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Cliffhangers and Extracts From Fact and Fantasy

Dan Hamilton

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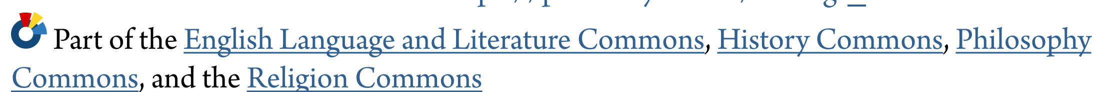
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A Collection of Essays Presented at

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FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

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Cliffhanger: The Serial Tale-Telling Gifts of George MacDonald

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Cliffhanger:
The Serial Tale-Telling Gifts of George MacDonald

by Dan Hamilton

Elizabeth and I sat in the public library in Huntly, Scotland, and handled—carefully—the original manuscript of *The Princess and the Goblin*. A few minutes with that stack of paper told us much about MacDonald and his methods of putting words into print.

To begin with, the manuscript was not on what we would call "writing paper"—it was written on the backs of old envelopes which had been opened up and flattened out. We could flip the pages over and see the addresses and the ancient postmarks. This was necessary thrift. *The Princess and the Goblin* was written during some of the poorest circumstances in MacDonald's life. He did not have extra money for fresh, clean, unused writing paper. He used what he had on hand—and not simply the obvious, but anything that could be adapted for his use.

An appreciation of his poverty led us into other interesting observations about the realities of his era and his work as a writer. It was an age without electricity, a time before cars, a season when reading was a large, family event. Books were expensive, but they were available, and weekly magazines helped fill the gap. Sunday as a "holy day" was more widely observed than today, and there was special approved reading for the occasion.

Many of MacDonald's novels first appeared in serial form in one or another of such magazines—*The Sunday Magazine, Cornhill Magazine, Good Words, Day of Rest, Wide Awake,* and *The Glasgow Weekly Mail.* The full story could take up to a year to run its course, and the first true book version would appear some time after that. The first book version was usually printed in three volumes called a "triple-decker." The triple-deckers went mainly to the circulating libraries, which "rented" the books out to anxious readers. (These copies were quickly worn out, and usually discarded—which helps explain their rarity and price today.) Perhaps two or three years after the triple-decker versions, a "new and cheaper" one-volume reprint would appear.

Such an approach to publishing created special problems for the writers. Books were written in installments of several chapters each, and had to be delivered piece-meal on a regular schedule to keep the publishers—and

the reading public—happy. Some writers could handle the forced creativity, and some could not. William Thackeray admitted that towards the end of the month he grew so nervous that he could scarcely speak to anyone, and that turning out each piece of *Vanity Fair* was typically a "life or death struggle." Constant panic seemed to be his normal working condition.

Dickens apparently had an easier time, though he relates a moment when "once, and but once only" in his life, he was frightened. David Copperfield was in magazine progress, and Dickens happened to be in a stationer's shop when a lady asked for the latest "number" of that story. The shopkeeper told her to come back in a few days—and Dickens suddenly realized that he had not yet written a single word for the imminent issue.

MacDonald apparently operated somewhere between these extremes. His books generally flow fairly well, but under close inspection they do show some signs of having been conceived under pressure.

1. There are puzzling mistakes between successive chapters. In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, the pastor's horse changes genders a couple of times. We wondered how this had happened, until we realized that while installment four (for example) was appearing on the newsstands, the handwritten—and only!—copy of installment five would be at the printer, and installment six was being written. No wonder MacDonald sometimes lost track of what had been said and done.

2. Mistakes were not only easy to make, but hard to correct. Once an installment was in print, it was public history—and that was that. Books published under more normal circumstances would be edited as a whole, and mistakes made across the entire story could be remedied - but MacDonald didn't always have that option. Chapter 37 of *The Vicar's Daughter* shows what he could do in desperate circumstances: he titled the whole chapter "Retrospective," offering corrections like these:

> I find also that I have, in the fourth chapter, by some odd cerebro-mechanical freak, substituted the name of my aunt Martha for that of my aunt Millicent, another sister of my father. . . I find also in the thirteenth chapter an unexplained allusion . . .

3. There are side stories, diversions, and occasional short or "empty" chapters that do little to advance the story. Perhaps he had temporarily lost track of the plot, or perhaps he was trying to gracefully fill out an installment while he tried to figure out what would happen next. The story wasn't necessarily complete in his mind, and fictional tales seem especially prone to changing shape as they are hammered together. As he admitted in that same "retrospective" chapter, "I find besides that several intentions I had when I had started, have fallen out of the scheme."

4. For similar reasons, there are dangling narratives—parts of the story that were never properly finished. *A Rough Shaking*, in particular, suffers from this. There are fascinating allusions, half-tales, and possibilities that are never fully fleshed out or finished later in the story.

5. There is a certain amount of chronological confusion. When Elizabeth and I were preparing to edit *Mary Marston* for republication, we were both bothered by the

continual flashbacks—apparently inserted as MacDonald realized that he had left essential pieces of the story out. This might not normally be a problem, but one of his main characters died in the middle of the narrative. Later chapters contained whole "resurrections" so important details could be inserted. When Elizabeth edited this book—to reappear as The Shopkeeper's Daughter—she snipped all the little pieces out and lined them up in chronological order. The resulting edition is much easier to read than the original.

5. There are rather abrupt endings to several of the books, as though he suddenly realized he only had two installments left to "tie it all together."

An unintended result for our time is the loss of the "cliffhanger" aspect of his books. The completed novels do not mark the original serial divisions, and one doesn't sense the ebb and flow of the narrative. There is room for investigation here—to group the chapters into their original installments and read them at the original pace. We tend to read a book in one or two sittings and then put it away— but how much more could we enjoy it if we savored it piecemeal for an entire year, rereading the earlier sections to keep the story fresh in our minds? Perhaps these minor flaws would bother us less, and the narrative impact grow all the more.

The process shapes the product; understanding and appreciating MacDonald's work will be easier and more rewarding if we take the time to see how—and under what circumstances and limitations—they were conceived, written, and published.

We found as we researched his books—and the circumstances that led to them — that he used not only old envelopes for his stories but buildings, towns, historical events, and even his friends and family as raw material.

We tracked MacDonald throughout Great Britain—and discovered many of the towns and landmarks that he described in his novels. In Arundel, his prototype for the Marshmallows of *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood,* we found the bridge where Pastor Walton met his indispensable Mr. Rogers; we found the castle; we even surmised that the name "Oldcastle Hall"—where his heroine lived—was his subtle salute to the castle The story of Robert Falconer first appeared in *Argosy.* Normally, the separate parts would simply have been collated for publication in book form. However, George MacDonald rewrote the last portion in preparation for the forthcoming book publication. In the interval, however, his publisher issued the collected original parts as Robert Falconer. George MacDonald protested the occurrence in a letter . . . see Grey bibliography.