

MacDonald, Morris and “The Retreat”¹

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For most readers of the [William Morris] *Journal*, the Society’s headquarters at Kelmscott House are immediately associated with William Morris who lived there from 1878 until his death in 1896. However, under its previous name—The Retreat—it was the home of another eminent Victorian writer, George MacDonald. MacDonald was probably better known to the contemporary reading public than Morris, as his books sold in huge numbers both in Britain and the United States. Richard H. Reis has even made the controversial claim that MacDonald was “a more important writer . . . than a number of his better-known contemporaries” amongst whom he cites “Arthur [Hugh] Clough, Charles Kingsley, Walter Pater, [and] . . . William Morris” (143). The most remarkable thing is that while both men were living at the house they wrote fantasy novels that have since been acknowledged as the precursors of the works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Morris’s famous prose romances were written at Kelmscott House, while MacDonald wrote two of his most important works at The Retreat: *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872).

Links existed between the two men, however, even before George MacDonald and his family moved to The Retreat in 1867. During his early career one of MacDonald’s greatest patrons was the philanthropist Lady Noel Byron. Indeed, MacDonald later acknowledged this debt by portraying her sympathetically as Lady Barnard in his novel *The Vicar’s Daughter* (1872), which was also written, incidentally, while he was living at The Retreat. In 1859 Lady Byron suggested that in order to further his writing career MacDonald should move his family from Hastings to London. At this time Lady Byron was searching for a property to serve as a hostel for homeless young women in the metropolis. She offered to rent this house to MacDonald on favourable terms until he was sufficiently well-established to afford more suitable accommodation.

In the first of a number of strange coincidences the house that Lady Byron chose was 7 Camden Street. This had been the home of Professor De Morgan and his family, and the negotiations for the remaining lease were actually carried out between Lady Byron and the seventeen year old William De Morgan, who was later to become one of Morris’s closest friends. A letter from Lady Byron to

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Mrs. Louisa MacDonald dated 4 August 1859 includes an enclosure from William De Morgan setting out the proposed terms for the house: “Purchase money of this house for 5 years at £60 a year and 6 per cent. - £335; To furnish said house - imperially, £350; regally, £300; aristocratically, £250; respectably, £200; genteelly, £150; decently, £50 Choosing respectability we get a total of £635” (Greville MacDonald 305).

Unfortunately, these negotiations were never completed, leaving MacDonald in an awkward position. He had assumed that Lady Byron had actually secured the lease on 7 Camden Street and had therefore disposed of his own house in Hastings. He and his family consequently found themselves in urgent need of rented accommodation. They eventually found suitable temporary premises at 18 Queen Square, Bloomsbury. MacDonald—then aged thirty-four—his wife, and their young family moved into the house in October 1859. They were to live there until the following spring when they found more permanent accommodation at “Tudor Lodge,” Albert Street, Regent’s Park, a house that had once been the home of the painter Charles Lucy. Greville MacDonald recalled “dancing with my little sisters before the statue of Queen Anne in the garden, and then, after making curtsies and bows, retiring backwards, not always without disaster; and . . . the more enjoyable duty of helping the gardener gather up the dead leaves for his bonfire” (310). He also added that the property was “long since pulled down, and its site on the west side [of the Square] now occupied by the Hospital” (310).

The MacDonald family eventually moved to The Retreat in the autumn of 1867 shortly after the birth of their eleventh child, George Mackay. Greville MacDonald gave the following description of the house at that time: “It was late Georgian, had a garden of nearly an acre, with roomy old stabling, a great walnut-tree in the stable yard, a tulip-tree, said to be the biggest but one in England, giving shade over the lawn, and a statue of Artemis with her stag leaping from the shrubbery” (379). He also recalled how the Upper Mall was still a tranquil spot in the 1860s: “The roadway, bordered by ancient elms, ran between the house and the river, widening into a semicircle opposite The Retreat; but there being no thoroughfare, the quiet was undisturbed, unless on holidays, such as the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race days” (379).

In fact, just as the Morrises were to do some years later, the

MacDonalds held an annual boat-race party. In 1875 the guest of honour was Alfred Lord Tennyson. Greville MacDonald remembered with pride that “it was my glory to have rescued a cab from the human flood on the highroad half a mile away, and piloted it to [4] the house for the Poet Laureate. What a great hand was his in its strong gentle grasp! What a deep sad voice, I thought” (379-80). George MacDonald was also impressed by Tennyson’s visit to The Retreat. He wrote to Mrs. Alexander Powell on 24 March 1875: “Tennyson seemed delighted with my little library which he did not think a little one: there seemed so many books he had never seen What do you think he borrowed? A splendid copy of the Gaelic *Ossian*, which I bought at Uncle’s [Macintosh Mackay’s] sale, that he might read the prose Latin translation which seems to be the literal one” (380).

The MacDonalds were also great enthusiasts for amateur dramatics. One of the first things they did when they moved to The Retreat was to convert the coachhouse into a miniature theatre. A gas-lit stage was constructed at the far end of the building and a loose box served as the green room. The eldest of the MacDonald daughters, Lilia, was a great friend of Kate Terry who Greville MacDonald described as “the first and greatest of that gifted [acting] family” (384), and so these plays were often of a very high standard. On one memorable occasion Lilia played Lady Macbeth with her father in the title role. The famous tragedian, Phelps, who was in the audience, was so impressed with Lilia’s performance that, according to Greville MacDonald, “he talked to my father of her gift as marvellous and vowed he would before long play Macbeth to her” (385).

Later the stage was moved from the coachhouse to MacDonald’s study, which occupied what is now the long dining-room. MacDonald, writing to an unnamed correspondent, described it before one performance as “surrounded with curtains; but those in front of it are withdrawn, and there the space of it lies before me, a bare, empty hollow of green and blue and red, which tomorrow evening will be filled with group after group of moving, talking, shining, acting men and women, boys and girls” (386). It must have been an unusual theatre, for MacDonald had had his friend Cottier, a decorative artist who later obtained much the same fame in New York as Morris did in London, to decorate the room. Greville MacDonald described his father’s study as possessing “a sort of barbaric splendour” with “crimson-flock wallpaper with black fleurs-de-lis stencilled over, a dark blue ceiling with scattered stars in silver and gold, and a silver crescent moon; and specially designed brass-ball wall-brackets and chandeliers for

gas” (386). Similar decorations were also used for MacDonald’s study at Halloway House, Hastings, which he took as a holiday home in 1871 (411). William De Morgan, who visited The Retreat with Morris in 1878, was far from impressed with this decoration. He found the red-flock [5] wallpaper in extremely bad taste and noted how the “ceiling of azure blue, dotted with gilt stars, [was] considerably tarnished” (MacCarthy 392).

Another entertainment held at The Retreat was the annual party for the tenants of Octavia Hill’s housing schemes for the poor. The day began with a midday dinner followed in the early afternoon by amateur dramatics performed by the MacDonalds and their friends. These took place on a makeshift stage that was erected on the lawn, with the scenery being painted by E. R. Hughes. The plays were generally based on fairy tales written by Mrs. Louisa MacDonald, but occasionally more serious pieces were attempted such as adaptations of Zola’s *L’Assommoir* and Dickens’s *The Haunted Man*. The day ended with tea, games, and country dancing. Greville MacDonald recalled that in 1868 John Ruskin led off the final Sir Roger de Coverley with Octavia Hill as his partner. These parties were also attended by, among others, C. Edmund Maurice (the radical), the Rev. Samuel Barnett (founder of Toynbee Hall) and Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones. The latter, incidentally, though a MacDonald before her marriage, was not related to George MacDonald.

For John Ruskin The Retreat was to be a place of special significance. The MacDonalds were friends of an Irish family called La Touche with whose daughter, Rose, Ruskin had become infatuated while she was still a child. In what was by any standards a bizarre love-affair, alternately encouraged and discouraged by the La Touches, Ruskin had three of his happiest days with Rose when she was staying with the MacDonalds at The Retreat between 28th – 31st of July 1872. Greville MacDonald, who was sixteen when Ruskin visited, wrote: “I remember very clearly Ruskin’s strength of face, his searching blue eyes, and his trustful smile. . . . I remember, too, the shadowy Rose, so amazingly thin, with her high colour and great eyes, and such a tender sad smile on her strangely red lips” (418). Ruskin later wrote to MacDonald and spoke of “having had three days of heaven which he bought with all the rest of his life” (417). Ruskin’s happiness was to be short-lived, as Rose La Touche died in 1875 and he was to suffer the first of a series of mental breakdowns two years later.

John Ruskin was by no means the only famous visitor to The Retreat during the years in which it was occupied by the MacDonalds. In September

1872 MacDonald, accompanied by his wife and eldest son, had embarked upon an extensive lecture tour of Canada and the United States. On his return, in May 1873, The Retreat paid host to a steady stream of distinguished visitors he had met on this [6] tour. Amongst these were Lord Collier and his two sons, Mrs. Whitney, Mary Mapes Dodge (author of *The Silver Skates*), Antoinette Sterling, and Mark Twain. The American Jubilee Singers also came and sang in the garden of the house (Johnson 56).

In 1875, MacDonald, in order to provide accommodation for his large family, took over River Villa, a small house adjoining The Retreat. This enabled Jane and Anne Cobden to join the household, thus establishing another link with Morris for Anne was later to marry Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson who bound Morris's much-thumbed copy of *Das Kapital* and founded the Doves Bindery close to Kelmscott House at 15 Upper Mall. Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson later wrote that life at River Villa was "full of excitement and interest. Meals were erratic; but no one complained, for self-forgetfulness was the rule of the house. The belief in Divine Guidance carried us over the difficulties" (Greville MacDonald 387-88).

This period of family happiness at The Retreat was to be shortlived. In 1875 Mary, one of the MacDonalds' daughters, contracted scarlet fever. Her illness convinced her father that The Retreat's proximity to the Thames was unhealthy, and so for much of that summer the family went to live at Great Tangle Manor near Guildford. When the six months' lease on this house expired they moved to a newly built house in Boscombe which they named "Corage" after the first word in MacDonald's anagram "*Corage! God mend al.*" Eventually, in the autumn of 1877, it was decided that Mary should go to Italy for the winter, and lodgings were taken at the Palazzo Catteneo at Nervi.

At first MacDonald was unable to accompany the rest of his family to Italy as he suffered a severe attack of bronchitis and pleurisy at The Retreat. As soon as he was well enough to move, however, he left the house for good in October 1877 in order to stay with Mrs. Cowper-Temple at 15 Great Stanhope Street. He was then further delayed due to a recurrence of the financial problems which had dogged him for most of his life. After paying the outstanding debts on The Retreat he found he was left with only £50. Luckily fate intervened and he was granted a Civil List Pension of £100 per annum by Queen Victoria, which meant that early in November 1877 he was able to join his family in Italy.

The change of air did little to help Mary MacDonald and she died

at Nervi on 27 April 1878. Strangely, on this day Morris, was also in Italy, at Genoa, where he was suffering from a particularly severe attack of gout! (Salmon 94). Despite the death of his daughter, MacDonald decided to settle in Italy for another year taking the lease on the Villa Barratta at Porto Fino. Thereafter the MacDonalds were to enjoy extended stays in Italy. Much of their time was spent [7] at a new house, the Casa Coraggio at Bordighera, which MacDonald had had built. According to Greville MacDonald Casa Coraggio “quickly became the centre of life for a rapidly growing colony of intellectual Scots and English” (505). In December 1892 Jane Morris, who was wintering at Bordighera, took part in one of the theatrical entertainments at Casa Coraggio. She wrote to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: “I have been taking part in some ‘tableaux vivants’ at George MacDonald’s [and] people seemed pleased, some characters are to be played tomorrow where I believe I am to be chief lover as I am so much taller than anybody else” (Faulkner 78).

The Retreat remained empty for many months following MacDonald’s departure in October 1877 and soon became riddled with damp. When Dante Gabriel Rossetti visited it early in 1878 he found it dank and uninviting. In a letter to Jane Morris he referred to “a frightful kitchen floor, perfectly dark and very incommodious—the kitchen stairs being a sort of ladder with no light at all, in which smashes would I think assail the ear whenever a meal was going on” (MacCarthy 392). Morris, though perfectly aware of The Retreat’s problems for he had written to MacDonald on the subject on 22 March 1878, was more positive. He described its location as “certainly one of the prettiest in London” (MacCarthy 393) and loved the notion that the Thames linked it to his beloved Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire. In the summer of 1878 he therefore took a twenty-one year lease on the house from MacDonald and during the next few months entirely renovated and redecorated the building at a cost of nearly £1,000. He and his family moved into what he now called Kelmscott House in November 1878. And so it came about, as Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson so aptly put it, that “the days of Christian Socialism came to an end at Hammersmith, to be succeeded for a time in the same house by the more strenuous days of Marxian Socialism” (Greville MacDonald 388).

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