

Inklings Forever

Volume 5 A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &
Friends

Article 7

6-2006

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Recommended Citation

Webb, Jean (2006) "Realism, Fantasy and a Critique of Nineteenth-Century Society in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 7.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/7

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

Realism, Fantasy and a Critique of Nineteenth-Century Society in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*

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Webb, Jean. "Realism, Fantasy and a Critique of Nineteenth-Century Society in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*." Inklings Forever 5 (2006) www.taylor.edu/cslewis

Realism, Fantasy and a Critique of Nineteenth-Century Society in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*

Jean Webb

George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, (1871) can be situated between two seemingly opposite lines of literary evolution in English literature in the nineteenth century: the realist social problem novel, as exemplified by Elizabeth Gaskell's novel for adults, *Mary Barton*, (1848) and the burgeoning of fantasy writing for children in the 1870s, for example Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863), and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1864). Kingsley and Carroll have been designated under the title of writers of 'Nonsense,' however, embedded in their work is a critique of 19th century society. Similarly MacDonald is perceived as a writer of fantasy, and similarly MacDonald engages in a philosophical and moral discussion and critique of the contemporary Victorian English society.

In her novel *Mary Barton* Elizabeth Gaskell was intent upon raising awareness of the deplorable conditions under which the poor lived in Manchester in the 1840s. Such conditions were also recorded by Friedrich Engels in his journeys around England at the time¹. In terms of design of the city, Manchester was particular in that due to the ergonomic patterns it need not be necessary for the rich to come into contact with the poor, since they lived and worked in separate areas. Gaskell was married to a Unitarian Minister, thus her work would have taken her into the places shunned by others of the middle classes. She also demonstrated a high level of moral and social conscience and a sensibility towards the ignored poor. Benjamin Disraeli had previously brought such division to the notice of the reading public in 1845 in his novel *Sybil or The Two Nations* stating that England was comprised of two nations, the rich and the poor.

In her Preface to *Mary Barton* Elizabeth Gaskell ponders on the lives of the poor as follows:

I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want, tossed to and fro by circumstance, apparently in a greater degree than other men. (*Mary Barton* xxxv)

... I bethought me how deep might be the innocence of some of those who elbowed me

daily in the streets of the town in which I resided. (*Mary Barton* xxxvi)

Gaskell demonstrates a humanitarian approach to the poor, setting the lives of her characters in the turbulent social and political contexts of the 1840s which was a decade of boom and bust in manufacturing. The Chartist Movement was also pushing for the franchise for working class men. Gaskell's characters are fully engaged in the political action, the tension and understandable dissatisfaction which led to riot and social unrest. Again she records this awareness in her Preface:

I saw they were sore and more irritable against the rich, the even tenor of whose seemingly happy lives appeared to increase the anguish caused by the lottery-like nature of their own. (*Mary Barton* xxxv)

Thus her protagonists struggle with the poverty of their everyday working lives and strive for the movement towards greater political equality. Disraeli also focussed on political economy and the impact such had on the working classes. Both writers had strong moral and humanitarian drives underpinning their work, which they integrated into the realist depiction of their characters and the decisions they made.

By the 1870s some movement had been made in the improvement of working conditions and the franchise, however, there was still much to be done, especially in social conditions for the poor. Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, (1863), brought the plight of the child chimney sweeps to the notice of the reading public. Kingsley's novel is a combination of realism, fairytale and the surreal, as the narrator observes Tom on his journey of moral redemption from boy chimney sweep, to water baby, to a Great Man of Science. *The Water Babies* is also a critique of nineteenth century society, in terms of the cruelties and working conditions for these child sweeps (for some of them were girls), and of the morality of the contemporary world. A great work in the genre of fantasy and surrealism, Kingsley's intention is not to explore the nature of the imagination as was that of George MacDonald, who, amongst other matters, was concerned with morality, both social and individual, and the nature of humanity. Kingsley's fantasy world

was a parallel one, for characters and related events from the 'real' world are transposed and continued into the fantasy creation which translates the debates of the period, and those Kingsley was having with himself concerning Darwinism, for example, and notions of creation. Kingsley does not offer any practical solutions. His answers lie in the morality of the individual; the moral education of Tom. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, the agent for change is Diamond, who is morally pure and innocent. MacDonald's world of fantasy is better described as an adjunct world, for Diamond moves to the back of the North Wind, yet the happenings there are not observed by the reader, nor can Diamond clearly transpose such into reality. This country lies within the imagination of the reader, and is recalled by Diamond through the poetry and music he brings back with him as a memory of his experiences.

George MacDonald's essay 'The Fantastic Imagination' (1893) can be read in conjunction with *At the Back of the North Wind*, as a discussion of the imagination which enlightens the reading of MacDonald's novel for children. In 'The Fantastic Imagination' he writes:

The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use

a man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws ('FI' 5)

which is what he does in the novel, both in his realist creation and in the world beyond the North Wind. MacDonald's discursive thoughts relate to the narrative structure of *At the Back of the North Wind*. There are no magical happenings which change the real world for the better; all change is derived from a logical cause and effect mode conducive to realist writing. The inclusion of the North Wind enables MacDonald to invent his 'own little world' for the interaction of Diamond and the North Wind in order to explore the otherness of the imagination; yet even that world does not transgress the laws which govern over both reality and imagination, as will be discussed further. What is enhanced by Diamond's interaction with the North Wind is his ability to effect change by the ambiance of his personality. Despite the desperations of poverty into which Diamond and his family descend, Diamond creates harmony. Here there is a direct relationship with MacDonald's theorising on the writing of fantasy:

His world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist; ('FI' 6)

The root of such harmony is with Diamond's close relationship with the natural world, epitomised in the personification of the North Wind.

In his introductory paragraph MacDonald emphasises the difference between his conceptualisation of the back of the North Wind and that recorded by Herodotus, which suggests that it was 'so comfortable' that 'a people who lived there' 'drowned themselves' (NW 11). A playful implication here is that Herodotus, who is regarded as a founding father of historians, actually got it wrong. This is especially ironic in that the Victorian period was one particularly interested in the formulation of the writing of history, with the work of Thomas Carlyle et al. A further implication is that an excess of 'comfort' cannot be transposed into the real world, which is certainly not the case in MacDonald's text, for Diamond brings great comfort to all who know him.

Diamond's sleeping accommodation in a room over the coach-house where Old Diamond, the horse is stabled is not comfortable by modern standards but it is so for the boy because he is in close proximity to nature. He luxuriates in the warmth and smell of the hay and the security of the horse below. MacDonald's description of the flimsiness of the boards which separate his sleeping quarters from the outside world and the domain of the North Wind is emphasised by the image of the wind slipping through the slit in the boards made by a penknife like a 'cat after a mouse' (NW 11). The closeness to nature is thereby introduced and gently stressed from the very beginnings of the narrative. Furthermore, and more importantly, Diamond is closer to the horse rather than to his family in those private hours, when he settles and sleeps, and it is with the horse that he shares a close understanding and relationship. Even their name is shared. Horse and boy; boy and horse become synonymous, as it were. Yet interestingly, MacDonald elected to limit this relationship to one which refused to enter into say, magical conversations between the two. The equine Diamond is an instrumental factor in the realist narrative, not the fantasy. The greater force of Nature embodied in the North Wind which surrounds both boy and horse is the conduit into the world of the imagination.

Diamond's first experience of meeting North Wind is one which develops through natural association. She emerges as a presence firstly in her 'normally' natural state:

The wind was rising again, and getting very loud, and full of rushes and whistles. (NW 13)

The logical development is the emergence of a voice, that of North Wind herself. Structurally the narrative is rational, easing the reader from realism into fantasy and the imagination. MacDonald abides by the classical unities of time, place and character, in strong contrast to

the fantasy creations of his contemporary, Lewis Carroll whose *Alice in Wonderland* certainly has its own logical construction which is based on syllogism and moving beyond the constraints of time and place². MacDonald's technique dissolves those boundaries, fusing together the real and fantasy worlds, thus conveying that sense of the imaginary/fantasy space which can be in the actual as well as an-other place.

From his first sight of North Wind, Diamond is 'entranced with her mighty beauty' (NW 18). The physical description MacDonald assigns to North Wind brilliantly produces a solidity out of the wind which as Christina Rossetti observed in her poem 'Who has seen the wind?' (1893) could only normally be materialised in the effect on objects, such as the trees. MacDonald's personification of the wind is a combination of physical attributes, such as her flowing hair and the description of her face which looked 'out of the midst of it like a moon out of a cloud' (NW 18).

Their conversation had circulated upon Diamond's unusual name, which North Wind thought 'funny' (NW 16), a response to which Diamond objects. The expectation of the reader in association with the word 'diamond' is to think of the precious stone, however, for Diamond his connection is with the 'great and good horse' (NW 17). Both of them have to come to know each other, further than the representation of their names; as MacDonald comments: 'For to know a person's name is not always to know the person's self' (NW 17),—which in many ways is the crux of the text, for MacDonald is creating a child protagonist who will mean more than the materialistic associations with his name. In fact the character of Diamond is a rejection of the materialism and capitalism which drove and blighted human experience in the Victorian period, and which in many ways still does today.

North Wind logically has to be a beautiful woman, for as MacDonald wrote in 'The Fantastic Imagination':

Law is the soil in which alone beauty will grow; beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed; and you may, if you will, call Imagination the tailor that cuts her garments to fit her' ('FI' 6).

Beauty, Law and the Imagination are fused together in the figure of North Wind. Through their interaction Diamond is initiated and educated into such understanding, which he will disseminate to those with whom he communicates. Following his first meeting with North Wind, Diamond is found in the courtyard and taken into the warmth of the drawing-room, for they think he has been sleep-walking. He mistakenly thinks that Miss Coleman is his North Wind, and is then disappointed. Here the fusion between reality and imagination is emphasized; the transposition of the world of fantasy back into reality, which is then in itself unsatisfactory. The process of moving into the fantasy

world is gradual and logical: a child's dream, perhaps, on a stormy night, or the initiation into an other worldliness which exists outside normality.

Diamond's next meeting with North Wind is pre-figured by his return to the yard where North Wind had left him. Having been confined to home because of bad weather for a week, his experience of going outside to play before sunset is one of a bountiful re-union with nature. He is described as 'flying from the door like a bird from its cage' (NW 31). MacDonald provides a luscious description of the sunset over the stable-yard:

And Diamond thought that, next to his own home, he had never seen any place he would like so much to live in as that sky. (NW 31).

MacDonald is bringing together the elements of the narrative in a logical construction, so that it is acceptable when Diamond is so happy at the back of the North Wind, and that he is deeply embedded in the love of his family. What is also emphasized is the Romantic relationship with nature. Diamond is a Romantic child; he is emotionally affected by his natural surroundings; an innocent who moves from innocence to experience through both his relationships with North Wind, in terms of the imagination, the spiritual, and with those he meets and affects in his 'real' life.

The world of the imagination is brought into Diamond's consciousness and confirmed as being part of his reality when he returns to the yard and remembers 'how the wind had driven him to the same spot on the night of his dream' (NW 31). He stoops down to look at a primrose, 'a dwarfish thing,' focussing on the diminutive size of the plant, which is itself stirred by a 'little wind' (NW 31). The centre of the primrose is described as being 'one eye that the dull black wintry earth had opened to look at the sky with' (NW 31). In his own way, Diamond will be an eye through which his family and close companions will be 'able to look at the sky' or rather 'into' the sky when he recounts later his journey to the back of the North Wind. Diamond will become the 'eye' through which others may see.

The emphasis on size in this passage is an instrumental introduction to the changing size and power of the North Wind. She is diminutive at sunset, in this case, and will grow to a mighty raging storm, as we all change in emotional power at different points of experience. The primrose acts as a referent in the later conversation which Diamond has with North Wind:

'But you're no bigger than me.'
'Do you think I care how big or how little I am? Didn't you see me this evening. I was less then.'
'No. Where was you?'
'Behind the leaves of the primrose. Didn't you see them blowing?'

'Yes' (NW 33).

North Wind's ability to change size is a responsive approach to the demands of natural conditions, rather than the happenstance of changes in body size to which Carroll's Alice is subjected. Diamond is also, through such conversations and experiences with North Wind, learning of the multiplicity of the self. As an aside, I also think that the analogy with the North Wind and the variations in levels of energy in response to situations, parallels the levels of energy, both emotional and intellectual which one may feel 'inside one's head' at different times, and the energies created by engagement with the creative imagination. Physically, emotionally and spiritually we are not static beings.

North Wind is certainly not static, as said. Diamond accompanies her on a journey through the environs, as her energy increases she becomes a 'full-grown girl' (35) and then a wolf which frightens a drunken woman who should have been caring for a child. Here MacDonald incorporates a direct moral warning against the excesses of drink, whilst also including a discussion of the perception of 'good' and 'bad' and the differences between person and necessary action. Following her appearance as a wolf North Wind comments to Diamond:

'Good people see good things; bad people, bad things.'

'Then are you a bad thing?'

'No. For *you* see me, Diamond, dear,' said the girl, and she looked down at him, and Diamond saw the loving eyes of the great lady beaming from the depths of her falling hair.' (NW 36).

Diamond's relationship with the North Wind is an educative one. In the episodes in the 'real' world Diamond is given broadening experiences which he may not fully understand, because they lie outside of the rationality in which Diamond can operate, and also how as human beings we cannot 'know' the reasons for everything. Time spent with North Wind is not always comfortable and easy; he has to learn to trust her, to develop a Keatsian negative capability in not being able to 'know' the rational answers to natural disasters, such as the sinking of the passenger ship. The emotional veracity of MacDonald's writing communicates how Diamond has to struggle with his doubts and fears, until he can fully trust North Wind. Initially lessons to develop this confidence in her are placed in the real world, later this trust will transpose directly to the imagined world at the back of the North Wind, where there will be no direct contact with recognised reality. MacDonald thereby takes his reader on a process of learning as he does with Diamond, and in so doing to learn more about urban society and morality, or in many cases the lack of it. Trust is established through the

physical relationship between Diamond and the North Wind. On, for example, the stormy night in London, she weaves her hair together to make a warm nest for him.

It was just like a pocket, or like the shawl in which gypsy women carry their children. (NW 38).

North Wind is a 'natural' nomad, a gypsy of the sky. Diamond is technically flying with her, in the quasi-situation of being her baby cradled on her back, safe from the elemental furore below, which she is creating.

There was a great roaring, for the wind was dashing against London like a sea; but at North Wind's back, Diamond, of course felt nothing of it at all. (NW 39).

On being questioned as to the cause of the noise, North Wind replies gently:

'The noise of my besom. I am the old woman that sweeps the cobwebs from the sky; only I'm busy with the floor now.'

The logical link is established between this moment with North Wind and seeing the little sweeper girl, struggling against the wind, dragging her broom, for it is Nanny who will figure so greatly later in the realist part of the narrative. Diamond asks if North Wind will help the child, however, at that time there are other duties for his guardian companion, who answers saying that she must not leave her work. His question is one born of his compassionate nature:

'But why shouldn't you be kind to her?'

North Wind points out that she is actually helping the child in one way by 'sweeping the wicked smells away' (NW 41).

It will later be the influence of Diamond's kindness which saves Nanny's life and brings her a better way of living. The implied lesson communicated by North Wind is that there are actions which are appropriate at certain times, and others which are not. Here North Wind is employing a broad brush, to cleanse the city; Diamond will later employ his compassionate nature to, as it were, cleanse little Nanny's life of the tawdry lifestyle with her grandmother. MacDonald is also, through such narrative sequencing, demonstrating the cause and effect between events which may seem minor, or meetings which may be fleeting, or coincidental and then develop into important and life changing relationships.

In order to fully be prepared for the ways in which Diamond's life will change, for example, when he takes over his father's cab driving business, Diamond has to learn physical courage. The early episode in the

cathedral is where North Wind tests Diamond; on trusting her; trusting his own senses and trusting his own measure of courage. North Wind leads him into one of the towers and onto a gallery to wait for her while she has to go about her duty of sinking the ship. He is, understandably, greatly afraid of falling. North Wind questions his seemingly irrational fear, for he had not quavered when nestled in her hair traversing the skies but a few moments previously. Although he is now being held by her he is upset because he is walking on his own legs, which might slip. Even though he directly states that he does not like this albeit knowing that she would be down after him and save him should he slip, North Wind lets go of his hand, where with Diamond screams and is 'bent double with terror.' 'She left the words, 'Come after me,' sounding in his ears.' (*North Wind* 68).

The Biblical echoes here are very strong of Christ calling his disciples to demonstrate their faith in Him, to leave their normal lives and follow. The phrasing of this short sentence is also interesting, for the situation of the command is within Diamond as a physical presence. MacDonald could have more conventionally written: 'North Wind called Diamond to follow her,' however, this phrase would not have carried the emotive weight of the fear Diamond is entrapped by and which is within him. At such heightened traumatic moments, one does experience differently; time slows, sound becomes transposed into one's physicality, that fusion of event and emotion and the body. Diamond does survive and 'pass' this test, for he walks alone, whilst realising that he had been helped by the wind blowing into his face to make him brave. She did not hold him, but she had not left him. As North Wind says afterwards:

'You had to be taught what courage was. And you couldn't know what it was without feeling it: therefore it was given you. But don't you feel as if you would try to be brave yourself next time?'

'Yes, I do. But trying is not much.'

'Yes, it is—a very great deal, for it is a beginning. And a beginning is the greatest thing of all.' (*NW* 70).

North Wind passes on great wisdom to the young Diamond. The narrative structure of MacDonald's novel also imparts the philosophical perceptions which he discusses in 'The Fantastic Imagination.' Diamond has overcome a great fear of falling; he has discovered courage within himself, a courage which was dormant, for as MacDonald states in his essay:

'The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to raising his consciousness, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself.' ('FI' 9)

The conversation between North Wind and Diamond which follows the incident on the ledge demonstrates that there cannot be absolute understanding of all states, events and consequences. They discuss how the breath of North Wind had the power to awaken courage in Diamond:

I knew it would make you strong. . . . But how my breath has that power I cannot tell. It was put into me when I was made. That is all I know.' (*NW* 70).

Interestingly North Wind 'knows' the power, but cannot 'tell'; she is unable to articulate an explanation. Here MacDonald returns both to the rationality of his writings on the creation of the imaginary, that certain laws cannot be traversed, there has to be a logic within the created world and also to a demonstration by North Wind of negative capability. To 'know' is all she and thus Diamond, need 'to know.' As MacDonald states:

In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take the laws with him into his invented world as well. ('FI' 7)

Morally North Wind would have misinformed or misled Diamond had she made up a reason for why her breath has so much power. By honestly sharing her 'ignorance' North Wind refrains from falsely setting herself up as all-powerful and all-knowing.

By this stage in the novel MacDonald has established a completely trusting relationship between the boy and the wind. The realist context of the harshness and inequality of nineteenth century working

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class life in London has also been introduced, at this point with some distance from Diamond himself, for it is later in the narrative when Diamond takes over his father's position as cab driver. The reader thus far, has an insight into Diamond's strengths and frailties, and is, in other words, getting to 'know' Diamond. High incidence of child illness and mortality was a sad reality during the nineteenth century. MacDonald's own experience and that of his family is testament to the ravages of tuberculosis, for example. Diamond's first visit to the back of the North Wind is associated with his being very ill, of the fragility of child health during the period.

MacDonald's rendering of these sections of the novel take reality—serious illness and near-death experiences, and death itself—and explore that which we cannot know through the imaginative process. Diamond is taken by his mother to Sandwich on the coast to recuperate, and to try to prevent his illness becoming more acute. He meets North Wind again in a toyshop, where she stirs the sails of a windmill. That afternoon Diamond falls very ill. He sleeps and in his doing so 'found himself in a cloud of North Wind's hair' (NW 82). Body, elements and sky-scape are merged. Diamond wants to go to the back of the north wind. North Wind explains that it is not possible for her to go there, since she always blows in a southerly direction, from the north, and so she 'never gets farther than the outer door' (NW 83). This is very logical, whilst being conceptually puzzling and disturbing, her namesake 'home' is one she can never enter; a place of 'otherness' for the North Wind herself. The way she can reach the boundary is explained by her as follows:

' . . . I have only to consent to be nobody, and there I am. I draw into myself, and there I am on the doorstep' (NW 83).

She has to agree—with whom the reader does not know, nor needs to know—to give up her body, to become 'no-body,' and to relinquish her identity. The image of withdrawal is very powerful. When serious illness overtakes the individual, there is such a withdrawal from the energy of life, as portrayed by the activities of North Wind, and following the increasing withdrawal into the self, which then ceases to exist as a projection into the social world, as the patient lies in a state of suspended animation. They are a sick body with a silenced 'self.' Diamond travels north by sea with the aid and company of North Wind. On reaching their destination North Wind is disappearing:

Diamond stared at her in terror, for he saw that her form and face were growing, not small, but transparent, like something dissolving not in water, but in light. He could see the side of the blue cave through her very heart.(NW 88).

North Wind is landscape, ice, light and nothingness, her being is all around and within her, yet she is not. Looking into the heart of light, one has all light, yet 'sees' nothing. Interestingly, for me, this pre-figures T.S. Eliot's lines in *The Wasteland*:

. . . I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I new nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.
(trans. Desolate and empty the sea³) (*The Wasteland* 11 40-43)

Eliot's post-World War I image is negative and without hope, in contrast to the experiences Diamond brings back with him. At this stage, however, before he has entered that country at the back of the north wind, he has to surmount his terror, and feels that North Wind does not care for him any more.

'Yes, I do. Only I can't show it. All my love is down at the bottom of my heart. But I feel it bubbling there.' (NW 90).

This sums up the dilemma of the human condition, when feelings are suppressed for various reasons and the expression of love becomes concealed, lying dormant and inanimate.

MacDonald has an honesty which is communicated through the narrative voice. He addresses the reader directly, as seemingly the omniscient, all-knowing narrator, yet what he has to say is that he does not know.

I have now come to the most difficult part of my story. And why? Because I do not know enough about it. (NW 91).

The narrative role is given over to Diamond who has been to the back of the north wind, whereas the 'official' narrator has not. Diamond, at this point, becomes an unreliable narrator,

Because, when he came back, he had forgotten a great deal, and what he did remember was very hard to tell. Things there are so very different from things here! (NW 91).

Diamond's problem is that things are so different that he has no reliable referents.

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The people there do not speak the same language for one thing. Indeed, Diamond insisted that there they do not speak at all. I do not think he was right, but it may have appeared so to Diamond. (NW 91).

The conversational, confiding tone of 'the' narrator is somewhat amusing, whilst also introducing a clash of power and status, between the adult narrator and the child narrator. The knowledge of Diamond is actually being overruled by someone who cannot know the truth. 'The' narrator returns to the techniques derived of History and of Law: accounts given by different people which verify 'the' Truth, yet in truth, verify difference according to experience. Yet again, return to 'The Fantastic Imagination' raises the philosophical and, indeed, political position of the differences in reading according to the individual reader: the liberation from a singular mode of reading and understanding.

Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another. ('FI' 7)

Diamond's account of his experience has to be recounted by using referents with which *he* is familiar. His guide, North Wind, cannot be there with him. This has to be his interpretation and translation. The referents pertaining to the elements and landscape which MacDonald has used throughout which have enabled the description of North Wind do not exist in the same form for Diamond to use:

The sun too had vanished; but that was no matter, for there was plenty of a certain still rayless light. Where it came from he never found out; but he thought it belonged to the country itself. . . . He insisted that if it (the river) did not sing tunes in people's ears, it sung tunes in their heads, and proof of which I may mention that, in the troubles which followed, Diamond was often heard singing. . . . One of the tunes the river at the back of the north wind sung. (NW 93).

The omniscient narrator is reclaiming his authority from Diamond by asserting that he has proof of the unprovable. MacDonald refuses to take an 'easy option' with this section of recounting Diamond's memories, he could have defined the landscape at the back of the north wind, by using oppositions in a parallel world, much as Carroll did in his reversed world in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Instead he aligns this world beyond with this one, yet shifts the 'concreteness,' giving softness to the landscape, where the river flows through grass, not rocks. There is also an emphasis on

interiority as the river sings tunes 'in' the head, fusing body and landscape as he has done so before.

When Diamond is back with his mother following his visit to the back of the north wind which was in the real world of physicality a severe illness, she reads poetry to him. Despite her efforts to find a better one than the 'nonsense' she has before her, 'the wind blew the leaves rustling back to the same verses.' MacDonald is again fusing landscape, language, reality and imagination. The leaves of the book become as leaves from a tree, wind-blown and rustling.

Now I do not know what the mother read, but this is what Diamond heard, or thought afterwards that he had heard. (NW 110).

The long poem is a harmonious fusion, where one element of nature flows into another linked by the repetition of words and rhythmic sounds. In his essay MacDonald discusses the relationship between music and words. His imagined opponent retorts:

"But words are not music; words at least are meant and fitted to carry a precise meaning!" ('FI' 8)

To which MacDonald answers:

It is very seldom indeed that they carry the exact meaning of any user of them! . . . Words are live things that may be variously employed to various ends. . . . They are things to be put together like the pieces of a dissected map, or to arrange like the notes on a stave. ('FI' 8)

The elements of the landscape which occur in the poem—the river, shallows, hollows, dust, and daisies for example—are like the pieces of a map which becomes populated by the nesting activities of the swallows and the gamboling lambs. The river runs throughout 'singing' this natural celebration of life and provides the musicality like a recurrent theme in a composition. Linguistically the poem returns to an almost repeated patterns of words like the subtle change in harmony in music. For example:

for he loves her best
with the nicest cakes
which the sunshine bakes (NW 111).

becomes a little later:

for the nests they make
with the clay they cake
in the sunshine bake (NW 113).

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The emphasis in the poem is on the musicality and harmony, rather than rationality. The patterning is repetitive and circular, the poem finishing with the lines

and its all in the wind
that blows from behind (NW 115).

MacDonald is using language in the place of music, for as he states in 'The Fantastic Imagination, using a common Romantic association between the Aeolian harp, the wind and the imagination:

'where his (the writer's) object is to move by suggestion, to cause to imagine, then let him assail the soul of the reader as the wind assails the Aeolian harp' ('FI' 10)

Approximately one third of the novel has been given to Diamond to reach this point, where he can realise the country at the back of the north wind in an extended poem which narrates the harmonies of nature. When he sleeps he sleeps in that country, yet at this point MacDonald returns the reader to the actualities of nineteenth century working class life, and a realist narrative. Reality and the imagination become fused through Diamond, for he is active in the domain of the working cabbies whilst increasingly strongly 'living' in the country at the back of the north wind. The result is that the enhanced experience of Diamond increases the effect he has upon the working and social communities.

Diamond's father's working situation has changed and he decides to go into business for himself as a cab driver. Here the impact upon changes in working conditions become evident, and the emphasis moves to the self-employed, in accord with the ethos of Samuel Smiles *Book of Self Help*. The responsibility falls more greatly upon the individual to effect change in their lives and on those of others. The responsibilities of Diamond's parents per se also increase with the birth of a new baby. Diamond extends great love, celebrating joy with his little brother, demonstrating a feminine caring approach. Diamond also eventually assumes the position of bread-winner for the family when he takes up the cab driving business due to his father's illness. Whilst scrupulously honest and hard working he is also a good business man, ensuring, politely, that he is paid a fair remuneration for his work (NW 178). His loving, caring and socially responsible attitude is thus effective in both feminine and masculine roles. Through Diamond's meeting Mr. Raymond, a gentleman, Diamond's father becomes aware of the importance for Diamond to be taught to read. MacDonald's decision in introducing Diamond to literacy emphasises the holistic approach embedded in this novel: that dissemination of imaginative experiences is related to literature and thereby the necessity for the child to be able to read. It also illustrates the need for the adult to take responsibility for all aspects of child welfare and

development. However good, loving and responsible Diamond is derived from the influence of the North Wind and his visits to the back of the north wind, his innocence needs to be accompanied by experience and knowledge which will serve him in this real world.

The shift into the living conditions of the working classes with the visit to the slum cellar dwelling of Nanny and Sal, and events of Diamond's working life take the reader into an oppositional world of violence and ugliness in comparison with the serenity, beauty and love embodied in the country at the back of the north wind. However, Diamond's influence variously enables good to out and positive change to come about, not only enacted by himself, but also by the adults who are influenced by him, especially pertinently Mr. Raymond, the rich man. Whereas in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* there is a physical as well as a social divide between the classes, in MacDonald's novel the wealthy are seen to act in a philanthropic vein, bringing relief to the poor. There is no 'jealousy' extended towards the rich as with Gaskell's observation, for they willingly work together. Diamond could also be said to be the embodiment of the 'deep innocence' Gaskell observed in working class people she 'elbowed' in the street. Diamond's spiritual benevolence derived of his innocence, is transposed into material action, which is reminiscent of the innocent character Gluck in John Ruskin's fairy tale 'King of the Golden River' (written 1841, published 1851). On taking up the agricultural management of the valley, post the changing of his brothers into black stones, Gluck puts into action a socially supportive programme. This model embodied Ruskin's ideas of a social welfare system which eventually came into actuality a century later in the Welfare State—which proves that fairy tales can 'come true.'

The ending of the novel with Diamond's death, however, seems to deviate from the traditional notion that fairy tales always end happily, with the young innocent protagonist triumphing and receiving great reward in this life. Through Diamond's dying MacDonald maintains the integrity of his text. He refuses to perform a magical saving and return to robust health for the child. Instead, Diamond's death reflects the probability of child mortality conducive with the period, an experience which sadly MacDonald could attest to in his own life. By Diamond's pre-pubescent death, his innocence is preserved. There is also an implied critique of Victorian society in this sad ending, suggesting that such wealth and concentration of innocence in itself, symbolised by Diamond, has no place in the real world. Charles Kingsley transformed his chimney sweep's boy Tom into a Great Man of Science, the reader knows not how because Tom was blindfolded going 'up the back stairs.' Tom's future is predictable in this practical mode since the nineteenth century was a great time for scientific discovery, engineering and industrialisation. He is not, however,

allowed to marry Ellie, merely be friends, since she is of a higher class, despite his rise in status. Kingsley's recognition of the horizon of expectation stops with class; MacDonald's with morality and humanity which can totally override class barriers, eradicating poverty, ignorance and the depravities of life. MacDonald has given some hope in demonstrating that this is to some extent as possible, but complete social change was in the future, and still is, for the divide between rich and poor continues to exist in the twenty first century in the United Kingdom, despite the Welfare State. Where MacDonald gives the reader the possibility of vision is in the final line of the text: 'They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind.' (NW 292) The country of the imagination is where Diamond now lives, in a state which can be no other than bliss. What the adult narrator and the reader have is this experience translated into reality by Diamond and potentially to be continued in the ways in which individuals can transpose such through their own imaginative processes. As the omniscient narrator affirms, the back of the North Wind does exist, and certainly is not nonsense.

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Notes

- ¹ Frederick Engels *The condition of the working class in England : from personal observation and authentic sources*. First published in Great Britain in 1892, Granada, 1969
- ² See for example Jean Webb 'Alice as Subject in the Logic of Wonderland.' Cogan Thacker, Deborah and Webb, Jean (2002) *Introducing Children's Literature: Romanticism to Postmodernism*, London, Routledge.
- ³ Thanks to Dr. Catherine Neale, Worcester University for this translation.

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