

Inklings Forever

Volume 4 A Collection of Essays Presented at the
Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S.
Lewis & Friends

Article 15

3-2004

George MacDonald on Psychology

Barbara Amell

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Amell, Barbara (2004) "George MacDonald on Psychology," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 15.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/15

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2004
Upland, Indiana

George MacDonald on Psychology

Barbara Amell,
editor *Wingfold*

Amell, Barbara. "George MacDonald on Psychology." *Inklings Forever* 4 (2004)
www.taylor.edu/cslewis

George MacDonald on Psychology

Barbara Amell

In an 1870 article from *Scribner's Monthly* we find the following assessment of George MacDonald as a novelist: "He is a far greater writer because a greater thinker than Dickens."¹ This is a surprising statement: it is Charles Dickens, not George MacDonald, whose literature is required college reading today. How did the *Scribner's* author justify this claim? "He has no equal as a writer of the highest sort of fiction: what we may call the psychological novel."² This too is a surprising statement, considering that Sigmund Freud, the so-called father of psychoanalysis, was sixteen at the time.

The assessment in *Scribner's* of George MacDonald as psychologist was far from an isolated incident. In 1879 a critic for *The Spectator* described MacDonald's novel *Sir Gibbie* as follows: "Written, as it has been, for a great and serious purpose—it is, in fact, a social study of psychological evolution."³ An 1897 review in *The Bookman* of his final novel *Salted with Fire* stated, "Certain psychological processes are laid open in which some of us will find it difficult to believe. But with this difficulty on the part of his readers Dr. MacDonald has always had to reckon."⁴

Webster's Dictionary dates the word 'psychology, the science of mind and behavior,' at 1653. While Freud is commonly regarded as the founder of many theories that first established modern psychology as a legitimate science, there are many who agree that George MacDonald was ahead of his time in his own analysis of human behavior. In *The Gold Thread* F. Hal Broome refers to the common acknowledgment that MacDonald had an "uncanny prescience of both Freudian and Jungian theory."⁵ But most people who study MacDonald's works will notice that he had his own theories on the healing of the human mind and heart, theories that for many transcend those of established psychiatric schools.

Virtually every published book and recorded presentation of George MacDonald's contains references to the mental suffering of humanity and advice for its cure. But perhaps the following concept recorded in his novel *Weighed and Wanting* best does justice to the scope of MacDonald's healing vision: "The cry of the human heart, in all ages and in every moment is, 'Where is God and how shall I find Him?'"⁶ This one statement places MacDonald in a different category than any school of psychoanalysis will advocate. If MacDonald is right, then the commonly unacknowledged scope of the problem prevents the fully needed cure. It is God we want, God we need, God whose very presence heals. "No human fault," MacDonald wrote, "the smallest, is overcome, save by

the bringing in of true, grand things"⁷; yet so many of MacDonald's generation had not been presented a God who was grand or true. "The only Possibility of believing in a God seems to me to lie in finding an idea of a God large enough, grand enough, pure enough, lovely enough to be fit to believe in."⁸ Throughout his literary and speaking careers MacDonald consistently presented a God who is absolute goodness and love, stating that, "at the long last, Love will cure everything."⁹ An 1872 *Harper's* review of his earliest book, *Within and Without*, praised MacDonald's grasp of this truth and his practice of it in dealing with human suffering: "There are many . . . to whom his interpretations of unuttered and unutterable thoughts, are precious, and many more who need to be taught, what he is teaching with wonderful power, that true religious life is something deeper far than philosophy, unmeasurable by science, indefinable by theology, inexplicable to the reason, whose utmost powers are inadequate to solve the problems of the heart."¹⁰ The concept that God cures our every weakness and need brings MacDonald into immediate conflict with Freud, who appears to have viewed belief in God as a childish need for a father figure, something patients needed to outgrow. MacDonald left us a ready answer for this argument. In his book *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* he mentioned people who regard trust in God as "at best a fantastic weakness, fit only for sickly people. But watch how the strength of such people, their calmness and common sense, fares when the grasp of suffering lays hold upon them. . . . All the men I say who have done the mightiest things, have not only believed that there was this refuge in God, but have themselves more or less entered into the secret place of the Most High."¹¹ MacDonald adds further insight into this topic in his novel *Paul Faber, Surgeon*: "The poorest glimmer of His loveliness gives a dawn to our belief in God; and a small amount indeed of a genuine knowledge of Him will serve to neutralize the most confident declaration that science is against the idea of a God—an utterance absolutely false."¹² For MacDonald it was not a sign of weakness but of strength to acknowledge our need for the Father who loves us, because this need is a fact, a reality of our God-created nature.

There are of course many people who cannot bring themselves to believe in a loving God because of the cruelty and wickedness that flourish in this world. MacDonald devoted entire novels primarily to defending Christian belief in the face of suffering and evil. Once confronted with the question, "How can I be at rest when I see these fearful conditions of disease and

sin like devils tearing my fellow creatures?” MacDonald replied, “I would suggest the way in which a mind might be at peace notwithstanding all these terrible things: I think that looking out on all the horrors of the world we might just remember that God is there—that He is suffering in it and with it, and so if we are suffering also with it we are suffering with God Himself.”¹³ MacDonald thus believed in a God who loves us so much that He feels our every pain. “It helps me to think that things are not so horrible quite, as they look from the outside, because God is in the midst of it all—not sympathetically only, but actually.”¹⁴

George MacDonald’s biographer William Raeper claimed MacDonald was aware of the human unconscious, and anyone who studies MacDonald’s 1858 book *Phantastes* would find ample evidence that this was the case. But in approaching the healing of the unconscious, MacDonald differs from the average psychologist in one very important element. In the 1906 article “A Neglected Novelist,” MacDonald’s friend Louise Collier Willcox wrote, “His subject is a large one—namely, the coming to consciousness, not of the mind, but of the soul, of man. It is so large a subject that it admits of calm and meditative treatment.”¹⁵

How did George MacDonald believe the human soul comes to consciousness? In recorded sermon MacDonald said that Christ, “in His own heart and soul and mind, in all His consciousness, knew. . . . If there come not into you a higher power of purity and deliverance, a presence to your consciousness of the living God, your whole nature is a something from which you recoil, for it was never meant for you to live in the consciousness of self, and no man can live in that, but must go mad.”¹⁶ MacDonald here implies that Christ had no unconscious, that a perfect being would have no hidden corners of the mind, that our recoil from our own impurity creates our unconscious, and that honesty and purity helps unravel the unconscious. He believed this kind of healing can only take place when we find God, when we recognize God for what He truly is. “To find himself in such conscious as well as vital relation with the source of his being, . . . with a Consciousness by and through which he is conscious, would indeed be the end of all the man’s ills! nor can he imagine any other, not to say better way, in which his sorrows could be met, understood, and annihilated.”¹⁷

In a recorded account of a MacDonald lecture on Tennyson, we find him advocating the development of virtue as the cure for a problem that is very familiar to psychologists today. “There are some people subject to terrible *depression*. Every one knows something of it, but some are most particularly afflicted with it. It is very easy to put it all down to physical causes, the liver or the nerves, and so on. But saving the presence of our friend the Doctor I do not believe in that. If he could make us really *good*, we should not need very many

medicines. . . . Of course medical remedies may aid. But in the long run there is only one cure, and that is a spiritual one. . . .

“Go and do God’s will, and you will know. That is the remedy to the gloomy doubts and terrible depression of this age. And remember what so many forget, the Christian duty of joy. . . . You say: ‘It is not in my power to rejoice now.’ Well, I deny it. You have the power, if only you will exert the will.”¹⁸

Anyone familiar with MacDonald’s writings will notice that he frequently stresses obedience, the need to do what we believe God would have us do, as a cure for pain, weakness and unbelief. In his sermon ‘The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity,’ MacDonald shared his reasoning for this concept: “Life, that is, action, is alone the human condition into which the light of the Living can penetrate.”¹⁹

In the same sermon MacDonald wrote that Christ speaks not merely to a common level of understanding, but “to the whole mode of thinking, to the thought-matrix, the inward condition.”²⁰ It is obvious in many instances that MacDonald was making an attempt to communicate his concepts in a similar manner and on a similar level, in an effort to follow the example of his Master. This may help account for the fact that while many admire MacDonald as a theologian, many others reject him as incomprehensible or inconsequential: his mode of expression was not an average one but a spiritual one, as was the case with his psychology.

MacDonald wrote hundreds of poems, many of which qualify as psychological studies in the same way that his novels did. “Poetry,” he wrote in his essay on ‘The Imagination,’ “is the source of all the language that belongs to the inner world, whether it be of passion or of metaphysics, of psychology or of aspiration.”²¹

This same essay chronicles MacDonald’s belief in the importance of cultivating a healthy imagination. “If (the imagination) be to man what creation is to God,” he wrote, “we must expect to find it operative in every sphere of human activity. Such is, indeed, the fact, and that to a far greater extent than is commonly supposed. . . . That evil may spring from the imagination, as from everything else but the perfect love of God, cannot be denied. But infinitely worse evils would be the result of its absence. . . . The antidote to indulgence is development, not restraint. . . . A wise imagination, which is the presence of the Spirit of God, is the best guide that man or woman can have; for it is not the things we see most clearly that influence us the most powerfully. . . . It is the nature of the thing, not the clearness of its outline, that determines its operation.”²²

MacDonald illustrated his theories on the importance of the imagination for healing through the title character of his novel *Adela Cathcart*, a young woman who suffers from a strange sickness. “I suspect,” her doctor says, “the cause of her illness is

rather a spiritual one. She has evidently a strong mental constitution; and this strong frame, so to speak, has been fed upon slops; and an atrophy is the consequence."²³ Adela's friends determine to form a story-club to revive her interest in life by appealing to her imagination. Dr. Nancy Mellon has written at length on the structural value of the stories offered for Adela's mental cure and the medical purpose of the order in which they are presented.

MacDonald may have owed his belief that spiritual poverty causes physical and mental illness to his exposure when young to Scotch Calvinism. In an essay on MacDonald's Scottish novels, Alexander Webster wrote, "*Robert Falconer*, being witness, Calvinism bewildered the Scottish people, arrested the development of their genius, and coarsened and hardened their life and character."²⁴ MacDonald's answer to Calvinism in *Robert Falconer* was the presentation of God as altogether good. "When souls like Robert's have been ill-taught about God, the true God will not let him gaze too long upon the Moloch which men have set up to represent Him. He will turn away their minds from that which men call Him, and fill them with some of His own lovely thoughts or works, such as may by degrees prepare the way for the vision of the Father."²⁵

This belief that God is in such close contact with the human mind was discussed in a fascinating introduction to MacDonald's fantasy *Lilith*, written by his son Greville. He claimed his father would have asserted that, "Granted the *sub*-conscious inheritance does explain our tendencies to wrong-doing, the *supra*-conscious is more significant. These *supra*-conscious instincts are as real as any we possess, and are responsible for all that is noble in man. They must be grounded in this truth: that in God we hold our being."²⁶

Contact with God in the *supra*-conscious would surely require cultivating the art of listening. MacDonald made frequent mention of the importance of silent contemplation when seeking God and seeking emotional healing. "When we cease listening to the cries of self-seeking and self-care, then the voice that was there all the time enters into our ears. It is the voice of the Father speaking to His child, never known for what it is until the child begins to obey it."²⁷

MacDonald often wrote about the healing of pain from wrongs we have had done to us. "Just because you are eternal," he wrote in his novel *Castle Warlock*, "your trouble cannot be. You may cling to it, and brood over it, but you cannot keep it from either blossoming into a bliss, or crumbling to dust. Be such while it lasts, that, when it passes, it shall leave you loving more, not less."²⁸ In the same novel, a saintly man prays, "Nothing can hurt me, because nothing can hurt Thee."²⁸

In a recorded sermon on hope, MacDonald linked

the sacred use of the imagination to contact with God when seeking healing for wrongs committed against us. "When you fear, you do not trust or love. Hope in God, who is not the God of the perfect only, but of the *becoming*. . . . Do not be afraid of letting your imagination work. Invent as glorious an outcome of all the troubles of your life as you can possibly think of: 'for as the Heaven is high above the Earth,' so it is above the most exalted imaginations."²⁹

"At the root of all human bliss," MacDonald wrote, "lies repentance."³⁰ It was vital to MacDonald's healing vision that we seek God's forgiveness, whether for wrongs we have done, or for our inability to forgive those who have wronged us. The title character in MacDonald's novel *The Vicar's Daughter* says she cannot forgive herself for her bad deeds. A friend replies, "If you think how the world is flooded with forgiveness, you will dip in your cup and take what you want."³¹

MacDonald saw God's mercy as revealed in Christ. "Call to mind how Jesus used to forgive men's sins, thus lifting from their hearts the crushing load that paralyzed all their efforts. Recall the tenderness with which He received those from whom the religious of His day turned aside."³²

Perhaps everyone has had something happen to them that they feel is unforgivable, irreparable, wrong even for God to forgive. Addressing this painful issue, MacDonald wrote, "The very impossibility you see in the thing points to the region wherein God works. . . . How could He say that He took our sins upon Him if He could not make amends for them to those they had hurt?"³³

Considering the scope and value of MacDonald's concepts on mental healing, the question naturally arises as to why his theories are not more widely known. A possible explanation for this ignorance was offered in an 1898 article on MacDonald from *The Scots Magazine*: "In his books it is indeed true, if true of any, that the eye sees only in so far as it brings the power of seeing. Where one man reads an ordinary novel, another beholds a new revelation of life. We can never fully appreciate his books if we only believe in what we see."³⁴

Notes

¹ "Prose Fiction," *Scribner's Monthly*, 1870, p. 112.

² *Ibid.*

³ "Fiction," *The Spectator*, 1879, p. 1415.

⁴ August Max, "George MacDonald's New Novel," *The Bookman*, October 1897, p. 161.

⁵ Broome, F. Hal, *The Gold Thread*, William Raeper, ed., p. 87.

⁶ MacDonald, George, *Weighed and Wanting*, *Sunday Magazine*, 1881, p. 291.

- ⁷ MacDonald, George, *Guild Court*, 1868, p. 199.
- ⁸ MacDonald, George, *Thomas Wingfold*, 1876, p. 369.
- ⁹ MacDonald, George, *The Seaboard Parish*, 1879 edition, p. 579.
- ¹⁰ *Harper's Magazine*, June 1872, pp. 138-9.
- ¹¹ MacDonald, George, *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, 1871, p. 299.
- ¹² MacDonald, George, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 1879, p. 184.
- ¹³ MacDonald, George, recorded sermon on faith, Notes from Broadlands Conferences, 1887.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Willcox, Louise Collier, "A Neglected Novelist," *North American Review*, Sept. 1906.
- ¹⁶ MacDonald, George, "Know God," *George MacDonald in the Pulpit*, J. Joseph Flynn, ed., 1996, pp. 162, 164.
- ¹⁷ MacDonald, *Orts*, p. 69.
- ¹⁸ "Letters to the Editor," *The Spectator*, 1905, pp. 525-6.
- ¹⁹ MacDonald, George, *Unspoken Sermons II*, 1885, p. 41.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ²¹ MacDonald, *Orts*, p. 9.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 26-28.
- ²³ MacDonald, George, *Adela Cathcart*, 1864, p. 52.
- ²⁴ Webster, Alexander, *Theology in Scotland*, 1915, p. 84.
- ²⁵ MacDonald, George, *Robert Falconer*, 1868, p. 181.
- ²⁶ MacDonald, Greville, Introduction to *Lilith*, George MacDonald, 1924, pp. xvii-xviii.
- ²⁷ MacDonald, George, *Castle Warlock*, 1882, p. 596.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 555.
- ²⁹ MacDonald, Notes on Broadlands Conferences.
- ³⁰ MacDonald, George, *Thomas Wingfold*, 1876, p. 341.
- ³¹ MacDonald, George, *The Vicar's Daughter*, 1872, p. 155.
- ³² MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold*, p. 231.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 308.
- ³⁴ Paterson, Alec, "Dr. George MacDonald's Novels," *Scot's Magazine*, May 1898, p. 470.
- Harper's Magazine*, 1872.
- Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, George MacDonald, 1871.
- Paul Faber, Surgeon*, George MacDonald, 1879.
- Recorded sermons, Broadlands Conferences notes, George MacDonald, 1887.
- North American Review*, 1906.
- George MacDonald in the Pulpit*, J. J. Flynn ed., 1996.
- A Dish of Orts*, George MacDonald, 1893.
- Unspoken Sermons II*, George MacDonald, 1885.
- Adela Cathcart*, 1864.
- Theology in Scotland*, Alexander Webster, 1915.
- Robert Falconer*, 1868.
- Introduction to *Lilith*, Greville MacDonald, 1924.
- Castle Warlock*, George MacDonald, 1882.
- The Vicar's Daughter*, George MacDonald, 1872.
- Scot's Magazine*, 1898.

Works Cited

Scribner's Monthly, 1870.

The Spectator, 1879, 1905.

The Gold Thread, William Raeper, ed.

The Bookman, 1891.

Weighed and Wanting, George MacDonald, 1881.

Guild Court, George MacDonald, 1868.

Thomas Wingfold, George MacDonald, 1876.

The Seaboard Parish, George MacDonald, 1879.