

Defining Death as “More Life”: Unpublished Letters by George MacDonald

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Who lives, he dies; who dies, he is alive.
Phantastes ch. XIII

Most readers of George MacDonald’s fiction, especially of his faerie romances and fairytales, will recall his penetrating treatment of the subject of death and dying. A classic passage occurs, for example, at the conclusion of *The Golden Key*, when the Old Man of the Sea finally asks Mossy the ultimate question: **[end of page 4]**

“You have tasted death now,” said the Old Man. “Is it good?”

“It is good,” said Mossy. “It is better than life.”

“No,” said the Old Man: “it is only more life.”¹

Equally moving, in spite of its sentimentality, is the ending of *At the Back of the North Wind*, which depicts graphically Diamond’s dream-in-sleep death. Similarly, there is the ethereal death of the king, who becomes a sacrifice of “flaming red roses,” viewed by Curdie, at the end of *The Princess and Curdie*.

As a writer of parables and fairytales, George MacDonald is at his best when he is seeing death through the eyes of a child. Through the eyes of his fictional children—Mossy, Diamond and Curdie—MacDonald envisions his cardinal belief in the cosmic role of the child, who as a redemptive figure participates in and exemplifies universal love and immortality. Mossy and Tangle become agents of life-giving renewal. Diamond is a source of lasting love. And Curdie is a symbol of universal victory over evil. In each case it is the process of dying-into-life (“more life”) that is MacDonald’s major concern: it is a theme which is to be found in everything he wrote.

Critics of MacDonald’s books—beginning with G K Chesterton and C S Lewis—have noted MacDonald’s special talent for inspiring a sense of optimism at the time of death. Chesterton, in an attempt to define the “elfin quality” in MacDonald’s fairytales, suggests that it is a sort of “optimistic Calvinism”²: a positive approach to the doctrine of

1. In *The Gifts of the Child Christ*, ed. G E Sadler (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1973), Vol.1, p. 175. Subsequent references are to this edition.
2. Greville MacDonald. *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924), p. 12. [5]

predestination. Lewis, similarly commenting on his first reading of *Phantastes*, concluded: “The whole book had about it a sort of cool, morning innocence, and also quite unmistakably a certain quality of death, *good Death*.”³

Granted, not all readers of MacDonald’s romances will agree with Lewis’s ecstatic response to them (W H Auden and J. R. R. Tolkien thought MacDonald’s companion piece *Lilith* was his masterpiece and Tolkien once told me that he was re-reading *Lilith* and liking it less). But regardless of their literary worth, in both romances it is MacDonald’s symbolic treatment of death and its relation to personal immortality that makes these fantasies so impressive; it is also, at the same time, what makes these books so difficult for many modern readers.

An author’s religious convictions—especially concerning death—are always (I think) difficult to evaluate critically. In MacDonald’s case, however, the topic of death cannot be avoided; it is both of literary and biographical importance in understanding his life and works. As a writer and father of eleven children (plus two adopted), MacDonald had frequently to face death in his own family. Having lost his own mother when he was eight years old (and later other family members), MacDonald underwent repeated tests on his belief in personal immortality. Such a major loss came for him in the 1870’s, when, at the height of his fame, MacDonald and his wife had to endure the struggling death of their second daughter, Mary Josephine. MacDonald’s fiction written during this period is strongly influenced by Mary’s illness and

3. C. S. Lewis, ‘Preface’, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 21 [6]

subsequent death.

In a series of unpublished letters to their friends, Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, MacDonald discusses openly his daughter’s dying. These letters contain some of MacDonald’s most revealing thoughts on the philosophical implications of death and his belief in “more life.”

MacDonald seems to have had a special fondness for his daughter Mary, who was nicknamed “Elfie” and for whom MacDonald often wrote poems for her birthday. When she was two he wrote her:

I have an elfish maiden child
She is not two years old;
Through windy locks her eyes gleam wild,
With glances shy and bold.⁴

Of all the MacDonald children, Mary, born July 23 1853, was Lewis Carroll’s favourite. When she was ten Carroll often took her to the theatre in London. As a little girl Mary’s health had been robust (claims Wilfred Dodgson, who had “taught her to box” and “used to call her the ‘Kensington Chicken,’”⁵ apparently because of her physical strength).

Even more than the other MacDonald children, Mary seems to have relied heavily on her father’s opinion: when she was sixteen she wrote to her father asking for his definition of “love.” In reply, MacDonald wrote his daughter a detailed letter in which he enumerates the major points in his theory of the process of loving. From Doverdale (August 3 1869) he wrote:

4. Biography, Greville MacDonald, op. cit. p. 243.

5. Biography, p. 466. See Morton N Cohen, *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, Vol 1 (New York: Oxford University Press 1979), p. 58 note 4: “Dodgson first encountered Mary Josephine (1853-78) and her brother Greville Matheson (1856-1944) in the summer of 1860 in Alexander Munro’s studio, where Greville was posing for Boy with the Dolphin, the fountain in Hyde Park. Dodgson noted: ‘They were a girl, and boy, about seven and [7] [8] [Note: image not available]

I will with all my heart try to answer your question. And in order to make it as plain as I can I will put the answer in separate parts. You must think over each of them separately and all of them together.

In order to anyone loving another, three things are necessary. 1st. That the one should be capable of loving the other, or of loving in nature.

2nd. That the other should be fit to be loved or loveable.

3rd. That the other should know the other. Upon each of these three points respectively I remark!

1st. Now we are capable of loving, but are not capable enough, and the very best, the only thing indeed that we can do to make

ourselves more capable is to do our duty. When a person will not do his duty, he gradually becomes incapable of loving, for it is only good people that can love. All who can love are so far good. For if man were to grow quite wicked he could only hate. Therefore to do our duty is the main thing to lead us to the love of God.

2nd. God is so beautiful, and so patient, and so loving, and so generous that he is the heart & soul & rock of every love and every kindness & every gladness in the world. All the beauty in the world & in the hearts of men, all the painting all the poetry all the music, all the architecture comes out of his heart first. He is so loveable that no heart can know how loveable he is—can only know it in part. When the best man loves God best, he does not love him nearly as he deserves, or as he will love him in time.

3rd. In order that we should know God, & so see how loveable he is, we must first of all know and understand Jesus Christ. When we understand what he meant when he spoke, & why he did the things he did, when we see into his heart, then we shall understand God, for Jesus is just what God is. To do this we must read and think. We must also ask God to let us know what he is. For he can do more for those who ask than for those who do not ask.

But if it all depended on us, we might well lose

[continuation of footnote 5 from page 7] six years old. I claimed their acquaintance and began at once proving to the boy, Greville, that he had better take the opportunity of having his head changed for a marble one. The effect was that in about two minutes they had entirely forgotten that I was a total stranger, and were earnestly arguing the question as if we were old acquaintances.’ (Collingwood, pp 83-85, quoting the lost Diaries.)” **[9]**

heart about it. For we can never do our duty right until we love God. We can only go on trying. Love is the best thing: the Love of God is the highest thing; we cannot be right until we love God, therefore we cannot do right—I mean thoroughly right—until we love God. But God knows this better than we do, and he is always teaching us to love him. He wants us to love him,

not because he loves himself, but because it is the only wise, good and joyous thing for us to love him who made us and is most lovely.

So you need not be troubled about it darling Elfie. All you have to do & that is plenty is to go on doing what you know to be right, to keep your heart turned to God for him to lead you, & to read & try to understand the story of Jesus. A thousand other things will come in from God to help you if you do thus.

I am very very glad you asked me my child. Ask me anything you like, and I will try to answer you—if I know the answer. For this is one of the most important things I have to do in the world.

Mama sends her dear love to you.

Your Father⁶

When she was twenty, Mary became engaged to the nephew of MacDonald's artist friend Arthur Hughes: Edward R Hughes (Ted) who had, as his photograph reveals, an "Apollo appearance."⁷ A happy marriage was anticipated. However, it was discovered that Mary had suffered lung damage from scarlet fever, and she became seriously ill in the winter of 1875, while the MacDonalds were living in Hastings, at Halloway House.

After two struggling years, it was decided in the autumn of 1877 that Mrs MacDonald would take her three daughters (Lily, Mary and Irene) and their son Ronald with her to Italy, in hopes that Mary's condition would improve. MacDonald was to remain at The Retreat, Hammersmith, in order to lease the house and keep close check on the sales of his latest novel,

6. Unpublished letter. The George MacDonald collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University. See Muriel Hutton, 'The George MacDonald Collection' in The Yale University *Library Gazette*, 51,2 (October 1976) 74-85.

7. Biography, p. 466 [10]

The Marquis of Lossie (1877). Also, he was finishing the final volume of *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (1879).

Estranged from his family, MacDonald continued to write to the Mount-Temples. After finally joining his family at Villa Cattaneo, Nervi, in November 1877, he wrote to them:

I found Mary better again a little. I fear she is a little thinner, but she is so cheery, and so funny. She said this morning: 'I feel

just like a badly cut nine-pin. When I try to stand up, I tumble over before the ball touches me.' The worst symptom has for the time ceased. Every other is better. But the wasting—that I cannot say for.⁸

As Mary's health deteriorated, MacDonald sensed his daughter's impending death; but he wrote hopefully to Lady Mount-Temple on February 17 1878:

So much is better, but all is not better, and she does not get stronger, I much fear. The perfect will be done. Why should we be like the little child that would snatch her sick kitten out of the lap of her mother? When I look forward and think how I shall look back on my folly, I want to have some of the wisdom now. If Jesus was born, and said such things, and died, and rose, and lived again, can I trust my God too much? Am I in danger of losing my human tenderness if I say—Let the Lord do as He will: I shall only hope and look forward the more. The present in no way satisfies me, least of all the present in myself. I want to be God's man, not the man of my own idea. I look forward—God grant I press forward too. Parent could not have more comfort in his children than he gives me in mine: shall I be oppressed because he may choose to take one before the rest? Who knows how soon the turn of her parents may come, and then they will be very glad she is there and not here. But of course it will or would be much harder for those whose being almost is taken up with watching and ministering to her. Even they however would, I believe, be more anxious that she should not suffer greatly than

8. Unpublished letter, National Library of Scotland. Permission to publish this and the following letters has been granted by the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland and the George MacDonald Estate. [11]

that she should stay long with us. But all is unknown—save that it is well with the child.⁹

And two months later (April 7 1878), realising that the end was near, MacDonald wrote again:

Surely the father is with us, and the shadow that seems to deepen is but the shadow cast from his hands by the light of his countenance. I can hardly trust myself to write about our Mary.

But God is with her, and she clings to him. Surely he will take her as easily as may be consistent with her good entrance into the more abundant life. She is very weak now—and nothing on her dear bones. But we shall all be glad to change this lowly body for a better one day. And we hope in the Lord, who *is my* resurrection, for surely I have *risen* in him—a little already—I have got my head up and my heart too—and my body will follow.¹⁰

On April 27 1878, just before her twenty-fifth birthday, Mary Josephine died. “Her desire for life,” says her brother, “remained almost till the last, strong in her emaciated, cough-racked body, clinging to parents and lover and the beauty of the earth.”¹¹ During the year that followed, MacDonald continued to reflect often on Mary’s death, as he attempted to express his own definition of “death.” Defining his feelings, he wrote on April 9 1879 to Lord Mount-Temple:

How real death makes things look! And how we learn to cleave to the one shining fact in the midst of the darkness of this world’s trouble, that Jesus *did* rise radiant! I too have noble brothers to find where the light has hidden them, besides my faithful children, girl and boy. And you, beloved friends, will find your dear ones also, and when your hearts are filled with love and embraces, you will perhaps turn to us to help you to endure your bliss. My wife and I look for and hasten unto the coming of our Lord, whatever that means in words—we know what it means to our hearts.

9. Ibid

10. Ibid

11. Biography, pp. 483-484. There survives an interesting children’s sketch (unidentified) of the MacDonald children, depicting “Mary waisting [sic] away, and Barnard thin with sorrow.” The MacDonald Collection, Yale University. **[12] [13]**
[Note: images not available]

He alone who invented the nursery and its bonds, can perfect what he began there. I for my part, cry more for a perfecting of my loves than perhaps for anything else. That does make him a real God to us when we feel that he is the root of all our loving, and recognize him as the best love of all, causing, purifying,

perfecting all the rest. Our perfect God! and perfect making¹²

As MacDonald grew older, he continued to write letters of comfort to his friends, letters in which he attempted to inspire others to accept his intense belief in “good Death.” One such notable letter he wrote to Lady Mount-Temple after the death of her husband, in which he gives his visionary picture of death: a symbolic pattern which can be detected throughout his writings. Addressing Lady Mount-Temple as “sister,” he wrote from Casa Coraggio, December 9 1888:

Did you ever think, dearest sister, what kind of mourning is meant where the Lord says “Blessed are they that mourn”? It is simply and specially those that are mourning for the dead. The Greek word means that. Then the Master says you are a blessed woman, for there is a comfort coming that will content you. When it comes, perhaps you will say to yourself: “If I had known it was anything like this, it would have made me happy even then when I missed and wanted him.” Then might not he say, “You might have expected something good when I told you that such a comfort was coming and that I congratulated you even in the midst of your sorrow!”—”Will they never trust my father!” I imagine him saying sometimes.—

Yes, dear, it is a hard time for you, but he is drawing you nearer to himself. You will have, I think, to consent to be miserable so far as loneliness makes you miserable, and look to him and him only for comfort. But the words that the Lord speaks are spirit and life. We are in a house with windows on all sides. On one side the sweet garden is trampled and torn, the beeches blown down, the fountain broken; you sit and look out, and it is all very miserable. Shut the

12. National Library of Scotland. [14]

window. I do not mean forget the garden as it was, but do not brood on it as it is. Open the window on the other side, where the great mountains shoot heavenward, and the stars rising and setting, crown their peaks. Down those stairs look for the descending feet of the Son of Man coming to comfort you. This world, if it were alone, would not be worth much—I should be miserable already; but it is the porch to the Father’s home, and

he does not expect us to be quite happy, and knows we must sometimes be very unhappy till we get there: we are getting nearer. I need sorely to be got ready and die myself.

Your loving brother George.¹³

Contrary to what some critics have claimed, George MacDonald did not become disillusioned with life as he aged. There is ample evidence in his later published works and unpublished papers that he never totally lost his cosmic vision of the child-in-the-house. In one of the most revealing letters he ever wrote, MacDonald gives, at the age of 70, his final statement on the meaning to him of death and dying. With renewed confidence he wrote to his lifelong friend William Carey Davies, depicting his vision of childlikeness:

Bordighera, Nov 11 1894

My loved and honoured old friend,

I was glad to have your letter, and would have written sooner but have been much occupied. I am sorry to hear of your suffering. I know what asthma is, but that, with all other trouble, of the breathing apparatus has long left me.

The shadows of the evening that precedes a lovelier morning are drawing down around us both. But our God is in the shadow as in the shine, and all is and will be well: have we not seen his glory in the face of Jesus? and do we not know him a little? Have we not found the antidote to the theology of men in the Lord himself? I may almost say I believe in nothing but

13. Ibid [15]

in Jesus Christ, and I know that when life was hardest for him, he was still thoroughly content with his father, whom he knew perfectly, and to whom he has laboured and is labouring to make us know. We do know and we shall go on to know him. This life is a lovely school time, but I never was content with it. I look for better—oh, so far better! I think we do not yet know the joy of mere existence. To exist is to be a child of God; and to know it, to feel it, is to rejoice evermore. May the loving father be near you and may you know it, and be perfectly at peace all the way into the home country, and to the palace home of the living one—the life of our life.

Next month I shall be 70, and I am humbler a good deal more

than when I was 20. To be rid of self is to have the heart bare to God and to the neighbour—to *have* all life ours, and possess all things. I see in my mind's eye, the little children clambering up to sit on the throne with Jesus. My God, art thou not as good as we are capable of imagining thee? Shall we dream a better goodness than thou hast ever thought of? Be thyself, and all is well with us.

It may be that I shall be able to come and see you, if you are still within sight next summer. But the hand of age is upon me too. I can work only four hours a day, cannot, only I never could, walk much, and feel tired. But all is not only well, but on the way to be better.

I need hardly tell you how truly I am in sympathy with the sonnet you were so good as to send me. It seems to me that the antidote to party-spirit is Church history, and when the antidote itself has made you miserably ill, the cure is the gospel pure and simple—the story and words of Jesus. I care for no church but that of which every obedient disciple of the Lord, and no one else, is a member—though he may be—must be learning to become one. Goodbye for a little while anyhow. I have loved you ever since I knew you, for you love the truth. Please give my love to your wife—from of old time also.

Yours always,
George MacDonald¹⁴

14. Ibid [16]

Thus MacDonald wrote, with consolatory words to his friends, letters in which he repeatedly envisions the child's approach to death and dying. After his daughter's death he wrote a children's poem as a final tribute to her. This is the poem "Going to Sleep" which was originally entitled "Death":

Little one, you must not fret
That I take your clothes away;
Better sleep you so will get,
And at morning wake more gay—
Saith the child's mother.
You I must unclothe again.
For you need a better dress;

Too much worn are body and brain;
You need everlastingness—
Saith the heavenly Father.
I went down death's lonely stair;
Laid my garments in the tomb;
Dressed again one morning fair;
Hastened up and hied me home—
Saith the elder brother.
Then I will not be afraid,
Any ill can come to me;
When 'tis time to go to bed
I will rise and go with thee
Saith the little brother.¹⁵

For George MacDonald death meant simply the everyday experience of changing one's clothes and being taken like a little child to bed. To die was to be dressed up into a fuller awareness of immortality. This is the same concept of dying and "more life" which the Old Man conveys to Mossy when, at the end, Mossy and Tangle are climbing up out of the earth into the rainbow: "They climbed out of the earth; and, still

15. *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald*, Vol 1 (London: Chatto S. Windus, 1893), p. 348. Note: There also survives a later variation of this poem in manuscript, entitled: 'The New Year' (December 31 1886), in which MacDonald again refers to the death of his daughter Mary. See MacDonald Collection, Yale University. [17]

climbing, rose above it. They were in the rainbow."¹⁶ They were ascending, MacDonald believed, to "a better goodness"—"more life."

16. *The Golden Key*, p. 177 [18]