

## The Tennyson Connection: Fragments from MacDonald's Correspondence on Particular Occasions

Rachel E. Johnson

**I**mmediately on George MacDonald's return from Switzerland his energies were all given to his candidature for the Edinburgh Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres vacated by the poet and critic, W. E. Aytoun, who died in August of that year (1865). The gift was in the hands of the Crown through the Home Secretary and Lord Advocate. In spite of having such men against him as David Masson, who was chosen, Daniel Wilson of Toronto, Professor Nicol of Glasgow, Dr William Hanna, and other notable scholars, my father's reputation as a lecturer and the representative Scottish writer, as well as his popularity in Edinburgh society, would, many believed, have secured his election, had not "David Elginbrod" and its oft-quoted epitaph stood in his way. But he was not **[end of page 21]** very sorry at his failure, though the salary was large: what event could he regret when all things are ordered from above? But I well remember my mother's relief at the disappointing news: she had grave doubts whether her husband's bronchial tubes could weather the Edinburgh winds<sup>1</sup>

It was necessary for George MacDonald to acquire testimonials to support his candidature. Among those to whom he applied for such a service, as the following letter shows, was Alfred Lord Tennyson, then Poet Laureate.

Honoured Mr Tennyson,

I am taking a liberty in addressing you now, but not one, I trust, beyond excuse. I am a candidate for the chair of English Literature & Belles Lettres at Edinburgh. How much you may happen to know of my writings I cannot tell; but I write in the chance that you may have read some of them, and may, in consequence, be able to say a good word for me in the shape of a testimonial. This mode of application may be equally unpleasant for all concerned, but it is the only mode available. At all events your human kindness will forgive me for the trouble I seek to

put you to, and permit me without offence, to express the hope that some day you may at least feel no repugnance in knowing that, amongst the many who love you, I claim to belong to the necessarily smaller class of those who understand you.

Yours most respectfully  
George MacDonald

Aug 25 1865

MacDonald evidently kept up some, if infrequent, communication between himself and Tennyson, though the deference of his correspondence does not indicate a particularly close relationship.

Tennyson, “the great bard,” was held in as much awe by

1. *George MacDonald and His Wife*, Greville MacDonald. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1924) pp. 353-354. [22]

many of the authors of his day as he was by the reading public. However, on moving to “The Retreat” in the autumn of 1867, the MacDonalds were in a position to exercise their gift of hospitality in a larger way than previously, particularly on special occasions such as the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race days. As Greville MacDonald recounts:

Relatives and friends would come from far and near for the great event. Literature was well represented—by Tennyson himself on one occasion. Yet there was no ostentation, and refreshments were, if lavish, quite simple. The serviceable children were worth double their number in servants; and once it was my glory to have rescued a cab from the human floods on the highroad half a mile away, and piloted it to the house for the Poet Laureate.

What a great hand was his in its strong gentle grasp! What a deep sad voice! I thought.<sup>2</sup>

The following letter is George MacDonald’s invitation to the Tennysons on this occasion:

March 28 1870

My dear Mr Tennyson,

The Oxford & Cambridge boatrace is at hand, and ours is a good place to see it from. Could you not honour us with your company that day—the sixth of next month?

You should have a little room to yourself if you preferred it, and if you could bring Mrs Tennyson to share it with you, we should be only too glad

to receive her, or any other friend you pleased to bring. If you say you will come I will write again and let you know how you can reach the house most comfortably through the garden.

I send this by Mr Strahan because I think he said he was likely to see you. I need not add that my wife will be delighted to see Mrs Tennyson as well as your honoured self.

Yours most respectfully,  
George MacDonald

2. Ibid p. 379-380 [23]

As Greville MacDonald related, Tennyson accepted the invitation, which also gave him the opportunity to browse in George MacDonald's library, as can be seen from the following letter, recorded in *George MacDonald and His Wife*:

G M D to Mrs Alexander Powell

The Retreat  
March 24 1875

My Dear Helen,

. . . 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) sale, that he might read the prose Latin translation, which seems to be a literal one. He had never believed Ossian was a reality, but seemed a good deal more ready to believe in him when he had read a few lines, with which he was delighted

. . .<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, in the summer of 1877, MacDonald found it necessary to write to Tennyson regarding the above and other items borrowed from his library. Here, to round off these few glances at MacDonald through his correspondence, follows a polite "overdue" notice:

June 11 1877

Dear Mr Tennyson,

I hope you will not think me troublesome if I write to ask whether you have not now sucked all the honey from the three quartos of Gaelic heather you did me the honour of borrowing from me two years ago. The book is of value to me, therefore you will pardon me if I seem over-anxious about it—lest it may

have been sent and have never reached its home. When next I have the pleasure of seeing you, I hope you will be able to profess some faith in an Ossian somewhen, somewhere in space and the ages. I

3. p. 380 [24]

believe in him because I recognise a power to move me differing from any other.

If you happen to have by you a little book containing a translation of More's Utopia, which you had at the same time, and should find an opportunity of sending the other volumes, please put it in the parcel, but if you have lost sight of that, take no trouble about it, for it is of no consequence.

I hope this glorious weather brings lovelier things than itself to you and all yours. Do not think me troublesome, I pray you, but believe me most truly yours.

George MacDonald

Letters 1, 2, and 4 courtesy the Tennyson Collection, Lincoln Central Library.

[25]