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## A Cloud of Witnesses: A Collection of Quotes about Victorian Author George MacDonald

Darrel Hotmire

Many people have been profoundly influenced by the insightful writings of George MacDonald. His Victorian fairy tales, novels and sermons have caused life-changing experiences in authors as prominent as C.S. Lewis. He has influenced many others. The list of those influenced range from two of his sons, who both wrote biographies about their father, to literary greats like Samuel Clemens, G.K. Chesterton, Madeline L'Engle and W.H. Auden. The following quotes about George MacDonald both verify his influence as well as reveal some of the reasons his writings have made such an impact on so many people.

“His fairy-tales and allegorical fantasies were epoch-making in the lives of multitudes, children and parents alike, and still are widely read. His novels, not only those which inaugurated a new school in Scottish literature, but his stories of English life also, stirred the religious world to its depths and left their impress direct or mediate on the deeper thought of the whole English speaking world.”<sup>1</sup>

—Greville MacDonald

“George MacDonald was one of the endless chain of the interpreters of God to man.”<sup>2</sup>

—Ronald MacDonald

“Through stories of everyday Scottish and English life, whose plot, consisting in the conflict of a stereotyped theology with the simple human aspiration towards the divine, illustrated the solvent power of orthodox Christianity, he found himself touching the hearts and stimulating the consciences of a congregation never to be herded in the largest and most comfortable of Bethels.”<sup>3</sup>

—Ronald MacDonald

“In an Indiana town on a February afternoon in 1873, a fur-clad and bearded Scot in his mid-fifties, accompanied by his wife and eldest son, glimpsed the advance publicity for his evening lecture. Fluttering on the façade of the courthouse, a blue and silver banner read: ‘George MacDonald, England, Eminent Scotch Orator, Subject—Robert Burns.’ The

crowd that night was disappointingly small. The eminence of the Victorian man of letters, poet had perhaps not reached that place, but it did not matter. His American tour had begun auspiciously.

In Boston, three thousand, including several prominent New England literati, Emerson, Longfellow, and Beecher Stowe among them, had come to hear the author . . . Then large audiences from New York City to Ann Arbor crowded to hear the LLD from Aberdeen University.”<sup>4</sup>

—Virginia Verplough Steinmetz

“One hundred years ago—in 1872-1873—George MacDonald visited the United States. The reception he received from the Bostonian public was almost unprecedented. His first lecture was on Robert Burns. It took place on October 15 at Union Hall, Cambridgeport, with a ‘blaze of carmine or rather blood-colour elm trees’ outside. ‘There were two thousand eight hundred and fifty ticket holders, besides a few that got in as friends. Such a hall!’ exclaimed Mrs. MacDonald, in a letter to her children at home, ‘with two balconies all around it. They say Papa was heard in every corner of it.’ At the conclusion, the illustrious James T. Fields, ‘his eyes full of tears,’ rushed to shake MacDonald’s hand; ‘and declared there had been nothing like it since Dickens.’

With such tremendous success MacDonald’s speaking tour began. On October 30<sup>th</sup>, he visited Whittier at Amesbury, saw Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and lectured on Tom Hood at the Boston Lyceum. Eventually he went on to New York, Philadelphia (where the MacDonalds were lavishly entertained by the Lippincotts), New Jersey, Washington . . . And he was offered the pastorate of a church on Fifth Avenue (says his son), at the incredible sum then, of \$20,000 per annum, which he refused.”<sup>5</sup>

—Glenn Edward Sadler

“During his lifetime George Macdonald enjoyed great prestige and was extremely influential. As a writer and thinker his contemporaries ranked him with Trollope, Tennyson and Carlyle.”<sup>6</sup>

—Kathy Triggs

“It must be a very remote corner of America, indeed, where the writings of George MacDonald would not only be known, but ardently loved. David Elginbrod, Ranald Bannerman, Alec Forbes, Robert Falconer, and Little Diamond have many friends by this time all over the land, and are just as real personages, thousands of miles west of New York and Boston as they are hereabouts. Now there must be some good reason for this exceptional universality of recognition, and it is not at all difficult to discern why MacDonald’s characters should be welcome guests everywhere. The writer who speaks through his beautiful creation of imagination . . . if he be a master of his art, like MacDonald, will be a light and a joy to every household, however situated.”<sup>7</sup>

—James T. Fields

“The personality of the author will bear the closest inspection at any and all times. As a novelist, an essayist, a poet, and a preacher, he stands always in broad sunlight, and no dark shadow ever rests upon the dial of his pure and healthy inspiration. Those of us who know the man, love the sound of his pleasant voice, so full of tender sympathy with all that is best and strengthening in human life . . .”<sup>8</sup>

—James T. Fields

“ . . . and mamma and papa were quite well acquainted with Dr. MacDonald and his family”<sup>9</sup>

—Susy Clemens  
(daughter of Samuel Clemens)

“Susy died in 1896. In an 1899 letter to William Dean Howells, Twain reflected upon his successful career and then added, ‘All these things might move and interest one. But how desperately more I have been moved tonight by the thought of a little old copy in the nursery of *At the Back of the North Wind*. Oh what happy days they were when that little book was read, and how Susy loved it.’”<sup>10</sup>

—Samuel Clemens

“The two writers (MacDonald and Twain) were very intimate, and had discussed co-operation in a novel together, so as to secure copyright on both sides of the Atlantic.”<sup>11</sup>

—Greville MacDonald

“(*The Diary of an Old Soul* is) one of the three great sacred poems of the nineteenth century”<sup>12</sup>

—John Ruskin

“In native gift of poetic insight he was born with a richer dower than has fallen to any of our age now living since Alfred Tennyson saw the light of day.”<sup>13</sup>

—Sir William Geddes

“I for one can really testify to a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed. Of all the stories I have read, including even all the novels of the same novelist, it remains the most real, the most like life. It is called *The Princess and the Goblin*, and is by George MacDonald.”<sup>14</sup>

—G.K. Chesterton

“ . . . Another recurrent image in his romances was a great white horse; the father of the princess had one, and there was another in *At the Back of the North Wind*. To this day I can never see a big white horse in the street without a sudden sense of indescribable things.”<sup>15</sup>

—G.K. Chesterton

“ . . . MacDonald had made for himself a sort of spiritual environment, a space and transparency of mystical light, which was quite exceptional in his national and denominational environment. He said things that were like the Cavalier mystics, like the Catholic saints, sometimes perhaps like the Platonists or the Swedenborgian . . . And when he comes to be more carefully studied as a mystic, as I think he will be when people discover the possibility of collecting jewels scattered in a rather irregular setting, it will be found, I fancy, that he stands for a rather important turning point in the history of Christendom, as representing the particular Christian nation of the Scots.”<sup>16</sup>

—G.K. Chesterton

“Now, among the many men of genius Scotland produced in the nineteenth century, there was only one so original as to go back to this (pre-Calvin Christian) origin. There was only one who really represented what Scottish religion should have been, if it had continued the colour of Scottish mediaeval poetry. In his particular type of literary work he did indeed realize the apparent paradox of a St. Frances of Aberdeen, seeing the same sort of halo round every flower and bird . . . to have got back to it, or forward to it, at one bound of boyhood, out of the black Sabbath of a Calvinist town, was a miracle of imagination.”<sup>17</sup>

—G.K. Chesterton

“He wrote nothing empty; but he wrote much that is rather to full, and of which the appreciating depends rather on a sympathy with the substance than on the first sight of the form. As a matter of fact, the mystics have not often been men of letters in the finished and almost professional sense . . . it is in exactly the same sense in which we pity a man who has missed the whole of Keats or Milton, that we can feel compassion for the critic who has not walked in forest of *Phantastes* or made the acquaintance of Mr. Cupples in the adventures of Alec Forbes.”<sup>18</sup>

—G.K. Chesterton

“Lewis might be called MacDonald’s spiritual son and heir.”<sup>19</sup>

—Marion Lochhead

“I have had a great literary experience this week . . . The book is Geo. MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, which I picked up by hazard . . . Have you read it? At any rate whatever you are reading now, you simply must get this at once.”<sup>20</sup>

—C.S.Lewis (letter to Aurthur Greeves)

“I read MacDonald’s *Phantastes* over my tea, which I have read many times and which I really believe fills for me the place of a devotional book.”<sup>21</sup>

—C.S. Lewis (note from his journal)

“Most myths were made in prehistoric times, and, I suppose, not consciously made by individuals at all. But every now and then there occurs in the modern world a genius—a Kafka or a Novalis—who can make such a

story. MacDonald is the greatest genius of this kind whom I know.”<sup>22</sup>

—C.S.Lewis

“What he does best is fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this in my opinion he does better than any man.”<sup>23</sup>

—C.S.Lewis

“It was in this mythopoeic art that Macdonald excelled. The great works are *Phantastes*, the Curdie books, *The Golden Key*, *The Wise Woman* and *Lilith*. They are supremely good . . . The meaning, the suggestion, the radiance, is incarnate in the whole story.”<sup>24</sup>

“But it is, no doubt true that any reader who loves holiness and loves Macdonald—yet perhaps he will need to love Scotland too—can find even in the worst of them something that disarms criticism and will come to feel a queer, awkward charm in their very faults.”<sup>25</sup>

—C.S.Lewis

(speaking of MacDonald’s novels)

“I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself. Hence his Christ-like union of tenderness and severity. Nowhere else outside the New Testament have I found terror and comfort so intertwined.”<sup>26</sup>

—C.S.Lewis

“I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honesty drives me to emphasize it.”<sup>27</sup>

—C.S.Lewis

“It must be more than thirty years ago that I bought—almost unwillingly, for I had looked at the volume on that bookstall and rejected it on a dozen previous occasion—the Everyman edition of *Phantastes*. A few hours later I knew that I had crossed a great frontier . . . What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize my imagination. It did nothing to my intellect nor (at that time) to my conscience. Their turn came far later and with the help of many other books and men. But when the process was complete, by which, of course, I mean ‘when it had really begun’—I found that

I was still with MacDonald and that he had accompanied me all the way and that I was now at last ready to hear from him much that he could not have told me from the beginning.”<sup>28</sup>

—C.S.Lewis

“The captivating fairy tales and fantasy novels of nineteenth-century author George MacDonald had a profound influence on many British and American authors who followed after him. The best fantasy writers of this century including J.R.R. Tolkien and Madeleine L’Engle, acknowledged that they held the Scottish-born author in high esteem.”<sup>29</sup>

—Editors of *The Princess and the Goblin*,  
Illustrated Junior Library Series

“Surely, George MacDonald is the grandfather of us all—all of us who struggle to come to terms with truth through fantasy.”<sup>30</sup>

—Madeleine L’Engle

“The magical, the fairy story . . . may be a vehicle of mystery. This is what George MacDonald attempted, achieving stories of power and beauty.”<sup>31</sup>

—J.R.R. Tolkien

“It is odd that an age which thinks so highly of writers such as Blake or Kafka should neglect the works of George MacDonald. In that style of writing which is called visionary or mythic, MacDonald has never been surpassed.”<sup>32</sup>

—W.H. Auden

“The *Princess and the Goblin* is, in my opinion the only English children’s book in the same class as the *Alice* books.”<sup>33</sup>

—W.H. Auden

“His greatest gift is what one might call his dream realism, his exact and profound knowledge of dream causality, dream logic, dream change, dream morality: when one reads him, the illusion of participating in a real dream is perfect; one never feels that it is an allegorical presentation of wakeful conscious processes.”<sup>34</sup>

—W.H. Auden

“In his power to project his inner life into images, events, beings, landscapes which are valid for all, he is one of the most remarkable

writers of the nineteenth century . . . and Lilith is equal if not superior to the best of Poe.”<sup>35</sup>

—W.H. Auden

“MacDonald, having found his own golden key, gave it away to any who cared to have it and to follow him into his inner kingdom of magic and holiness.”<sup>36</sup>

—Marion Lochhead

“From His Scots ancestry, MacDonald inherited the wild romantic mysticism of the Highlands, and he combined this with a remarkable and apparently intuitive grasp of psychological truths that were far ahead of his time. His books are deep and strong, even the fairy tales and the dream romances, such as *Lilith* and *Phantastes*. Woven into their texture is a natural love and knowledge of the wild, dark moors of the Scottish earth, the weird lore of the ancient, superstitious Scots blood, a deep and sincere belief in the Divine, an inner faith that went beyond mere Christian orthodoxy.”<sup>37</sup>

—Lin Carter

“Unquestionably, the master of the Victorian fairy tale was George MacDonald.”<sup>38</sup>

—Michel Patrick Hearn

“For admirers of MacDonald, such as myself, his work is something of the effect of an hallucinatory drug. Finishing one of his stories is often like waking from a dream—one’s own dream. The best of them stimulate long-forgotten images and feelings—the ‘something profound’ that borders frustratingly close to memory without quite ever reaching it.”<sup>39</sup>

—Maurice Sendak

“It moved me the way books did when, as a child, the great gates of literature began to open and first encounters with noble thoughts and utterances were unspeakably thrilling. But this was different, too. It was as if a wind blew over me, coming from heights even higher than that of Glashgar. I wanted not to put the book down until it was finished, and yet I could not bear to come to its end. Once at its last page, I felt I would have to do what I had often done as a child—turn back to the first page and begin reading all over again. I longed to tell everyone I knew to read it. Just that, to read it. It would not do to tell them anything about it. This was not only a book, it was an experience.”

“Now and then a book is read as a friend is made and after it life is not the same, for it has become richer, more meaningful, more challenging. Sir Gibbie did this to me. Sir Gibbie holds that within it covers to do something to all who read it.”<sup>40</sup>

—Elizabeth Yates

“Years ago, when I was still a teenager, I discovered a book entitled *Unspoken Sermons* by George MacDonald. I remember one Sunday afternoon when I sat down and read it from cover to cover.

A normal teenage boy does not customarily read sermons on a Sunday afternoon, and I was a normal teenage boy . . . However, these were not normal sermons, and George MacDonald was not a customary writer. And I could never forget one sermon especially, called ‘The New Name.’ For years I thought I was the only one who knew about George MacDonald and his unusual insights. But then, as I began reading C.S. Lewis, I found that Lewis had ‘discovered’ MacDonald long before I had.”<sup>41</sup>

—William J Peterson

“Valued in his own time as an original thinker and spiritual guide, George MacDonald continues to command the attention of today’s readers.”<sup>42</sup>

—U.C. Knoepfelmacer

“George MacDonald is one of the most engaging and prolific creative writers of the Victorian Era. Although he was plagued by failure, poverty, and ill health, he was said to have a deep trust in God and a sunny playful disposition.”<sup>43</sup>

—Richard Foster

“Like so many others both before me and since, I have C.S. Lewis’s little anthology of quotations from MacDonald’s work to thank for it (reading MacDonald). Until then I had thought of MacDonald as a writer exclusively of children’s books, but from Lewis’s introduction I discovered not only that he had written a great deal of both fiction and nonfiction for grown-ups, but that all of it was deeply imbued by his Christian faith . . . And I have been reading him ever since.”<sup>44</sup>

—Frederick Buechner

“A man of vivid imagination, George MacDonald wrote in a great variety of literary genres, excelling in the creation of fairy tales, as he said, for children from seven to seventy.”<sup>45</sup>

—Rolland Hein

“If the magic of the storyteller is strong enough, his scenes and characters will grow into our real life. Of all writers, George MacDonald is one of the strangest, and in many ways one of the greatest. He never fails of his magic, for it is in the wonder-filled regions to which he leads us, always so easily and inevitably, and in the undoubtable truth even of his most daring inventions, that the real enchantment lies.”<sup>46</sup>

—Roger Lancelyn Green

(*The Princess and Curdie*) was given to me as a birthday present when I was about ten or so, before I knew that there was book about the mountain-haunting goblins, Princess Irene, and the sturdy dependable Curdie. My birthday book was devoured in one gulp and then I searched library shelves for more books by the same author. Having so discovered *The Princess and the Goblin*, I was entranced to see how the story really began. For some time the thought of the goblin queen’s fearsome stone shoes remained with me—certainly a new and unusual weapon to be used against dark forces, perfect to wear clumping about in the night of underground.”<sup>47</sup>

—Andre Norton

“Throughout the final third of the nineteenth-century, George MacDonald’s works were best sellers, and his status as a sage was secure. His novels sold, both in Great Britain and in the United States, by the hundreds of thousands of copies; his lectures were popular and widely attended; his poetry earned him at least a passing consideration for the laureateship; and his reputation as a Christian teacher was vast. This exalted one-time popularity alone makes MacDonald a figure of some significance in literary history; for it should be emphasized, his was not merely the vulgar vogue of the ordinary popular writer who is successful in the marketplace but is never taken seriously by qualified critics and is forgotten with justice and mercy. . . . In his own time, MacDonald was esteemed by an impressive roster of English and American literary and religious leaders. He was among

the closest friends of John Ruskin and Charles Dodgson; and he moved as a peer in the company of Alfred Tennyson, Charles Kingsley, F.D. Maurice, R.W. Gilder, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Samuel Clemens, and H.W. Longfellow. All of the respected, praised, and encouraged him, yet his reputation has nearly vanished while theirs survives. One wonders why . . .”<sup>48</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>MacDonald, Greville, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924), 1.
- <sup>2</sup>MacDonald, Ronald, *From a Northern Window* (Eureka: Sunrise Book Publishers, 1989), 31.
- <sup>3</sup>MacDonald, *Northern Window*, 33.
- <sup>4</sup>Verplough, Harry, *3000 Quotations from the Writings of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1996), 7.
- <sup>5</sup>MacDonald, George, *The Gifts of the Child Christ*. Vol. 1., ed. Glenn Edward Sadler (Grand Rapids: William B Erdmans Publishing, 1973), 9-10.
- <sup>6</sup>Triggs, Kathy, *The Stars and the Stillness, A Portrait of George MacDonald* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1986), iv.
- <sup>7</sup>MacDonald, George, *Cheerful Words*, ed. E.E. Brown (Boston: Lothrop & Co., 1880), 3.
- <sup>8</sup>MacDonald, *Cheerful Words*, 4-5.
- <sup>9</sup>Lindskoog, Kathryn, “Mark Twain and George MacDonald, The Salty and the Sweet” *The Mark Twain Journal*, Vol.30, No.2, (Fall 1992).
- <sup>10</sup>Lindskoog, “Mark Twain and George MacDonald.”
- <sup>11</sup>MacDonald, *MacDonald and His Wife*, 457.
- <sup>12</sup>Hein, Rolland, *George MacDonald, Victorian Mythmaker* (Nashville: StarSong Publishing 1993), 318.
- <sup>13</sup>Triggs, *The Stars and the Stillness*, iv.
- <sup>14</sup>MacDonald, *MacDonald and His Wife*, 9.
- <sup>15</sup>MacDonald, *MacDonald and His Wife*, 10.
- <sup>16</sup>MacDonald, *MacDonald and His Wife*, 12-13.
- <sup>17</sup>MacDonald, *MacDonald and His Wife*, 14.
- <sup>18</sup>MacDonald, *MacDonald and His Wife*, 14-15.
- <sup>19</sup>Lochhead, Marion, *The Renaissance of Wonder In Children’s Literature* (Edinburgh: Canongate Publishing, 1977), 5.
- <sup>20</sup>Lewis, C.S., *Letters of C.S.Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles LTD, 1966), 27.
- <sup>21</sup>Lewis, C.S., *Letters*, 84.
- <sup>22</sup>Lewis, C.S., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London : Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1947), 16.
- <sup>23</sup>Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 14.
- <sup>24</sup>Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 17.
- <sup>25</sup>Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 17.
- <sup>26</sup>Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 18-19.

- <sup>27</sup>Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 20.
- <sup>28</sup>Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 21.
- <sup>29</sup>MacDonald, George, *The Princess and The Goblin* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap 1985), i.
- <sup>30</sup>MacDonald, George, *The Light Princess and Other Fantasy Stories*. (Grand Rapids: William B Erdmans Publishing, 1980), back cover page.
- <sup>31</sup>MacDonald, George, *Lilith* (New York: Ballantine Books 1969), back cover page.
- <sup>32</sup>MacDonald, George, *The Visionary Novels of George MacDonald*, ed. Anne Fremantle (New York: Noonday Press, 1969), front jacket cover.
- <sup>33</sup>MacDonald, *The Visionary Novels*, vi.
- <sup>34</sup>MacDonald, *The Visionary Novels*, vii.
- <sup>35</sup>MacDonald, *The Visionary Novels*, vi.
- <sup>36</sup>Lochhead, *The Renaissance of Wonder*, 3.
- <sup>37</sup>MacDonald, *Lilith*, vii-viii.
- <sup>38</sup>Hearn, Michael Patrick, *The Victorian Fairy Tale Book*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), xxiv.
- <sup>39</sup>Sendak, Maurice, *Caldecott & Co. Notes on Books & Pictures* (New York: Michael di Capua Books, 1988), 45.
- <sup>40</sup>MacDonald, George, *Sir Gibbie*, ed. Elizabeth Yates (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), v-vi.
- <sup>41</sup>Verplough, *3000 Quotations*, 5.
- <sup>42</sup>MacDonald, George, *The Complete Fairy Tales* (New York: Penguin, 1999), vii.
- <sup>43</sup>Foster, Richard and Emilie Griffin, *Spiritual Classics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 79.
- <sup>44</sup>Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker*, xv.
- <sup>45</sup>Hein, Rolland, *The Heart of George MacDonald* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), xi.
- <sup>46</sup>MacDonald, George, *Phantastes* (New York: Ballentine Books Inc., 1970), preface.
- <sup>47</sup>MacDonald, George, *The Princess and the Goblin* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1986), 202.
- <sup>48</sup>Reis, Richard, *George MacDonald’s Fiction, A Twentieth-Century View* (Eureka: Sunrise Book Publishers, 1989), 17-18.

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