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Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about George MacDonald

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A Forgotten Place in History

Never one to be caught in an understatement, the journalist G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1905, "If we test the matter by strict originality of outlook, George MacDonald was one of the three or four greatest men of 19th century Britain." Whether later historians agree or disagree with Chesterton's assessment, MacDonald undeniably attracted a wide range of admirers in his own time. Queen Victoria gave MacDonald's novels to her grandchildren and granted him a Civil Pension in 1877. Archbishop Tait said that MacDonald "was the very best preacher he had ever heard."

Chesterton chaired the planning committee of the "George MacDonald Centenary Celebration," held on December 10, 1924, one hundred years after MacDonald's birth. The committee also included Sir James Barrie (author of *Peter Pan*), the poet William Butler Yeats, Ernst Rhys (founder of *Everyman Books*), and other well-known authors, theologians, social reformers, biblical scholars, ministers, a Member of Parliament, and leading luminaries of the day.

All the World's a Stage

George MacDonald was much sought after both to preach and to give lectures on literature. Archived letters reveal that, due to reasons of health and fatigue, he frequently had to turn down requests for both. When he did give a sermon, he refused any sort of remuneration. He was actually offered the considerable sum of \$20,000 per year to pastor a Fifth Avenue church in New York but was not tempted. He lectured in England, Scotland, Ireland, America, Canada, and Italy to audiences sometimes numbering in the thousands. He often spoke on Shakespeare—upon one occasion proffering the topic choice: "'The Moral Drift of Shakespeare's Play of MacBeth'—or for MacBeth, substitute Hamlet or King Lear." Other subjects included Wordsworth, Chaucer, Shelley, Tennyson, Milton, Dante, and his own essay on the imagination. In the U. S., Robert Burns was a

popular topic, with audiences delighting in MacDonald's Scottish brogue (though some upper-class English listeners labeled MacDonald's accent and manner as "poor elocution").

Grandfather of the Inklings

MacDonald had a profound influence on the circle of 20th-century British writers known as the "Inklings." J. R. R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" and C. S. Lewis's essay "On Stories" are both deeply indebted to MacDonald's writings on the relationship between faith and imagination (as is the chapter "The Ethics of Elfland" in G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*). Charles Williams, in his book *Victorian Narrative Verse*, included MacDonald among the 15 select poets. Tolkien and Lewis (and their student W. H. Auden) discussed MacDonald as the great "mythopoeic" writer—one who creates enduring stories greater than their medium, stories that can transform the reader. Indeed, when Lewis's character Jane (*That Hideous Strength*) needs to recover in bed, she is handed MacDonald's children's book *The Princess and the Goblin* to help the healing process.

Perhaps Lewis's greatest accolade to MacDonald was having him appear as his guide in *The Great Divorce* (like Virgil for Dante). Tolkien was more ambivalent, sometimes giving MacDonald high praise, sometimes withdrawing it completely. But if imitation is flattery, the correlations are many and strong—even the subtitle of *The Hobbit* echoes one of MacDonald's titles, *There and Back*. Lewis described Tolkien excitedly to his friend Arthur Greeves as "the one man absolutely fitted, if fate had allowed, to be a third in our friendship in the old days, for he also grew up on William Morris and George MacDonald ... "

A Connecticut Yankee in Fairyland

George MacDonald's son Greville recalled that his father and Mark Twain had an intimate friendship. Twain and his wife had read MacDonald's novel *Robert Falconer* while on their honeymoon, and Twain joined other literati in hosting a farewell benefit at the end of MacDonald's American lecture tour. When Twain and his wife came to England, the MacDonalds invited them to their unusual garden theater parties, including one which also hosted the African American Jubilee choir. In 1882 Twain asked MacDonald for a new edition of *At the Back of the North Wind* because his children had "read and re-read their own copy so many times that it looks as if it had been through the wars." Avid fans, they even made their father invent new stories about its hero.

At one point the two authors discussed the possibility of co-authoring a novel to avoid the copyright pirating that was occurring as their novels traversed the Atlantic. Although they never did so, the striking plot similarities between *Huckleberry Finn* and *Sir Gibbie* have suggested to some that this discussion was the germ for what became two very unique—and profound—novels.

Say "Cheshire Cat"

It is thanks to Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland* and one of the earliest photography enthusiasts, that so many pictures of the MacDonald family exist today. He was repaid when, after he read them his story of Alice, the MacDonald children convinced him to publish it.

"Dinna ye ken a proverb whan ye hear 't?'"

Although much has been made of the "Scots tongue" in which MacDonald writes, it is neither as formidable nor as all pervasive as many believe. Only about half of MacDonald's novels make use of this dialect (which, incidentally, is called "Doric," and is still heard in the North East of Scotland today). And even in these, it is only when certain persons speak that the dialect appears. Reading the text aloud, and paying attention to the context, is often sufficient to enable comprehension. MacDonald was actually much more frustrated by the "editing" that occurred in the multiple pirated editions appearing in America than he was by the loss of any financial compensation.

No Chauvinist

MacDonald was a social reformer in the field of education and taught in schools for working classes founded by his mentors F. D. Maurice and A. J. Scott (see Gallery). From 1859-1867 he served as head of the English Department at Bedford College, the first British institution to offer higher education to women. Through his friendship with suffragette Barbara Bodichon, he became acquainted with women's rights and social activist Josephine Butler, as well as Dr. Elizabeth Garrett, the first female doctor trained in Britain.

At Home with the MacDonalds

The MacDonald family took the commandment to "practice hospitality" quite seriously. Both in England and in Italy they became renown for opening their doors to the community around them. Letters abound which thank the MacDonalds for their listening ears or comforting words—or for simply providing a safe haven. Many claimed Louisa as a maternal figure, addressing letters to "Madre," "Motherbird," and "Mother."

While offering quiet retreat, the MacDonalds' houses were also frequently full of riotous fun. The actor Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson remembered George and the artist Arthur Hughes dressed up in bear rugs and roaring after the children "with great gusto." Octavia Hill and John Ruskin led off the folk dancing at one gathering, after a charity performance of "Beauty and the Beast."

When the MacDonalds moved to Bordighera, Italy, their house—funded by friends ranging from royalty to servants—was designed specifically to provide for large entertainment. A visitor described it as "the open house of the neighborhood, and naturally its artistic and intellectual centre." Greville MacDonald said it was "home-place or concert room, theatre or dancing-room, oratory or dining-room, the heart of every occasion being our father's and mother's." On Wednesday afternoons they held public readings from poetry and classic

literature, and on Sunday evenings there were hymns, Scripture reading and exposition, and extempore prayer.

The large room downstairs could comfortably seat 200, and when the local Italian community was invited to view Christmas tableaux (evoking disapproval from exclusivists in the English population), 450 were said to have stood. One attendee commented that "in some wonderful way, all classes, nations, and creeds met willingly under that roof." The all-inclusive hospitality received notice in newspapers, inspiring others to follow suit.

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