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# **Mutuality in Wonderland: Charles Dodgson, Adopted Member of the MacDonald Family**

by Rachel E. Johnson

Until December 2012 Rachel Johnson was the Research Librarian at the University of Worcester, UK. In “retirement” Rachel is currently working part time as a librarian at Tyndale House Library in Cambridge, UK and also volunteering at Homerton College Library, Cambridge, UK where she is working with a special collection of historical children’s literature.

As the title indicates, Charles Dodgson had a close and long-standing friendship with the family of George MacDonald. In this paper I aim to explore how their relationship developed to the extent that Dodgson was absorbed into the MacDonald family, with the result that the cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences affected and influenced their writing. I also ask the question—is the mutuality in their writing as great as the critics suggest?

## **A BIT OF BACKGROUND**

Dodgson and MacDonald first met in Hastings between the spring of 1858 and autumn 1859. MacDonald was visiting his homeopathic doctor and Dodgson visiting Dr James Hunt who had a reputation for curing stammering. Dodgson also visited his aunts, the Misses Lutwidge, who lived in Hastings.

The two men were very different in personality. MacDonald was outgoing, a brilliant public speaker, was married with a growing family, had come out of a Scottish Calvinist background and hosted large social gatherings at the family home, whilst Dodgson was shy, avoided public speaking, came from a High Church background and preferred small gatherings if any, since, according to his biographers, he was only completely socially comfortable in the company of children, with whom he lost his stammer.<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, present at one of the MacDonald gatherings at which Dodgson was also present, described him as “the stillest and shyest full-grown man I have ever met except

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1 Shaberman, Hudson, Taylor, Cohen

Uncle Remus”<sup>2</sup> (For more on Uncle Remus we may read Joel Chandler Harris, of whom Twain made a similar comment).<sup>3</sup>

Despite these differences in background and temperament, what they had in common was much more important. They were both influenced by the German and English Romantics which led them towards the form of dream-vision in their writing. Both were interested in the positive moral effect of drama. Dodgson was one of the MacDonald family’s greatest supporters when they later toured the country with their *Dramatic Presentation of the Second Half of John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress*, although he did once concede that “Lilia (the eldest daughter) was the only one who could act.”<sup>4</sup>

Both men were anti-vivisectionists and, key for both of them, they were both committed Christians who had struggled to faith through the rigid religious dogma of their backgrounds. Greville MacDonald, George’s eldest son, drawing out their differences, writes:

How happily could my father laugh over this loving humorist’s impromptu drawings, full of absurdities, mock-maxims and erratic logic so dear to the child-heart, young or old! While Dodgson, the shy, learned mathematician who hated inaccuracy, loved to question the very multiplication-table’s veracity, my father, the poet, who hated any touch of irreverence, could laugh till tears ran at his friend’s ridicule of smug formalism and copy-book maxims.<sup>5</sup>

They already had several mutual friends, and were both influenced by the thinking of F. D. Maurice, whose theology was regarded by the mainstream churches as unorthodox.

## THE FRIENDSHIP

During the early 1860s, Dodgson and the MacDonalds were particularly close. It was a time when Dodgson often visited the MacDonalds. Whilst most of MacDonald’s fairy tales were written during this period, Carroll was gestating the story that was eventually published in 1865 as *Alice in Wonderland*.

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2 Shaberman, Raphael. *George MacDonald: A Bibliographical Study*. Winchester: St Paul’s Bibliographies, 1990, 117.

3 Wikipedia

4 Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1987, p. 346. From Dodgson’s Diary entry 26 July 1879.

5 MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and His Wife*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923, 342-43.

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In 1860, Dodgson first met two of the MacDonald children, Greville and Mary (second daughter), in the studio of Alexander Munro the sculptor. Greville was sitting for Munro's statue of *Boy Riding a Dolphin* which can still be seen in Hyde Park, London. Dodgson immediately began a conversation with Greville, aged five or six, about the benefits of having a marble head. Dodgson writes:

I claimed their acquaintance and began at once proving to the boy, Greville that he had better take the opportunity of having his head changed for a marble one. The effect was that in about 2 minutes they had entirely forgotten that I was total stranger, and were earnestly arguing the question as if we were old acquaintances.<sup>6</sup>

In his autobiography Greville includes a picture of the event drawn for him by Dodgson and continues to describe the growing friendship with the family in his account of outings which found their way into MacDonald's story *My Uncle Peter*,<sup>7</sup> which I will refer to later in this paper.

Mary was Dodgson's first child-friend to whom he wrote letters, and the longest standing, in that they remained corresponding friends into Mary's adulthood. One of these letters explains that (Derek Hudson's paraphrase)

the hot weather had made him so sad and sulky that he had thrown a book at the head of a visitor, the Bishop of Oxford ... And then thinking that perhaps he had gone too far he added<sup>8</sup>: '... this isn't quite true—so you needn't believe it—Don't be in such a hurry to believe next time—I'll tell you why—If you set to work to believe everything, you will tire out the muscles of your mind, and then you'll be so weak you won't be able to believe the simplest true things.'<sup>9</sup>

This passage, written before *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had been published, although it had been written, is echoed later in *Alice through the Looking-Glass* (1871) when the White Queen states

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6 Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson. *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*. London: Fisher Unwin, 1898, 83-85.

7 MacDonald, George. *My Uncle Peter* in *The Christmas Stories of George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1982, 7-34.

8 Hudson, Derek. *Lewis Carroll an Illustrated Biography*. London: Constable, 1976 (1954), 102.

9 Quoted in Hudson, Derek. *Lewis Carroll an Illustrated Biography*. London: Constable, 1976 (1954), 102. From *A Selection from the letters of Lewis Carroll to his Child-friends*, edited by Evelyn M. Hatch (1933), 22-25.

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that she sometimes “believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”<sup>10</sup> William Raeper also notes that in “*Through the Looking-Glass* Lilia (MacDonald’s eldest daughter) is transformed into Lily, the White Pawn and daughter of the White Queen, while Mary’s cat Snowdrop makes an appearance as Alice’s white kitten.”<sup>11</sup>

The story of Dodgson’s creation of *Alice’s Adventures Underground* is well-known. After he had begun to write it down, he handed a partially illustrated copy of the manuscript to George’s wife, Louisa MacDonald, who read it to the children. As the first child audience to hear the story, they responded enthusiastically, especially Greville, who notes:

I remember that first reading well, and also my braggart avowal that I wished there were 60,000 volumes of it. Yet I distinctly recall a certain indignant grief that its characters were only a pack of cards; and I still look upon that *Finis* as a blemish upon the sublime fantasy. . . .<sup>12</sup>

George MacDonald not only encouraged Dodgson to publish, which is noted in Dodgson’s diary May 9, 1863, but to lengthen the narrative. There are other claimants for this encouragement, but by comparing the dates, it does appear that the MacDonalds were the first to do so. And so the friendship developed to the extent that Dodgson was absorbed further into the MacDonald family, to become known as Uncle Dodgson. I will now move on to briefly examine some parallels between their works.

### INFLUENCE ON WRITING

All the major MacDonald and Carroll biographers note the mutual influence, which is described by Hubert Nicholson as “books built with stones from the same ruined chapels and temples,”<sup>13</sup> as well as ideas taken directly from each other’s writing.

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10 Carroll, Lewis. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition with Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. London: Vintage Books, 2015 (1865,1871).

11 Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1987, 172.

12 MacDonald, Greville. *Reminiscences of a Specialist*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932, 15.

13 Nicholson, Hubert. *A Voyage to Wonderland and Other Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1947, 13

Nicholson was the first writer to note parallels and mutual influence. Writing in 1947, he commented that “not much ferreting for meanings and origins has been done in the rabbit-hole that Carroll made.”<sup>14</sup> Nicholson majors on the parallels between MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1890-95) and Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871). That *Lilith* was published so much later does not refute his argument since the threads in *Lilith* run through all of MacDonalds work,<sup>15</sup> whilst John Docherty notes what he interprets as “borrowings” from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871).<sup>16</sup> Nicholson also notes the influence of Novalis on both authors, and the parallels found in his work *A Parable* (in *The Disciples at Sais: Novalis 1772-1801*) which MacDonald translated. Since then there have been a number of essays, articles, books and one minutely closely read and critiqued study.

I will mention one or two key works in which the parallels are clear but since to drill down into them all would be impossible in the time available, I will then settle on a brief examination of just one of GMD’s stories.

I have already mentioned the portrait of Uncle Peter, in GMD’s story *My Uncle Peter* (first published in *The Queen* Dec. 21, 1861. Reprinted in *Adela Cathcart* 1864), as a representation of Dodgson. The following quotes demonstrate the reality turned into MacDonald’s fiction.

Greville writes:

Our annual treat was Uncle Dodson taking us to the Polytechnic for the entrancing ‘dissolving views’ of fairy-tales, or to go down in the diving bell, or watch the mechanical athlete *Leotard*. . . . And there was Cremer’s toy-shop in Regent street—not to mention bath-buns and ginger-beer — all associated in my memory with the adorable writer of *Alice*.<sup>17</sup>

And in *My Uncle Peter* MacDonald writes

The first remembrance that I have of him is his taking me one Christmas Eve to the largest toy shop in London, and telling

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14 Ibid., 1.

15 See Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1987, 346. From Dodgson’s Diary entry 26 July 1879, 365.

16 Docherty, John. *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997 (1995), 375

17 MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and His Wife*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923.

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me to choose any toy whatever that I pleased.<sup>18</sup>

This portrait is apt but the underlying parallel is that Uncle Peter pined away when he lost his child-friend, interpreted by the Carroll and MacDonald critic Docherty as a possible warning to Carroll that his sadness at the loss of Alice Liddell as child-friend must be an accepted rather than become a destructive influence on his life.<sup>19</sup>

### PHANTASTES

I cannot move on without a further mention of *Phantastes*, subtitled *A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*, the first of the two adult fantasies which framed MacDonald's output. It was published in 1858, just before the period in which Dodgson and MacDonald first met and five years before *Alice's Adventures Underground* was written down in 1863. Following the German romantics, this bildungsroman in the form of a dream-vision includes a hole and passage down and along which the protagonist journeys, a meeting with a white rabbit and, an image often found in MacDonald's works, a mirror in which is found another country. As MacDonald writes "all mirrors are magic mirrors."<sup>20</sup>

More fundamentally, the structure of both works, or, as some critiques note, the lack of structure, is similar. Both works are structured from the centre outwards, like the spokes of a bicycle wheel. In *Phantastes*, MacDonald's influences include Spenser's *Fairy Queen* whose structure has been likened to:

the Gothic method of design on gardening—a centre to which all walks have opening but all walks also have their own purpose and destination.<sup>21</sup>

Also, Novalis, whose aim was to create "stories without rational cohesion yet filled with associations,"<sup>22</sup> was a major influence particularly on MacDonald. The cyclical or spiral narrative impetus

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18 My Uncle Peter in *The Christmas Stories of George MacDonald*. *Tring: Lion, 1982*, 8.

19 Docherty, 83-84.

20 MacDonald, George. *Phantastes: a Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. London: Paternoster, 2008. Special edition with introduction and notes by Nick Page, 125.

21 Hurd, Richard. *Letters of Chivalry and Romance*. London: Printed by W.B. for A. Millar in the Strand, and W. Thurbourn and J. Woodyer, in Cambridge, MCCCLXIV (1764), 67.

22 Docherty, 109. Novalis—quoted in *Phantastes*

is apparent in *Phantastes* and in the *Alice* books. Many other parallels, in *Phantastes* and *Alice in Wonderland* are examined in detail in the studies available.

MacDonald's final fantasy, *Lilith*, published in 1898 begins the dream-journey through a mirror and also reflects the mutual interest of both writers in psychical research. Dodgson was a founder member of the Society for Psychical Research, a subject which, along with spiritualism, interested many intellectuals of the period. MacDonald initially became interested through his friends the Mount-Temples, although his writing includes many instances of what the Scots term "second sight." The mutual mystical and psychical interest evident in the works of MacDonald and Carroll fed, in the early 1860s, from the meetings held by Dr Hale in Hastings, through subsequent conversations and discussions, into their work. All the biographers record this connection.

### CROSS PURPOSES

The story I want to mention particularly is MacDonald's short fairy tale *Cross Purposes*, written during the time of the closest MacDonald/Dodgson friendship, in the early 1860s, and published initially in *Beeton's Christmas Annual 1862*<sup>23</sup>. It was later included in *Dealings with the Fairies* in 1867.

Some critics (notably Docherty) have suggested that the story arose out of a discussion between Dodgson and MacDonald, which led to both writers producing stories about "Alice exploring her subconscious. MacDonald's was *Cross Purposes*; Dodgson's was *Alice's Adventures Underground*."<sup>24</sup>

The beginning of both stories takes Alice into fairyland whilst she is in the dreamlike state between sleeping and waking. On her approach to Fairyland, *Cross Purposes* Alice shrinks twice before the story continues with an emphasis on growth in self-knowledge. MacDonald's concern, as ever, is his protagonist's intellectual and spiritual development. Wolff notes that, even if Carroll had not seen MacDonald's story, which is highly unlikely since they were spending a lot of time together in the early 1860s, he would have "cleared" *his* Alice's experiences of shrinking, journey and dream with MacDonald

23 Wolff, Robert Lee. "An 1862 Alice: 'Cross Purposes,' or, Which Dreamed It?" in *Harvard Library Bulletin*. Cambridge (MASS): Harvard University Library, 1975, 199-202.

24 See for example Docherty, 85

before publication. In this scenario the name would have to be purely incidental since Carroll was writing for Alice Liddell.

*Cross Purposes* exposes the snobbery of social attitudes which dictate that a middle class girl (Alice) should not have anything to do with a working class boy (Richard) but that such attitudes can change when they are thrown together in Fairyland and meet a number of dangerous situations in which initiative and resourcefulness are needed. Docherty discusses the concern of Dodgson that Alice Liddell did not succumb to her mother's lead on such attitudes<sup>25</sup> by challenging the conventions surrounding Alice in his writing, just as MacDonald does in *Cross Purposes*.<sup>26</sup> Although the class divide is shown as insurmountable outside of Fairyland, within Fairyland, or Wonderland, both Alices learn to overcome their prejudice. Amongst many parallels in the stories, are the following situations which fall between entering and coming out of Fairyland (*Cross Purposes*) or Wonderland (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*):

- 1) Both Alices enter fairyland between waking and sleeping. *Cross Purposes*, 143; *Alice's Adventures*, 152.
- 2) Both Alices encounter a pool, or lake, of water in which they are immersed. *Cross Purposes*, 145 and 152; *Alice's Adventures*, 24-25.
- 3) Both Alice (in *Alice's Adventures*) and Alice and Richard (in *Cross Purposes*) are menaced by creatures. *Cross Purposes*, 164, 167, 169; *Alice's Adventures*, 41.
- 4) Both Alices encounter and overcome mental illusion. *Cross Purposes*, 164, 167, 169; *Alice's Adventures*, 129.
- 5) At the end of the time in Fairyland, Alice and Richard jump from a tree back "down to earth," Alice runs home through a "little gate ... into her father's grounds." *Cross Purposes*, 170; *Alice's Adventures*, 130.
- 6) Also, the episodes the two Alices meet happen in the same order.

In *Cross Purposes* MacDonald writes: "many things we never could believe, have only to happen, and then there is nothing strange about them,"<sup>27</sup> and the White Queen expects Alice to believe what at first appear to be impossible things: "I daresay you haven't had much

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25 Docherty, 111. Mrs Liddell had a reputation for snobbishness.

26 Ibid., 129.

27 MacDonald, George. "Cross Purposes" in *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1993. 141-171

practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day.”<sup>28</sup>

The letter to Mary MacDonald on believing impossible things has already been noted. Both authors are concerned with the importance not only of the creative imagination but also the importance of not taking any given situation at face-value and assuming that is all there is to it.

## CONCLUSION

When the MacDonald family moved to Bordighera, and visited England less often, Dodgson almost lost touch with them. The last reference to them in his diary of 1882, notes a conversation with George and Louisa after a performance of the play the family toured in the summer months. He also recorded inviting Ronald (2<sup>nd</sup> son) to dinner at Christchurch College when Ronald became an undergraduate in Oxford, also in 1882. This meeting appears to have been their last.

Finally, is it possible to answer the initial question as to whether the mutuality in their writing is as great as the critics claim? I would suggest the answer is “Yes.”

That George MacDonald and Charles Dodgson remained friends and mirrored each other’s major themes, consciously or unconsciously, testifies to the depth of their friendship and the acceptance of each other’s idiosyncrasies. A major theme of their work, following Novalis, concerned the nature of the dream-vision and the nature of life as a dream. MacDonald quoted Novalis at the end of *Phantastes* “Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will.”<sup>29</sup> Carroll’s question “whose dream was it?” the Red King’s or Alice’s, was further explored in his *Sylvie and Bruno* where dream and what passes for real life are juxtaposed and often inverted whilst MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) equally poses the same question to the reader. Was Diamond’s life with North Wind the reality or was it a dream, or was it delirium?

Dodgson remained an adopted member of the MacDonald family until his death in January 1898. His interest in “the dreamlike quality of this life compared with what was seen as the solid reality of the next”<sup>30</sup> was also a concern that flowed, like Irene’s connecting

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28 Carroll, Lewis. *The Annotated Alice*, edited by Martin Gardner. Rev. Ed. London: Penguin, 2001 (1970).

29 MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*, 269.

30 Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1987, 174.

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thread in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), through all of MacDonald's work and beyond to those he influenced, creating their mutuality in Wonderland and a door into Fairyland for their readers.

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