

## Inklings Forever

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

Article 16

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3-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Hotmire, Darren (2004) "MacDonald, the Revelation of God, and Literature," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 16.  
Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol4/iss1/16](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/16)

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**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

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Hotmire, Darren. "MacDonald, the Revelation of God, and Literature." Inklings Forever 4  
(2004) [www.taylor.edu/cslewis](http://www.taylor.edu/cslewis)

# MacDonald, the Revelation of God, and Literature

Darren Hotmire

Recently I referred to William Raeper's biography of George MacDonald and found something I thought intensely interesting. Raeper spoke of MacDonald's perspective of how God reveals Himself to humanity. The first reason this interested me was that as a sometime student of theology and devotional materials, the Revelation of God fascinates me. Above all other theological inquiries it seems to focus on what is essential to the life of a Christian who really wants to grow in their relationship with God. It asks the question, "How does God speak?"

A second reason Raeper's statement especially intrigued me was that he listed works of literature as one of the ways MacDonald perceived God as revealing Himself. While I at times study works of theology, I cannot sleep without reading a few pages from some work of literature. This is really how my interest in George MacDonald started. MacDonald, more than any writer, can pack theological or devotional thoughts into his writing of fiction.

Though many are critical of the writings of this Victorian author (even at least one of the esteemed speakers at this colloquium), I believe MacDonald's thoughts as developed throughout his literary works are well worth investigating. The most powerful reason for this is the depth of insight readily found in them, which has profoundly influenced other respected Christian authors. C.S. Lewis, undoubtedly the most influential Christian writer of the twentieth century, acknowledged him as his mentor and often spoke words of highest praise of his work. G.K. Chesterton wrote that one book of MacDonald had completely changed his way of looking at life. J.R.R. Tolkien, Madeleine L'Engle, Dorothy Sayers and others also admit to admiring and benefiting from his writings.

If only for this reason it is worthwhile to investigate MacDonald's thoughts on this matter. Accordingly, I will seek to briefly examine, here, what this respected author says regarding the revelation of God and how He speaks through works of literature.

## The Revelation of God

### *Types of Revelation*

Traditionally, systematic theologians refer to God's self-revelation in a general and specific sense. General revelation is given to all men through works of nature and other acts of God; the Holy Scriptures provides a more specific utterance from God to humanity. MacDonald, however, consistently avoids any reference to traditional theology. The frameworks achieved by man's interpretations of scripture, he believed, are flawed, and do much more harm than good. This is not to say that MacDonald avoided discussion of systematic theological issues. For instance, he asserts that there are differing levels of revelation. He states that God reveals himself more through some means than through others.

In *Robert Falconer*, a semi-autobiographical Victorian novel, MacDonald the narrator writes a passage that in many ways summarizes his perspective on revelation.

Whatever it be that keeps the finer faculties of the mind awake, wonder alive, and the interest above mere eating and drinking, moneymaking and money-saving; whatever it be that gives gladness, or sorrow, or hope—this, be it violin, pencil, pen, or, highest of all, the love of woman, is simply a divine gift of holy influence for the salvation of that being to whom it comes, for the lifting of him out of the mire and up on the rock. For it keeps a way open for the entrance of deeper, holier, grander influences, emanating from the same riches of the Godhead.<sup>1</sup>

In other works MacDonald further develops this thought. The deepest form of revelation, he writes, is Christ, Himself. "There is more hid in Christ than we shall ever learn . . ." writes MacDonald in *Unspoken Sermons*.<sup>2</sup> Other "deeper" sources of revelation are the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures. But, MacDonald cautions that it is not the Bible as a book that one is to look for revelation, it is from the person of Christ who this book shows us. His Spirit speaks to the reader of the book as they read it, revealing the person of Christ. In *Paul Faber*, he writes:

“. . . no man can, with thorough honesty, take

the name of a Christian, whose ideas of the Father of men are gathered from any other field than the life, thought, words, deeds, of the only son of that Father . . . it is not from the Bible as a book that we are to draw our ideas about God, but from the living Man into whose presence that book brings us, Who is alive now, and gives His spirit that they who read about Him may understand what kind of being He is, and why He did as He did, and know Him, in some possible measure, as He knows Himself.”<sup>3</sup>

“Secondary” instances of divine revelation in MacDonald’s thought are many. He mentions music, writing, and the influence of love to a woman. In other works he refers also to nature, animals, the child, obedience to one’s duty, and the reading of works of literature.

#### *Characteristics of Revelation*

MacDonald mentions several characteristics that apply to all these forms of God’s revelation throughout his works. For instance, he asserts that this work of God has a strong impact on those who come under its influence. As seen in the previous quote, one is influenced towards salvation by it. Salvation, according to MacDonald, was more than praying a “sinners prayer.” It involved a process of “becoming.” A person who is experiencing salvation is becoming better than he was previously. Thus one reads in *The Princess and Curdie*, that Curdie is given the ability to feel by touch who is either growing better, or who is becoming more childlike.

Not only does it cause those who receive it to become better, it is also something that is always happening. He asserts that God is constantly bridging the gap that divides Him from humanity, revealing Himself to them.<sup>4</sup>

One should note, also, that revelation depends on God’s initiative. God is the one who bridges the gap. This is not to say that the individual does not have an important role in this. One must be childlike, obedient, and have one’s “spiritual eyes” open in order to be in a position to perceive it.<sup>5</sup>

It is also something that can not be experienced perfectly. Since the fall, all relationships in this life are imperfect. One can and must, however, experience God in a sense that is more complete than any other human relationship.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Revelation in Literature**

Each of these characteristics applies to every means of revelation in which MacDonald believed. To

experience revelation through literature, then, one must put oneself in the right position. One must be childlike, striving to be obedient, and have one’s spiritual eyes open, in order for perceive God’s initiative in revealing himself. One should also proceed with caution, realizing that though God’s delivery is perfect, one’s perception of that event is not.

In reading MacDonald’s works of fiction one often sees examples of this facet of revelation. Many of his Victorian novels describe the process of a characters “becoming.” These characters interaction with works of literature often plays an important role in this process. In *Sir Gibbie*, one finds the two main characters, Sir Gibbie and Donal Grant, through reading literature. Donal reads to Gibbie, initially, because Gibbie is mute and had not been taught to read. Gibbie’s childlike, duty driven nature quickly soaks up spiritual truths from Sir Walter Scott, Burns, Bacon, and Milton. Donal, in his turn, grows more rapidly because he sees this process occurring in Gibbie. As they grow, they continue to read and share with each other what they read and how it impacts them.

And, in *Robert Falconer*, a semi-autobiographical novel, Robert learns to question and outgrow his grandmother’s strict Calvinism by reading books. Ian and Alister build a room in a cave to read and talk over things they learn from works of literature in *What’s Mine Mine*. In this as in many instances, one of the characters is in the position to help lead the other person in the process of becoming. One key element to this process is reading and discussing works of literature that are conducive to God’s use as revelation.

#### *Literature Conducive to Revelation*

MacDonald writes of God revealing himself through such a wide variety of authors in his novels, that it might seem a daunting enterprise to examine what types of literature he considered as likely for God to speak through. Two of his works, however, help in defining the sorts of things that spoke to him on a personal level: *England’s Antiphon* and *Rampoli*. *England’s Antiphon* seeks to survey England’s religious poetry, primarily with the goal of introducing the writers of this poetry to his readers.<sup>7</sup> *Rampoli*, MacDonald’s last published work, strives to translate some of the wealth (poetry) of other tongues to the English reader.<sup>8</sup> In both of these MacDonald relates to the reader what he perceives to be relatively unknown inspired writings. By focusing on a few of these works and MacDonald’s thoughts regarding them, one can have an intimate look into what MacDonald likely considered God’s revelation working in literature.

#### *Novalis*

MacDonald begins *Rampoli* by translating poetry of the German Romantic author Friedrich Von Hardenberg, known as Novalis. This was not his first translation of Novalis. In fact MacDonald's first published work was a translation of *Spiritual Songs* by Novalis. He published them again in the 1860's For the Scribner's Monthly Magazine. Obviously, MacDonald considered these valuable works, and it is likely felt some influence from them. A brief survey of a couple of these poems might suffice to see what about them appealed to MacDonald.

The first of these poems as found in the Scribner's Monthly is simply entitled *A Spiritual Song*.

If I him but have,  
If he be but mine,  
If my heart, hence to the grave,  
    Ne'er forgets his love divine—  
    Know I naught of sadness,  
Feel I naught but worship, love, and gladness.  
If I him but have,  
    Willing I depart;  
Follow, with my pilgrim staff—  
    Follow him with honest heart,  
Leave them, nothing saying,  
On broad, bright, and crowded highways straying.

If I him but have,  
    Glad asleep I sink;  
Of his heart the gift he gave  
    Shall to mine be meat and drink;  
Till, with sweet compelling,  
All is leavened by its soft indwelling.

If I him but have,  
    Mine the world I hail;  
Like a cherub, happy, grave,  
    Holding back the virgin's veil;  
While the vision thralls me,  
Earth no more with earthliness appalls me.

Where I have but him,  
Is my fatherland;  
Every gift to me doth come  
    As a heritage in hand;  
Brothers long deplored  
I in his disciples find restored.<sup>9</sup>

It is easily apparent that this is an intensely devotional work. It focuses on the nature of God and how this should color one's own perspective. Novalis writes if he truly has God as a part of his life, life is no longer a struggle; no longer is the earth appalling; no longer is there sadness; no longer are brothers deplored. Instead, God's intimate presence influences his perspective. Without this presence, one views life as

though looking through a veil; with this presence, the veil is lifted and the vision is enthralling. Life is revealed to be full of worship, love, gladness, and happiness.

MacDonald considered this sentiment to be a revelation from God, it stands to reason he would appropriate this thought in his own writings. Indeed, it does not take long to find this thought paralleled in MacDonald's own writings.

. . . To know God is to be in the secret place of all knowledge; and to trust Him changes the atmosphere surrounding mystery and seeming contradiction, from one of pain and fear to one of hope.<sup>10</sup>

Thus writes MacDonald in Paul Faber. He goes on to compare the process of coming to know God as a spiritual awakening—where one awakes to find that all he has previously perceived was as a dream. Reality, in fact, is one embodied in a lovely truth which inspires hope.<sup>11</sup>

Novalis' Song VI carries this theme along from life to death. Not only does God's presence imbue life with endless worth, death is also profoundly effected.

Now to the newborn sense appears  
    The world a fatherland;  
A new life men receives with tears  
    Of rapture from his hand,

Deep into soundless gulfs of sea  
    Death's horror sinks away  
And every man with holy glee  
    Can face his coming, day.

The darksome road that he hath gone  
    Leads out on heavens floor;  
Who heeds the counsel of the Son,  
    He finds the Father's door.

Weeping no longer shall endure  
    For them that close their eyes;  
For, soon or late, a meeting sure  
    Shall make the loss a prize.<sup>12</sup>

As in the previous selection from Novalis, the message here is one of hope. When one truly appropriates a relationship with Christ, no struggle is in vein. Christ's Easter inspires hope in the face of death—a theme also common in the writings of MacDonald.

*Goethe*

MacDonald was fond of the writings of Goethe as

well. He translates a few of his poems in Rampoli, including one describing a facet of poetry.

“Poetry”

Poems are painted window-panes:  
Look from the square into the church—  
Gloom and dusk are all your gains—  
Sir Philistine is left in the lurch:  
Outside he stands—spies nothing or use of it,  
And nought is left him save the abuse of it.

But you, I pray you, just step in:  
Make in the chapel your obeisance:  
All at once 'tis a radiant pleasaunce:  
Device and story flash to presence:  
A gracious splendour works to win.  
This to God's children is full measure:  
It edifies and gives them pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

Goethe poignantly compares poetry to religious experience. One with open spiritual eyes may see glorious things where the outsider sees nothing. This, once again, reflects MacDonald's understanding that God can be more clearly seen by those who are awakened. Something of this nature is found in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*. When Curdie first sees the supernatural grandmother, he cannot see her or her dwelling place. It is not until he begins to obey her commands without seeing that he develops the eyes to see.

Coincidentally, this might be said to reflect the nature of MacDonald's writings as well. There are some, as mentioned previously, who do not understand what others see in his work. They stand outside and can do nothing but “abuse” them. But, there are those to whom the mixture of imagination/story and edification as found in MacDonald's writings is an extremely pleasant one. To these Goethe and MacDonald send out the invitation to “step in” the chapel.

*John Milton*

MacDonald may be said to refer to Milton as much or more than any other author. In *England's Antiphone* he compares his writing to the swordplay of an experienced knight who flashes his “huge but keen-cutting blade in lightnings about his head.”<sup>14</sup> He quotes the poem, written by Milton in response to his blindness:

“ . . . God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best: his  
state  
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:

They also serve who only stand and wait.”<sup>15</sup>

This, it may be mentioned, is a needed response to the popular thought today that we should give God what he needs of ourselves or our praise. God is all-sufficient, and “needs” nothing from his creation to be complete.

*Wordsworth and Coleridge*

MacDonald describes what he calls a “Christian Pantheism” in *What's Mines Mine*. Every scene can have an individual speech to the soul; it embodies eternal truths; God reveals himself through it even to the unbeliever.<sup>16</sup> His thoughts are similar to those found in Wordsworth and Coleridge. God is in nature, and He can be seen and learned of in it.

Wordsworth, who MacDonald refers to as the high Priest of Nature, writes the following after a period of disillusionment in his life,

Dread Power Whom peace and calmness serve  
No less than nature's threatening voice,  
If aught unworthy be my choice,  
From THEE if I would swerve;  
Oh, let thy grace remind me of the light  
Full early lost, and fruitlessly deplored;  
Which at this moment, on my waking sight  
Appears to shine, by miracle restored:  
My soul, though yet confined to earth,  
Rejoices in a second birth  
—'Tis past; the visionary splendour fades;  
And night approaches with her shades.<sup>17</sup>

His respect of Wordsworth was overshadowed by that of Coleridge. In fact, he asserts that the grandest hymn of praise from man is found in the *Hymn of Mount Blanc*.

“Before sunrise, in the vale of Chamouni”  
Ye ice-falls; Ye that from the mountain's brow  
Adown enormous ravines slope amain—  
Torrents, methinks, that heard a mighty voice,  
And stopped at once amid their maddest  
plunge—  
Motionless torrents—Silent cataracts—  
Who made you glorious as the gates of heaven  
Beneath the keen full moon? Who bade the  
sun  
Clothe you with rainbows? Who with living  
flowers  
Of loveliest blue, spread garlands at your  
feet?—  
God. Let the torrents, like a shout of nations,  
Answer. And let the ice-plains echo, God.

God. Sing, ye meadow-streams, with your soft  
and soul-like sounds.  
And they too have a voice, yon piles of snow,  
And in their perilous fall shall thunder, God.<sup>18</sup>

### Final Comments and Applications

When one reads the works of MacDonald, it becomes apparent that he believed God does indeed reveal Himself through works of literature. MacDonald sought to share what he believed were revelations from God in his own writings, and in *England's Antiphon* and *Rampoli*.

MacDonald once admitted he admired one author because he was a master at seeking and finding God everywhere. This, I believe summarizes MacDonald's own perspective of revelation. God is everywhere; It is only logical that He can be seen in all settings. If one agrees with his perspective, the implications are vital to one's way of looking at the Christian life. One must not limit oneself to only reading the Scriptures or devotional works. To do so will be to shut ones ears to a myriad of means in which God is speaking. One must have ones spiritual eyes open, and be strive to be receptive to the revelation God has given through many classic works of literature, as well as through nature and other creative endeavors. It is certainly the best reason one can have to read the sorts of authors mentioned here, C.S. Lewis and friends—including and perhaps especially, George MacDonald, himself.

MacDonald challenges the reader to "seek Him where he can be found." The lesson is as relevant today as it was when he first preached it. God is everywhere seeking to speak to us. We need to put ourselves into position to hear what he wants to say to us, by seeking Christ in the scriptures, by being obedient and childlike, and by reading great works of literature.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>George MacDonald, *Robert Falconer*, (London: Hurst and Blackette, ND), 75.
- <sup>2</sup>George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: The First Series*, (London: Strahan and Company, 1869), 54.
- <sup>3</sup>George MacDonald, *Paul Faber*. (New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1900; reprint, Whitethorn, Cal.: Johanneson, 1992), 231.
- <sup>4</sup>George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*. (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Company, Ltd, 1885), 2-3.
- <sup>5</sup>George MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospel*. (London: Word, Lock, Bowden, 1892: reprint, Eureka, Cal.: Sunrise Centenary Editions, 1989.), 202.
- <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>7</sup>George MacDonald, *England's Antiphon*. (J.B,

Lippincot & Co. nd.), vi.

<sup>8</sup>George MacDonald, *Rampoli*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1897; reprint Whitethorn CA: Johanneson 1995.), v.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 23. References are keyed to *Rampoli*, because access to *Scribner's Monthly* is extremely limited.

<sup>10</sup>*Paul Faber*, 361.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Rampoli*, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>14</sup>*England's Antiphon*, 194.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>16</sup>George MacDonald, *What's Mine's Mine*. (Boston: D Lothrop Company, 1886.) 222, 289, 327.

<sup>17</sup>*Englands Antiphon*, 306

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 309.

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