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Robert Trexler

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# **On the Friendship of Books: F.D. Maurice on the Art of Reading, Writing, and Friendship**

by Robert Trexler

Robert Trexler is an independent writer, publisher, and the editor of *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society* since 2000. Through Winged Lion Press, he has published over 50 books specializing in Inklings related studies including David's Neuhouser's books *A Novel Pulpit: Sermon's from George MacDonald's Fiction* (Winged Lion Press, 2010) and *Exploring the Eternal Goodness: Selected Writings of David L. Neuhouser* (2016).

“On the Friendship of Books” was a talk first given by F.D. Maurice in 1856 and published in a collection of literary lectures a few years after his death in 1872.<sup>1</sup> For students and fans of the Inklings, the primary interest in Maurice (it's pronounced *Morris* not *Maurice*, by the way) is due to his friendship with and influence on George MacDonald. So before discussing the content of his essay, it will be useful to find out more about his life.

Born in 1805 (nearly 20 years before MacDonald), he was the son of a Unitarian minister. At Cambridge University he was influenced by the Platonically derived idealist philosophy then coming from Germany, especially though the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge—a fact which also forms an intellectual link with C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield. During the 1820s, he was the editor of various respected magazines and journals.

He entered Oxford University in 1828, was baptized an Anglican in 1831, and ordained an Anglican priest in 1834. A prolific writer, his masterpiece, *The Kingdom of Christ* (1838) was influenced by and dedicated to Coleridge. Among other things, this book makes the claim that politics and religion are inseparable and the church should be involved in addressing social questions. For more on how this idea may have played out in MacDonald's thinking, see David Neuhouser's essay “‘The Great Questions of the Day’: The Social Conscience of George MacDonald.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 F.D. Maurice. *The Friendship of Books and Other Lectures*. Ed. Thomas Hughes. London: Macmillan and Company, 1874. 1-32

2 David L. Neuhouser. *Exploring the Eternal Goodness: Selected Writings of David L. Neuhouser*. Ed. Joe Ricke and Lisa Ritchie. Hamden: Winged Lion Press, 2016. 131-141.

## Proceedings from the Francis White Ewbank Colloquium

In 1840, Maurice was appointed Professor of Literature at King's College, so he was not exclusively a theologian and social reformer as people tend to think of him. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, he helped to form what became known as the Christian Socialist Movement. After shocking the principle of King's College with some of his theological views in 1853, he was asked to resign. Soon after, he concentrated on education reform and drew up the scheme for a Working Men's College.

Although MacDonald knew of and probably met Maurice prior to the founding of the Working Men's College, we know that MacDonald attended Maurice's inaugural address there. Maurice was also instrumental in finding a publisher for MacDonald's famous adult fantasy *Phantastes* (1857). Maurice became rector of St. Peter's Church in London in 1860, and when the MacDonald family moved to London in 1865, they started attending his church. MacDonald became an Anglican in 1866.

Much more could be said about Maurice and MacDonald, but it is not a surprise that the theme of the George MacDonald conference being held July 2016 is on his connections with the "Cambridge Apostles," which included F.D. Maurice, Lord Tennyson, John Sterling, and Charles Kingsley. As the conference advertisement says, they will examine "their social activism, diverse writings, and fascination with S.T. Coleridge."

But now it's time to look at the essay "On the Friendship of Books." In the opening paragraph, Maurice sets the stage by saying "an age of reading is not always favorable to the cultivation of this friendship." His first observation on why this might be the case is that "a large part of our reading is given to reviews, magazines, and newspapers." Being the editor of about five different magazines and journals for over a decade, he certainly had occasion to be familiar with this type of literature.

He says that the writer of a newspaper, magazine, or review article "commonly assumes an off-hand, dashing air [. . .] which seems intended to put us at our ease. He speaks in a loud rattling tone, like one who wishes to shake hands the first time you meet him. But then, when you stretch out your hand, what is it you meet? Not that of a man, but of a shadow, of something that calls itself 'We.'"

Maurice uses this principle to determine whether an author can become a friend through his writing: The person you "meet" on those pages can never be a "we." He says, "We can never make any book our friend until we look upon it as the work of an I." By getting acquainted

with the writer, you get acquainted with the book, and at that point the book becomes a friend.

Having set up his premise, he continues with case studies from English literature, beginning with the works of Shakespeare. Maurice says that it might be objected that Shakespeare is not to be found in his plays. He is not Othello, Hamlet, Desdemona, or Portia. He states the argument this way: "Shakespeare does not intrude himself into any of their places; he does not want us to know what he thought about this or that matter."

Then, to answer this objection, Maurice steps back and asks a question about friendship, he writes: "Have you found that the man who is in the greatest hurry to tell you all that he thinks about all possible things, is the friend best worth knowing? Do you not become rather exhausted with men of his kind?"

Have you not met with some men who very rarely spoke about their own impressions and thoughts, who seldom laid down the law, and yet you were sure had a fund of wisdom within, and who made you partakers of it . . . specially by the kindly, humorous, sympathetic way in which they told you about their fellow men, and made you acquainted with them? Instead of being a Reviewer who sits above the universe . . . Shakespeare throws himself with the heartiest and most genial sympathy into the feelings of all, he understands their position and circumstances; he perceives how each must have been affected by them. Instead of being a big, imaginary WE, he is so much a man himself that he can enter into the manhood of people who are the farthest off from him. . . . And so, I believe, his books may become most valuable friends to us—to us especially who ought to be acquainted with what is going on with all kinds of people.

Ah, spoken like a true professor of English literature. It's a great explanation of why Shakespeare's plays can become our friends.

He also briefly mentions George Herbert, the poet/author of "The Temple" which C.S. Lewis listed among the ten books that most influenced his life philosophy and vocation. Maurice says Herbert's poems, "are the utterances of the heart of an affectionate, faithful, and earnest man, they speak directly to whatever is best in ourselves, and give us friendly and kindly admonitions about what is worst."

Next, John Milton is of particular interest to Maurice because Milton wrote in the time of the religious and political controversies of the English Civil War. He says that some may think Milton's political views must exclude him from being a friend, but he has found him

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a friend “even when I have differed from him most and when he has made me [hurt] most. It does not strike me that on the whole we profit most by the friends that flatter us.” Barfield echoed that idea in his book *Poetic Diction* which he dedicated to Lewis with these words from William Blake, “Opposition is True Friendship.”

Despite any disagreements Maurice may have had, he says of Milton, “I know of no one who teaches us more habitually that disobedience to the Divine will is the seat of all misery to man.”

Of course, Lewis wrote a book called *A Preface to Paradise Lost* in which he wrote:

The older poetry, by continually insisting on certain Stock themes—as that love is sweet, death bitter, virtue lovely, and children or gardens delightful—was performing a service not only of moral and civil, but even of biological, importance. Once again, the old critics were quite right when they said that poetry “instructed by delighting,” for poetry was formerly one of the chief means whereby each new generation learned to make the good Stock responses. Since poetry has abandoned that office the world has not bettered.<sup>3</sup>

Of Spenser’s *Fairy Queen*, which was another favorite of C.S. Lewis and MacDonald, Maurice wrote that it “makes us feel [that we are] engaged in a great fight with invisible enemies, and that we have invisible champions on our side.” C.S. Lewis wrote his own tribute to this poem in his book *Spenser’s Images of Life*.

Regarding Edmund Burke, Maurice greatly admired his moral courage for standing firm in his convictions. He writes:

“[Burke] told the electors of Bristol that they might reject him if they pleased, but that he would maintain his position as an English statesman and an honest man. They did reject him of course, but his speech remains a model for all true men to follow, as a warning to all who adopt another course, that they make friends for the moment, but that they will not have a friend in their own conscience, and that their books, if they leave any, will be no friends to those who read them in the times to come.”

These are just a few of the English authors mentioned in Maurice’s essay, indicating books and authors we may want to consider making our friends. Other essays in this collection include: “On Words,” “On Books,” “Use and Abuse of Newspapers,” “Critics,” and separate essays on the authors Edmund Spenser, John Milton and Edmund Burke.

3 C.S. Lewis. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. London: Oxford University Press, 1942, 57.

It is somewhat odd and very interesting that after describing these famous English authors and books, he finally mentions one American author of a book that was published in 1856, the same year as Maurice's talk was given. The book's name was *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. Has anyone heard of this book, or know the name of the author?

The author is Harriet Beecher Stowe who published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* just three years before. The book used two factual court cases to propel the action of the novel and present Stowe's thesis that slavery corrupted Southern justice and humanity. It was written in response to the violence that broke out between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces in Kansas following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which permitted white male settlers in those territories to determine through popular vote whether they would allow slavery or not.<sup>4</sup>

One of the characters in the novel is a simple-minded and brave black man who, although he could not read himself, had Bible stories read to him, and knew the characters from those stories as a reality and as friends. Maurice says, "No lesson, I think, is more suited to our purpose. It shows us what injury we do to the Book of Books when we regard it as a book of letters, not as a book of life."

He concludes with these words, "I believe that all books may do that for us, because there is one Book (with a capital "B") that brings before us one Friend (with a capital "F") . . . who is called there the Son of Man."

Now ordinarily, that would be a good place to stop. But I can't resist letting George MacDonald have the last word. In a passage from his novel *The Seaboard Parish*, MacDonald reminds us of how much we treasure our author/friends. Of course, we all realize this at the Lewis and Friends Colloquium as we listen to talks on some of our favorite authors: Lewis, Tolkien, Barfield, Dorothy L. Sayers, and

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4 MacDonald was sympathetic to the cause of freedom for Blacks in America. During his 1872-3 tour of America he met Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Greenleaf Whittier and was friends with Mark Twain, another abolitionist writer. Furthermore, in 1869, Stowe wrote a book, *Lady Byron Vindicated*, which defended the deceased widow of Lord Byron (the poet) from published accusations that she was a cold, calculating woman. Her book, which raised the issue of Lord Byron's alleged incestuous relationship with a blood relative scandalized the reading public and diminished Stowe's popularity. No doubt, MacDonald would have appreciated Stowe's valiant defense, partly because Lady Byron was a very important benefactress in his own career as well as a personal friend.

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MacDonald. But at this year's colloquium, I'm glad that we also have the opportunity to also draw closer to our friend David Neuhouser, because we have each been given a book of his collected writings.<sup>5</sup>

Here is what MacDonald says in his novel,

I went up to my study. The familiar faces of my books welcomed me. I threw myself into my reading chair and gazed around me with pleasure. It felt so homely here. All my old friends—whom somehow I hoped to see some day—present there in spirit ready to talk with me any moment when I was in the mood, making no claim upon my attention when I was not! I felt as if I should like, when the hour should come, to die in that chair, and pass into the society of witnesses in the presence of the tokens they had left behind them.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Attendees of the 10<sup>th</sup> C.S. Lewis and Friends Colloquium were each given a book of David L. Neuhouser's collected writings referred to in endnote 2.

6 George MacDonald. *The Seaboard Parish*. Originally published by Hurst and Blackett: London, 1868. Reprinted Strahan and Company: London, 1869. 620.