we

can look upon Adela as giving the onesided people who gather to help her the opportunity for some self-therapy as they create their stories for her. The narrator John Smith encourages them in this by visiting them individually and coaxing them to tell their life stories to him.

MacDonald made Adela a young middle-class woman because he was well aware from his work in Manchester and at Bedford College in London of the well-nigh unbelievable intellectual deprivations endured by most such young women at the time. The women whom he knew at Bedford College who displayed symptoms like Adela's (in milder form), were probably in their late **[28]** teens like Adela (although today such symptoms could afflict children of thirteen or even younger, and persist in some degree throughout life). Octavia Hill, still only a girl herself, was encouraging her friends to find new and imaginative ways to help such women, believing that if their enthusiasm were roused and harnessed they could be an immeasurably potent force for reform throughout the whole body-social. Possibly from her example, MacDonald realised that most of the qualities which the New Young Woman would require would be the opposite of those which society expected of "The Angel in the House."¹⁰ He depicts Adela gaining such qualities as resourcefulness, self-reliance and temperance—the last involving keeping one's feet firmly on the ground while aspiring to the heavens—something which presupposes a keen sense of humour. These qualities similarly characterise the best traditional fairy tales, which is why MacDonald draws upon such tales. Borrowing also from the *Kunstmärchen* of the German Romantics, his fairy tales are unsurpassed not only in their beauty but also in their therapeutic potential.

John Smith, the prime mover in the story, is an obvious portrait of MacDonald himself, although with unexpected modifications which fit him better for the task before him. He is a bachelor, so has no home ties at Christmas; a mature person ("not very far from fifty"); and "a 'nobody'" with exceptional understanding of young people (4). The Cathcarts, from one aspect, are stock figures of the conventional Victorian novel. But they also represent four distinctly different attitudes towards the spiritual life.¹¹ They comprise the widowed Colonel, a good man who has always battled against evil, but who has no understanding of how to bring up a daughter; his loveless sister who has embraced a loveless Christianity; her son Percy, too indolent to develop any of his spiritual faculties but not inherently bad; and Adela herself, overwhelmed by all the neglect of the spirit around her.

By contrast, the active members of the story-telling club which Smith

organises for Adela's benefit, superficially resemble the idealised Christian characters who appear in most of MacDonaid's novels. To the reader who knows something of MacDonaid's biography, however, it gradually becomes apparent that first and foremost they are exaggerated portraits of different types of person whom MacDonaid himself might have become. Apart from Smith, there is the curate, Ralph Armstrong, an archetypal example of a "Muscular Christian," as he himself acknowledges, capable of unlimited good works amongst the lower classes; his opposite, the schoolmaster James Bloomfield, who seems to be modelled on the archetypes of rural felicity in the novels of Jeremias Gotthelf, which were apparently introduced to MacDonaid by John Ruskin;¹² and the more complex figure of Ralph's brother, Harry Armstrong, a wise physician and superlative horseman. Harry is a far more balanced figure [29] than the other two (as the horse-riding symbolises). But he nevertheless finds a need throughout most of the story to draw repeatedly upon his brother's translations of German poets rather than be creative himself.

MacDonaid juxtaposes descriptions of the story-telling sessions with such things as Smith's meditations and summaries of Ralph's sermons. This makes it clear that, as well as attempting to give practical help to his readers in what they would recognise as in some respects an all too familiar situation, he is symbolising the universal human condition which Christ came to redeem.

The opening chapters of *Adela Cathcart* are a mixture of ultra-conventionality, an astonishingly subversive outlook, and striking symbolism. The story begins with Smith and Ralph Armstrong travelling up from London to the small town of Purleybridge on Christmas-eve.¹³ They establish a relationship by smoking cigars—an activity, as Broome points out, strictly illegal on trains at that time. But as they approach Purleybridge the modern world is symbolically left behind when the carriage in which they are travelling (a slip-coach) is detached from the express train.

MacDonaid's subversive techniques are most evident the following morning, when Smith goes to church. His cynical dismissal of the letter of the Christian faith in favour of the spirit still has power to shock. He describes the loveable old vicar as mouthing the scriptures as if they were offal. And his conventionally picturesque account of the church itself suddenly changes in mid-sentence as he describes it looking "as if it had grown out of the churchyard, to be ready for the poor souls, as soon as they got up again But . . . none of them came" (17). MacDonaid is savagely subverting

the cosy message conveyed by billions of Christmas cards. The message of Christ's coming is not a cosy one. Smith's allusions to the esoteric ideas of Swedenborg, Tycho Brahe, the German Romantics, and others are likewise as startling to the ordinary reader today as they must have been to MacDonald's contemporaries.

Adela's home is "The Swanspond." The absurd name alerts us to the fact that she is likely to be confined to this "pond" for the whole of her probably brief life. Smith had been unaware of Adela's illness, and the idea of a story-telling club for her is suggested to him by stories with which Mrs Bloomfield, the wife of the schoolmaster, enlivens what would otherwise have been a very dismal Christmas Day. Yet (as a necessary corollary of MacDonald's autobiographical approach) when the club is established the active members are exclusively male. At this period of his life his conceptions of feminine liberation were still relatively undeveloped, and Smith does not seem perturbed at the way Mrs Bloomfield and Mrs Armstrong are idolised by their husbands as typical "house angels," kept at bay while the menfolk have their serious conversations by dense clouds of tobacco smoke. [30]

Mrs. Bloomfield tells the story of her encounter with an idiot boy, who has far more understanding of God's love than most of the people whom he meets. People's names in *Adela Cathcart* are as symbolic as the place names, and Mrs Bloomfield has awakened the rose of Christmas (the "*Ros' entsprungen*" of the carol) in Adela's heart. Adela's cure begins when she concedes that the idiot boy, who can believe in God's love, is undoubtedly to be envied, a comment which does not accord with her father's view of society.

Adela has been under treatment from a Dr Wade, but to no avail. In fact he seems to be introduced only as a foil to Dr Armstrong. Colonel Cathcart is sufficiently disgusted with Dr Wade's useless treatment of Adela to be prepared to switch to the young and unconventional Harry Armstrong, even though Harry's only apparent response on his initial trial visit is to play and sing to Adela. The sheet-music accessible to Adela is all vapid and worthless, as Harry swiftly ascertains, but the music he plays speaks movingly of hope arising out of despair.

A new threat then comes upon the scene in the figure of Adela's aunt Mrs Cathcart, who "at once . . . establishe[s] herself as protectress of Adela" (49). She is depicted rather like the Antichrist devil of a mediaeval morality play: full of hypocritical smiles and religious wiles—terrifying, yet a figure of fun to be outfaced. By deleting his description of her, Smith succeeds in

conveying an even more damning impression than if he had left it in. She is a threat which must be instantly dealt with, and he seizes an opportunity to put her down when she attacks Ralph's "Broad Church" sermon. Everyone present is astonished and delighted at this, but much more is needed. So Smith accordingly modifies his story "The Light Princess" with which he opens the proceedings of the story-telling club.

It seems likely that MacDonald began *Adela Cathcart* as an explanatory frame for "The Light Princess" after he was unable to find a publisher for the fairy tale on its own; that he then realised he could legitimately and with advantage fit in others of his short stories and verse translations (published and unpublished); and that finally he found he had to create one or more new stories to complete the pattern of Adela's cure. Twelve sessions of stories and poetry are described (including the impromptu Christmas-day story-telling), four in each volume of *Adela Cathcart*, although they extend beyond the twelve days of Christmas.

The psychological elements of "The Light Princess" are comparatively overt and have been explored by various critics. It is easy to extrapolate from this published criticism to see how the light princess' psychological condition corresponds to Adela's and how her cure to some extent prophetically reflects Adela's. But the way the psychological elements of the story are inter-penetrated by the spiritual has received far less attention.¹⁴

Homoeopaths do not always work on the principle of like curing like. Adela's state is so grave that a prompt dose of levity is called for, and the light princess receives it at her baptism. From then on, her condition is the opposite to Adela's wanhope, although both girls lack love. The early onset of her affliction can also seem the opposite of Adela, whose illness manifested in late puberty. But the popular perception was that so many girls at puberty were passing into something like Adela's state that it must represent a condition arising in infancy. An important aspect of infant baptism is the welcoming of a new soul down to Earth. This has been nullified for the light princess, and it is made clear that Adela too has been prevented from establishing a proper relationship to the Earth—in her case because of the mental "slops" upon which she has been fed (52).

Inevitably the princess becomes turned in upon herself. This occurs when a slip on her father's part while she is still a child makes her aware of the delights of swimming in a "lake" (75) which—since she possesses an "imponderable body" independent of the four elements (74)—comes to serve

as both her physical and her soul-body. Here she swims at every possible opportunity “like a swan.” This self-absorption heightens the sensual delight she subsequently experiences in her play in the lake with a prince, but it precludes any possibility of her experiencing love. Her lake is “the loveliest lake in the world”; but it is “in the world,” and love looks towards something higher. Her relationship with the prince, however glorious, cannot last, and a “wasteland” situation supervenes. With Adela, the cause of the “wasteland” state of her soul was the loss of her mother. But whatever the cause of a waste-land, the only cure is true love.

It would deny the validity of the story-telling club if Smith depicted his hero and heroine achieving fulfilment solely for themselves and by their own efforts. The princess, as well as being very much an individual, represents the psyche of her country, which languishes as she languishes. (Just as Adela at one level represents the psyche of England.) The prince is advised by a hermit, while the light princess is advised by her old nurse, although these wise figures in no way interfere with their freedom. And what the prince must do, as saviour of the princess and the country, is inscribed on a golden tablet found at the centre of the nearly dried-up lake.

An essential principle of any therapeutic tale is that its metaphors should be intensely dramatic. So the near-death of the prince, which induces the ultimate awakening of love in the princess, is linked with imagery of both Christ’s Sacrifice and the sexual act. Smith is employing the most powerful imagery [32] imaginable to cast some light into Adela’s darkness.¹⁵ But although this imagery is obvious enough to present-day readers, Smith is anticipating only a subconscious and gradual penetration of these images—he does not expect to awaken an instant flash in response.

Adela, however, does instantly acknowledge the urgent message of the story “that you need not be afraid of ill-natured aunts” (104). Mrs Cathcart is totally demolished in her eyes. As Adela has always been disgusted by her cousin Percy, whom she is intended to marry but who is incapable of sharing any of her higher interests, the only remaining obstacle to her recovery, outside herself, is now her father. But he, unfortunately, is all too vulnerable to Mrs Cathcart’s manipulation of his snobbery. Harry Armstrong has begun to have an idea how the problem of Colonel Cathcart may be tackled, but he is not a polished story-teller like Smith and is not ready to contribute his story until nearly the end of the book.

At the next session of the story-telling club the story-teller is Ralph Armstrong the Curate, whose story is homoeopathic in a much more obvious

fashion than “The Light Princess.” “The Bell,” a sad tale to engage Adela’s sadness, repeats the ‘holy fool’ theme of Mrs Bloomfield’s story. As in that story, Adela is confronted by both spiritual and factual reality. Ralph is described as having grown up in Huntly (like another of MacDonald’s practical idealists, Robert Falconer), and the fool whose tale he tells was an actual Huntly inhabitant. However, to help Adela identify with the fool who is the principal character, Ralph introduces a fictional heroine with an affliction not wholly dissimilar from Adela’s own, who befriends the fool because she finds fellow-feeling with him.

Next evening, the schoolmaster’s story, “Birth, Dreaming and Death,” reinforces the direct homoeopathic approach in being another sad and true story. But now happiness is mixed in equal measure with the sorrow. Mr. Bloomfield, who is particularly sensitive to the different roles which the true and the factual should play in therapeutic stories (134), has intuitively transformed autobiographical experiences into an artistic form suitable for the present need. MacDonald sensitively conveys how this modest and retiring man is at first defensively didactic and rhetorical until the pathos of his story overcomes his inhibitions. A central theme which underlies his story, as it does “The Bell,” is that if we look up for a moment from our troubles we will always find someone in a much worse situation who has nevertheless been able to acknowledge their human need and has thus received Grace.

The mood of this simple tale moves Adela to sing. She is apparently uneasy about the macabre content of her song—a translation of one of Heine’s “Ghost Dreams”—and asks Harry also to sing. Smith remarks somewhat sententiously [33] that the “whole tone of [Harry’s] song was practical and true, and so was fitted to correct the unhealthiness of imagination which might have been suspected in the choice of the preceding” (153). MacDonald fears this suspicion of unhealthiness may arise in his readers, but he certainly does not feel it himself, and Smith’s distaste for the macabre is soon to be boisterously demolished.

The following day, Smith visits the curate and immediately establishes powerful rapport with him, as he did with the schoolmaster. This is scarcely surprising if these men represent opposite directions in which MacDonald might himself have developed. MacDonald skilfully depicts how they have made their weaknesses into their characteristic strengths. He seems to imply that had he fallen into immorality at college as Harry Armstrong did, this might have provided the essential stimulus to develop the skills necessary to work effectively amongst the poor and underprivileged. Yet unkind

critics have implausibly suggested that MacDonald did fall like Harry—and comparable characters in other stories—but still found he could not emulate these characters in practical “good works.”

On the Sunday evening, Smith tells his second story, “The Shadows.” The plot is worked out in the same way as a homoeopathic physician would work out his partem of treatment. The tale begins at the point where the convalescing hero Ralph Rinkelmann has: “By strong and sustained efforts . . . succeeded, after much trouble and suffering,” in reducing to order “all the gnomes and goblins, and ugly, cruel things that live in the holes and comers” of the mind (187). Adela has reached a comparable stage in her convalescence, although she does not yet consciously realise this. This is the only included story which Broome was able to examine and he provides a masterly exploration of its relevance to Adela’s condition.

Smith here introduces a wholly new element: that of deliberately encouraging Adela to puzzle over what she hears, both within the story itself—for example in his description of the different types of shadows—and in his answers to her questions afterwards. Her response is a perplexed but determined: “I must think. I don’t know” (217). Subsequently she realises she is “very much” better and even sets out upon some parish-visiting.

Next evening the Armstrong’s entertain, and the fare they provide for Adela is Romantic in the extreme. Ralph argues that: “Some dreams . . . in poetry or in sleep, arouse individual states of consciousness altogether different from any of our waking moods . . . All our being, for the moment, has a new and strange colouring” (227). So the entertainment centres around more translations of Heine’s songs. The programme is chosen to harmonise with the weather: an awesome snowstorm. The fates conspire to assist the mood when Harry is called out to a woman in labour across the moor.

Needless to say, the effect [34] upon Adela is dramatic, not least in the way it increases her admiration for the doctor. This is not melodrama, although it can seem very much like it, but an example of what Smith has eloquently argued for at the beginning of the chapter—life lived in harmony with every aspect of Nature (221-22). But there is an undoubted element of flamboyance in Harry’s character, so that rumour has it that he goes to church regularly “for the sake of being called out in the middle of the service” (30). Mrs Cathcart, of course, perceives only this element in Harry, and it stimulates her to renew her attempts to discredit him in the Colonel’s eyes.

Ralph’s next story, “The Broken Swords,” is at one level a reflection of his earlier “The Bell.” Both tell how a young woman, through the death

of the hero, is herself able to achieve a “good death.” But whereas the mood of “The Bell” was essentially passive, the mood of “The Broken Swords” could not be more dynamic. Many passages observe trite melodramatic conventions about low-life and war, but juxtaposed with these are powerful descriptions of the hero’s acute awareness of squalid reality. (It was the first story MacDonald published, and represents a young man wrestling with some of the greatest paradoxes of life.) Ralph, primarily, is following up and expanding the approach introduced by Smith with “The Shadows.” Adela has reached the stage in her cure when she ought to face the central enigmas of life. They are put before her by a person who thinks that all problems can be resolved by the heart and will alone, but that is what is needed at this stage—it would be all too easy for Adela to attempt to resolve them simply with the intellect.

Another of Ralph’s failings is that he has to depict a woman’s role as essentially passive. In later books, MacDonald spectacularly rejected Ralph Armstrong’s type of chauvinism, but here his narrator John Smith seems blandly to accept it. Smith’s real feelings, however, become evident two tales later when he observes apropos a small girl’s comments on “The Giant’s Heart”: “The darling did not know how much more one good woman can do to kill evil than all the swords of the world in the hands of righteous heroes” (338). The comment is not particularly appropriate in that context, but it can be validly applied to “The Broken Swords.”¹⁶

The session is not confined to Ralph’s story. He and his brother also read more of his translations of German poets. *Adela Cathcart* is full of overt allusions to German poetry and covert allusions to German Romantic prose. They are appropriate to Adela’s cure, and they are also appropriate to MacDonald’s attempt (as in *Phantastes*), to create a British *Kunstmärchen*.

The next story, “My Uncle Peter,” is described as a published tale written by Mrs Armstrong. It is the antithesis of Mrs Bloomfield’s impromptu story of summer. Mrs Armstrong knows her husband well enough not to put herself [35] forward by reading it in the group, so it is read by Harry. This is appropriate, because it is the story of the love of two people of great openness of heart and contains no erotic element. Thus it reflects the stage reached in the relationship between Harry and Adela. It is sentimental (this may be why MacDonald felt it necessary to attribute its composition to a lady) but Adela’s convalescence is proceeding so well that such sentimentality is unlikely to produce any negative reaction from her. The excuse for its insertion is that it is all that is available until Harry’s own story is completed. This makes the

reader eagerly anticipative of that tale, and at the same time aware that Harry realises it must not be given until the right moment. He is biding his time concocting the exact blend of pathos, horror and humour required to potentise each of Adela's soul struggles and thus release her from them.

Even Percy is now approached for a story, but he points out that up until now they have been "nothing but goody humbug or sentimental whining" (277). For the fairy tales this is an untruth, but he has frequently been asleep or absent during the sessions. Apropos the rest of the stories his observation is, from one point of view, manifestly correct. However, as Ralph has indicated by quoting a poem of Goethe's, this is the point of view of the Philistine who judges stained-glass windows by looking at them from outside the church.

Adela has now progressed so far that Smith can admit to himself that she had been a thoroughly spoilt child—and spoilt by him as much as by her father. He can even begin to acknowledge that, much as he loved her, he was always subconsciously aware that since puberty, like the majority of young women, "her face looked as if it were made of something too thick for the inner light to shine through." She has been "dreaming a child's dreams, instead of seeing a woman's realities" (313).

"The Giant's Heart" is another filler introduced to gain time for Harry to complete his story. As noted, it is not primarily told for Adela's benefit. But it expands the "My Uncle Peter" theme of the importance of openness of heart.

The next night Harry is still not ready to tell his story. He reads a poem of his brother's, more horrific than any hitherto, but with a wonderfully redemptive ending. His brother then tells an autobiographical tale which reflects how "the winter is passed . . . the time of the singing of birds is come" in Adela's heart. There are many fine passages descriptive of nature in MacDonald's books, but none as sustained as "A Child's Holiday." Moreover, it has a heroine who is utterly free (except for her Calvinist-induced fear of God). This is pre-eminently a story which should be told aloud in a group of friends. By now we have come to realise that the curate's and the schoolmaster's stories, unlike almost all of MacDonald's writing, do not ask that after absorbing the truth which can speak directly to the heart we should [36] then struggle to uncover the hidden meaning. They speak their whole message directly to the heart.

The emotional setback which Adela receives from the unexpectedly continued delay over Harry's story now induces a physical setback. But

Smith realises that such a crisis often occurs at the end of an illness. Mrs Cathcart of course attempts to take advantage of the crisis, and presumes to bring back doctor Wade. But Adela has had no fear of her since “The Light Princess” and has now gained the will to oppose her. Moreover, her mild fever prevents her feeling any sense of impropriety in ordering her aunt about. She should feel none, since she is the lady of the house, but it is natural to defer to one’s elders. Adela is supported by Harry, and Mrs Cathcart is hopelessly compromised in Colonel Cathcart’s eyes, so that is the end of her. There is no chance that anyone like this, who actively rejects love, could ever be helped by anything which does not coerce. Percy’s selfishness, by contrast, is not rooted in lovelessness, and what has been happening has begun to penetrate his egoism. After a talk with Harry he has gone back to London with the possibility of a real growth of the spirit within him.

Now, at last, Harry is free to tell the story which will free Adela from the dominion of her father—although he will first have to face her suppressed sorrow for the loss of her mother. At the meeting at his brother’s house “the window curtains were scanty” (223) so the group was very conscious of the storm without. This time he makes the group aware of the night by persuading Colonel Cathcart to have the blinds drawn back. The weather has changed and it is a moonlight night, with deep-lying snow, and the mood Harry wishes to achieve—and then transmute—is one of a miasma of fear. He plays upon the story-telling club’s unspoken fear that Adela’s frightening illness has only been repressed, that they have taken her sickness so completely upon themselves that they too are threatened by monsters grown of unspeakable sexual repressions which are now closing in upon them.

“The Cruel Painter” has been much denigrated by critics, all of whom have forgotten that it was written for its particular place in *Adela Cathcart* and should be judged in this context (even though it was subsequently republished, probably against MacDonald’s better judgement, in a collection of his short stories). It satisfies enough criteria to be accepted as a fairy tale, but is a most unusual one, quoting verbatim from a published work which purports to be factual (415) and with the action taking place in a real city. To achieve its proper effect it must be read aloud within a group which has been carefully following the stages of Adela’s cure. The slow lead-up to the climax of the tale gives a person who is telling the story an opportunity to intensify the tension, but has the opposite effect upon a solitary reader. Read aloud, the dramatic [37] second half of the story should have listeners in paroxysms of laughter. But this levity will be balanced by gravity, fear by love, and so

on—all emotions are harmonised. Properly handled, the story would make a splendid cartoon film. However, at the story-telling club only Adela and (we assume) Smith experience the import of the tale. The curate and the schoolmaster are insufficiently rounded personalities to comprehend a tale like this. But one day these men too may come to understand what they have heard, because Smith is careful to tell us his belief that gradually they will come to have more and more influence upon one another (418).¹⁷

The first part of “The Cruel Painter” repeats the earlier stages of Adela’s cure, reflecting and transforming a number of important images from “The Light Princess.” Numerous details of the relationship between Harry, Adela and the Colonel are reflected with astonishing frankness. Harry’s development has been as important as Adela’s, and his tale is as much a liberation for him as for Adela. Without it he would never gain the courage to confront the Colonel.

The hero of the tale, Karl Wolkenlicht, bears some resemblance to MacDonald’s favourite German Romantic and universal man, Novalis; not least in the way his masculinity and femininity are perfectly harmonised and in his eye for a pretty girl. Harry realises that a central problem for Adela is that she cannot openly acknowledge the loss of her mother. So he brings Karl directly to Lilith’s place of sorrow. Karl first sees the heroine Lilith weeping on her mother’s grave at midnight. Only then are we told of her father, the cruel painter Teufelsbüst and the way he paints Lilith in all his pictures, although she is always out of place there: always “a frozen bud” (391) of beauty in the midst of tortured souls and torturing demons. Harry may well have recognised a repressed nightmare in the Colonel’s military life parallel to his daughter’s repression of her mother’s death. Most of the images Harry is employing, however, are as deliberately exaggerated as were Smith’s in “The Light Princess,” and when we recognise this we see that there is a parallel with the Colonel’s relationship to his daughter regardless of whatever hidden sorrows beset the two men.

Lilith’s attitude of despairing atheism is a scarcely exaggerated reflection of Adela’s despairing mood when the stories began. Lilith has absorbed this outlook from her father, whose precarious mental stability has been shaken by the news that for the second time in only a few years vampire rumours are “raging in the city” (394)—and this time the supposed vampire lived in the house next door! Lilith’s despair, however, has taken her far beyond fear: “They would all be dead soon,” after all (397). Karl has become an apprentice to Teufelsbüst to be near Lilith, but finds himself

powerless to help her. Moreover, the painter secretly drugs him to make his emotions more plainly [38] visible so that he will be a good model for the horror pictures. These drugs make Karl excessively perturbed by the vampire stories, although, like Lilith, he is not frightened by them. But finally the drugs overcome him and he collapses as if dead. As in “The Light Princess,” although much more slowly, love is awakened in Lilith’s heart by the realisation that Karl had loved her. Her father does not miss the opportunity to take a plaster cast of Karl’s magnificent body, but an electrical storm (probably not unconnected with Lilith’s emotions) re-enlivens Karl at midnight and he breaks out of the shell in which Teufelsbüst has encased him.¹⁸ Only half-revived, he believes he must now be a vampire and thus obliged to seek out his beloved, “according to rule pa[y]ing her the first visit because he loved her the best” (405).¹⁹ Then follows a sequence of events as complex and as hilarious as in any stage farce, superbly described, but wholly different from the average farce in that they carry profound spiritual meaning. The moment when Lilith and Karl meet “beyond the grave” (in that he is still acting the role of a vampire and she has disguised herself as a ghost) is one of the supreme moments in MacDonald’s writing. Its power is due to his masterly irony and bathos being used for once not to undercut a supremely dramatic moment but to heighten it: Lilith and the reader are fully aware of the bathos. Harry is affirming Adela’s triumph over death and reflecting it back at her. He has already described Karl quite literally taking Lilith out of the dreadful scenes into which her father has painted her. And she, thus released, has, equally literally, as a free agent, put herself back into them to help her father. This, convinces Teufelsbüst that he has “been for the greater part of a week utterly bewitched” (414). And, as his traumas have shocked him out of his terrible mental state, all ends happily.

The winter weather is now over, so Harry is able to display his prowess in the hunting field, impressing all the local gentry (Colonel Cathcart not excepted). These are people who have retained an understanding of man’s animal nature which most of the population have lost, and Harry performs the *de rigour* feat of horsemanship, thus demonstrating to them that he is a fit person to marry Adela (one implied parallel being the control of a wife). MacDonald is clever enough to describe this in a way which satisfies both blood-sportsmen and their opponents amongst his readership. He describes Harry as part of the hunt and yet concurrently on one of his dramatic rides in response to an urgent call.²⁰ Harry’s feat of horsemanship is an unusual one. These riders live in the past, and the modern world, which is anathema to

them, is symbolised by the railway which runs in a deep unbridged cutting directly across their path, “like a river of death.” But the modern world calls urgently to Harry—there has been an explosion at a quarry beyond the line. So he makes a perilous descent into the deep cutting and a virtually impossible climb up the [39] far bank. In him the wisdom of the past is united with unshakeable practical concern for the future.

A week later, Mr Bloomfield tells the final parable “The Castle,” which more or less overtly integrates Adela’s cure with the New Testament. This is followed by Adela and Harry affirming their love for each other. But Harry has been caught unprepared and has not announced his intentions to her father. Thus he has laid himself open to the charge of abusing his position of trust as her physician. Smith, however, now reveals that the Colonel, when “not even next heir to the property he has now” and a mere captain, “in a regiment of foot,” “ran away with Miss Selby, old Sir George the baronet’s daughter” (447). So the lovers could safely elope if they wished. But now, of course, everyone’s compassion is directed upon the Colonel, with the hope that he will recognise his stupid pride and thus be spiritually redeemed. It soon becomes evident, however, that this is not going to happen. Harry predicted in “The Cruel Painter” that some traumatic experience would be required. There are states of mind which are beyond our powers to help. But that is why Grace exists, and Grace always comes in wholly unexpected form. So MacDonald exercises his authorial powers as a *dens ex machina* and inflicts (relative) poverty on the Colonel. This is done with a light humorous touch and provides the appropriate ending for the story, of gentle irony blended with a profound spiritual message. So there is the possibility that at the following Christmas not one but two births will be celebrated!

Appendix

The second British edition of *Adela Cathcart* appeared in 1882. Critics have accused MacDonald of removing several of the best stories from this edition and replacing them by much inferior ones, but this is not the case. None of the new stories are replacements. And all the original stories remain, although half of them appear in the text in title only! Presumably MacDonald’s publisher argued that as these stories had been published elsewhere subsequent to their appearance in the first edition there was no need for them to be reprinted again. Bulloch, MacDonald’s first bibliographer, states that this edition was “hurried through the press without MacDonald seeing the proofs” (11) and is “an extreme example

of MacDonald's way of altering his text" (10). Shaberman in his 1990 bibliography repeats these claims. But what has happened is not "alteration." and it is unthinkable that MacDonald himself could have perpetrated it.²¹ That he co-operated at all in the republishing of the book in a form which makes it as absurd as "*Hamlet* without the Prince" is astonishing. Rolland Hein, however, shows that the publication of cheap pirate editions of MacDonald's works around this time forced his publishers to reduce what they [40] paid him by some ninety percent,²² and this may have been why he felt obliged to go along with their outrageous scheme. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that he made none of his usual revisions: even the interpolated discussions of the deleted stories are left intact, with no revision other than the addition of a few linking words to prevent them being absolutely absurd. And he displays sufficient spirit to place the four new stories in the only positions in the book where it is self-evident that they are not part of the programme of Adela's cure. Two, "The Lost Lamb" and "The Snow Fight," are inserted directly after the deleted story for the children, "The Giant's Heart"; two more, "An Invalid's Holiday" and "A Journey Rejourneyed" appear after the deleted closing parable, "The Castle."²³ MacDonald's partial acquiescence here is in striking contrast to his contemptuous response in 1864 to his publishers' apparent request that he provide a happy ending for "The Portent." Bulloch (repeated by Shaberman) records four subsequent publications of *Adela Cathcart* in Britain. Those of 1890 and 1894 are by Sampson Low, the publishers of the 1882 edition, so are presumably reprints. Then there is a Newnes edition of 1905 and a Dalton edition 'from the Newnes plates' of 1908. But the details of the Dalton edition given in Mary Jordan's 1984 bibliography confirm that it is virtually identical with the 1882 Sampson Low-edition. So all these four are apparently reprints of the mutilated 1882 edition.

Notes

1. See Editorial.
2. *Adela Cathcart* 1864 Whitethorn: Johannesen 1994.
3. Quoted by Roliand Hein in *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*. Nashville: Starsong, 1993 p. 165.
4. Richard Reis *George MacDonald's Fiction* 1972 Eureka: Sunrise, 1988 p. 61.
5. For current practice in the therapeutic use of fairy tales see for example Nancy Mellon *Storytelling and the Art of Imagination*. Shaftsbury: Element, 1992.
6. F. Hal Broome, "Dreams, Fairytales and the Curing of Adela Cathcart" *North Wind* 13 (1994) 6-18.

7. Broome, "The Science-Fantasy of George MacDonald." Diss. Edinburgh Univ. 1985 p. 64.
8. *Castle Warlock* 1872 Whitethorn: Johannesen 1991 p. 198.
9. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment* 1975 Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978 p.27, follows Lewis Carroll and suggests that the primary criterion for a fairy tale should be that it is intended as a love-gift. "The Giant's Heart" was first written as a love-gift—not however for Adela but for MacDonald's friend Lewis Carroll! See John Docherty *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll - George MacDonald Friendship* Lampeter: Mellen, 1995 pp. 98-102.
10. The ideal of "The Angel in the House" was expounded by Coventry Patmore in a famous poem. The ways in which Patmore's (essentially Swedenborgian) concept was hideously perverted by contemporary sociologists and the artists and writers who followed them is exhaustively depicted by Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity* New York: Oxford U.P., 1986.
11. A similar theme is important in *Phantastes*, where the three cottages and a farmhouse which the protagonist visits likewise portray four different attitudes towards the spiritual. However, there is only part-parallelism between the two series.
12. See Jamie Rankin, "The Genesis of George MacDonald's Scottish Novels" *Studies in Scottish Literature* 24 (1989) p.p. 49-67.
13. David Robb, in *George MacDonald* Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987 p. 35, points out that MacDonald's place names are usually allegorical—here, perhaps, "Pearly Bridge" is intended, but with emphasis upon the purling River of Life.
14. Important points are, however, touched on in the paper by Elmar Schenkel "Antigravity: Matter and the Imagination in George MacDonald and Early Science Fiction" *North Wind* 14 (1995) 46-56.
15. Two other authors influenced by F.D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll, employ a similar combination of images in books for young people. A. C. Swinburne was already 27 in 1864 so the new approach to sexuality in literature would have been familiar to Maurice's circle, although probably not to the inhabitants of Purleybridge,
16. It is to be regretted that Smith/MacDonald does not disassociate himself from some other remarks of Ralph Armstrong's. For example, selective book-burning may be condoned in some circumstances, but not when Sterne's work is selected for this fate (281-82).
17. Smith's belief turned out to be over-optimistic. The Ralph Armstrong and James Bloomfield sides of MacDonald's personality dominate most of his later writing, and what union there is between them is more a marriage of convenience than a merging to achieve a higher reality. The schoolmaster's stories can be said to mark the beginning of the Kale-yard school of Scottish writing, and the curate's influence (minus his passion for the German Romantics) seems to be traceable, via C. S. Lewis, in much modern Christian fantasy. One profoundly wishes MacDonald could have displayed more of his John Smith and Harry-Armstrong sides. [42]

18. As in *Phantastes*, MacDonald borrows extensively from E. T. A. Hoffman's *Der Goldne Topf*.

19. This incident draws upon the scene in MacDonald's *David Elginbrod* (1863) where Hugh Sutherland, lying awake in bed, is visited by Euphra Cameron, who has been half-persuaded she is a ghost. However, it is even more erotic than that episode and more familiar.

20. Similarly, in describing the smoking incident in the train at the beginning of the book, MacDonald is scrupulously careful to emphasize that "nobody would enter that carriage [that] night but the man who had to clean it" (3). And when Percy misuses his hand-gun, Smith is depicted as prudent but non-judgmental (243-44). Greville MacDonald in his biography of his father is less equivocal. He maintains that the "feat of crossing the railway butting . . . was known [around Wellingborough] as fact" (345). The horse belonged to his great uncle Mark Sharman and was ridden by MacDonald "in the first meet for cub-hunting" on 3 Oct. 1863.

21. It should be acknowledged that the view is also put forward that the last edition of any work published in MacDonald's lifetime must contain his considered views and that earlier editions can therefore be ignored.

22. Hein p. 309.

23. "An Invalid's Winter" and "A Journey Rejourneyed" are reprinted, amongst much other miscellaneous matter, as two of the Appendices in Raphael Shaberman's *George MacDonald: A Biographical Study* Winchester: St. Paul's, 1990. [43]