

THE GEORGE MACDONALD DIARY

DAY ONE

As I wake up I realise I'm lying in an unfamiliar bed. Where am I? The answer to the question materialises before I've finished formulating it: I'm in a ground floor room of the house in Huntly that George MacDonald lived in from the age of two until, as a teenager, he went off to finish his schooling in Aberdeen.

Another question: the same George MacDonald who was a huge influence on C.S. Lewis, and whose children's classic *The Princess and the Goblin* was read a dozen times by Enid Blyton, who preferred it above all other books for its extraordinary atmosphere? The very same. I'm up and dressing, eager to begin my time here as writer-in-residence.

There doesn't seem to be anyone about. From the central hall all seems quiet. Robert Heinemeier is in the Gulf of Mexico, so I wouldn't expect to hear much from him. Pam, who showed me round the place yesterday and invited me to make myself at home for the duration of my residency, will be somewhere in the house's ample garden if she's on schedule. And Jo, the only one of the Heinemeiers' daughters who still lives at home, will surely have made her way to school by now. Three people live in this house in 2006, normally. Whereas, when it was newly built by the MacDonald family in 1826, The Farm was home to - how many? Let's see: George, his parents, his three brothers - five brothers - if you count the two that died in infancy. Also in residence were George's father's brother, and his wife and their two kids. Plus a servant girl... That's thirteen in all. But although the house doesn't look much from the outside, in fact it is a three-storey building, with a basement below ground level and an attic floor hidden behind the sloping slate roof.

Pam gave me a guided tour yesterday, but the building can only really be explored satisfactorily alone. Or, should I say, in the company of Princess Irene. By the time I'm finished eating breakfast in the big basement kitchen I've reminded myself of the day George's fictional creation woke up and decided to explore a curious old stair of worm-eaten oak. She had once been up six steps, but this day she wanted to find out what was at the top of the staircase. Up she ran, such a long way it seemed to her - until she came to the top of the third flight. There she found the landing was at the end of a long passage. It was full of doors on each side... Well, in the MacDonald family home at Huntly, at the top of flights of stairs is the ground floor, designed in such a way that there is a portion of three adjoining walls made up exclusively of doors, it seems, five in all. One leads to the study, two goes down to the basement (the door from which I've emerged), three covers a cupboard, four leads upstairs and five leads to my bedroom. To me that seems straightforward enough, but to Irene in the farm/palace that was her home in *The Princess and the Goblin*, the plethora of doors confused her. And in her confusion she ran along corridors only to find more doors leading to more rooms. Confusion led to panic, panic to tears, but after a good cry, the brave princess pulled herself together and looked again for the staircase that would lead her back to the comfort of her nursery. She found instead a staircase going *up*. Frightened as she was, she wanted to find out where the steps led. So up she went, ascending the narrow spiral staircase on hands and knees.

I select the appropriate door and go up too, with a tingle of anticipation, because I know where these steps lead. To three doors that echo what the Princess found at the top of her tower: one straight ahead and two facing each other, at right angles to the first. From behind one door came a mysterious sound, so that was the door Irene opened. Within, an old lady sat spinning yarn. This woman introduced herself to the princess as Irene's great-great-grandmother, meaning Irene's father's mother's father's mother. Irene couldn't get her head round that, but as the old lady suggested, that didn't matter. What mattered, for Irene and for the reader, was the fabulous sense of mystery: the sense of discovering who one was.

So here I stand at the top of the house. As George stood before me. Who is George MacDonald, again? He wrote *The Princess and the Goblin* in 1871 when he was 47 years old, living in London, a father of eleven, a friend of some of the greatest imaginative writers of the day, including John Ruskin and Lewis Carroll. But MacDonald's psyche remained intimately connected with his own childhood spent in this very house. I like to think of him as my great-great-grandfather.

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An hour later I leave the house and walk to Huntly. The A96 wasn't there in George MacDonald's day. But the River Bogie was, so he found himself cut off from the town in much the same way as anyone resident at The Farm is these days. I cross the road, then the river, and walk for about ten minutes to the cluster of buildings that George would have walked to most days of his youth.

I've got the George MacDonald Town Trail leaflet, so that I don't miss anything. The school that George attended is now a church. This building gets several mentions in *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, the thinly disguised story of MacDonald's own boyhood. Thinly disguised? Well, Ranald lived with his three brothers, in a house like The Farm, situated similarly to a town like Huntly. There's one scene where Ranald, who had been given a lot of encouragement and responsibility by his teacher, became an object of resentment as far as the rest of his class was concerned. After school one day, he is chased from the school to the bridge over the river, which at that time had a gate at the town end of it, to make horsemen dismount. Here, Ranald, making use of the narrowness of the bridge and the presence of the gate, made a desperate stand against his pursuers. In the end, he was saved from a beating by his own good nature. That is, an older boy, whom he'd previously helped, and another older boy whom he'd long befriended, came to Ranald's aid. Happy ending to the episode, then. But the point is made in the book that Ranald had learned a lesson. From then on he treated his classmates with the respect they deserved.

MacDonald's old church is still there. Sort of. Letters make out the word 'STRATHBOGIE BAKERY', though some of them are missing and the brown paint on those remaining is blistered and peeling. Through what would once have been a stained glass window in the west wall of the church, I see newly baked loaves cooling. MacDonald would have known the parable in which Jesus took a few loaves and fishes and multiplied them, so thousands of his followers could be fed. George would have liked that story a lot more than the majority of the stuff he heard within the building. The Congregational church of his time believed in selective salvation. That is, certain

individuals chosen at random by God, were predestined to go to heaven. For the rest, damnation and eternal hell-fire. This puzzled George, who was a God-loving child but was conscious of an affinity with all life.

I move back a few yards and am looking at the house on Bogie Street that has a plaque on it, announcing that MacDonald was born there in 1824. However, by the time he was aware of his surroundings he'd been moved to The Farm. Any significance of this site has more to do with the fact that it was next door to his grandmother's house, and that a first-floor door connected the households. MacDonald made use of the feature in *Robert Falconer*, where Robert lives in exactly such physical proximity to his grandmother. But, come to think of it, there might be something in the relation between Princess Irene and her distinguished old ancestor that could be traced back to the set-up here. So the plaque is not a complete red herring.

I walk to the main square and then down a lane to a site which is not marked on the leaflet but which should be: Huntly's second-hand bookshop. Any books by Huntly's most illustrious literary son for sale? Well, there is a copy of *David Elginbrod*. I take the thick book into my hands. This was the first novel about Scottish life that MacDonald published, in 1863, when the author was 29. This copy, published in London by Hurst and Blackett is undated, but its first owner has thoughtfully left a newspaper cutting from June 1908 inside the front cover. The book contains 400-odd pages of thick, creamy paper, mildly foxed in places but basically in great condition. First line test?:

"Meg! Whaur are ye gaein' that get, like a wull shuttle! Come in to the beuk."

I'm not too sure what the 'wull shuttle' business refers to, something to do with a weaving machine, I suspect. But the beuk in question would be the bible, the only book that mattered to the vast majority of people in those days.

I paid £20 for a copy of *David Elginbrod* a few weeks ago, so no need to shell out again. Essentially, the book is a portrait of MacDonald's wise and religious father, the David Elginbrod of the title. It's also an autobiographical account of MacDonald's time as a tutor to rich people's children. And, in the relationship between Hugh Sutherland and Margaret Elginbrod (David's daughter), perhaps the story of how MacDonald met and courted the love of his own life, Louisa. At least that's how it strikes this reader. I'm about half-way through the story, enjoying the privilege of watching life being lived as it once was, and taking things just a few pages at a time.

I put *David Elginbrod* back on the shelf. Alongside, there is a copy of a book by William Raeper, unambiguously titled *George MacDonald*. 'The major biography of the Victorian visionary', it says on the cover. Perhaps it is. There's a good balance between description of MacDonald's life and discussion of his work: alternate chapters, almost. I also like the more succinct life written by Elizabeth Saintsbury, also published in 1984. However, Raeper's book gets Christopher MacDonald's vote. He's quoted on the cover as saying: *"The finest contemporary account of my great-great-grandfather's life and writings."* My brother Christopher? Well, yes, but only in the MacDonaldesque sense that all men are brothers.

William Raeper, who was also born in Huntly, wrote the Town Trail leaflet I've been using this morning. But he died recently so someone else will be updating it soon, me perhaps. I ask Annie Lamb, the shop-owner, whether George MacDonald titles still sell in these days of Harry Potter. They certainly do. Recently she sold a two-volume first edition of one of the novels with a Scottish setting for £60. But she also sells new

MacDonald books as well, and points me to the shelf close to the window. There is a handsome Everyman's Library Children's Classic edition of *At the Back of the North Wind*. The russet linen hardboards are gold-tooled, and there is a striking image, an illustration by Arthur Hughes from the original edition, successfully integrated into the cover. Annie tells me she keeps several more copies of this book in the stock room. I notice she doesn't have a copy on display of the companion volume, *The Princess and the Goblin*. So I enthusiastically describe its electric blue cover and its stunning contents. She tells me she will order a few copies. The Everyman Classics look as if they're an official list of world-class children's books collected from all corners of the globe. But, in fact, they're published in London by a commercial concern, and eight of the 48-strong list were written by Scottish men. I wonder, in passing, how such a seemingly significant statistic comes about.

Most of the books on the MacDonald shelf by the bookshop's front window were printed in California by the Johannesen family. Coincidentally, the same Johannesens lived at The Farm for a few years, before selling the house to the Heinemeiers. These books are actually from The Farm, I'm told. I suppose this means that although the publishing is done from Whitehorn in California, the Johannesens kept some stock over here, which they no doubt used to supply British booksellers. I'm told that Mr. Johannesen used to go round the second-hand bookshops of Aberdeen, looking for well-preserved copies of early editions of the books. These would then be taken to the States where the facsimile editions were made.

I pick *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* from the shelf. It tells me inside that I'm holding a photolithographic reprint on archival paper. It's a reprint of the 1911 edition published by Blackie and Son, complete with the 12 colour illustrations and 36 black-and-white illustrations that came with the early book. MacDonald published it in 1870, so it's not that early an edition. The quality of the reproduction is fine. What I'm less keen about are the covers, which the book tells me are 'silk-embossed cloth over acid-free boards'. Sounds good, but feels and smells sterile, like plastic.

I think The Johannesen family have a religious motive in publishing these books. MacDonald is looked upon as a way of getting a modern audience in touch with God. Funny that. For me, MacDonald puts you in touch with life: with being alive. And while it's true that George MacDonald was constantly acknowledging God's gift of life, I like the books in spite of this religious dimension, not because of it. At one stage, I believe another Californian publisher produced sanitised versions of the books. That's to say, the Scottish dialogue was taken out. I think there's a few of these copies in Huntly Library, strange as that might seem. Though to be honest I don't think edited versions would be needed anywhere. MacDonald was very conscious of when he used dialect, and always did it for effect.

However, I can imagine the American publishers would have felt tempted to play around with the beginning of *Sir Gibbie*. I slide the Johannesen facsimile version from the shelf and test the first line on Annie – who is an American:

“Come oot o' the gutter, ye nickum.”

She smiles. And if she doesn't need a translation then why should her fellow countrymen? No reason. Annie now tells me she has already read this book from cover to cover, and greatly admires both the storytelling and the novel's central character. Let it be, then.

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I'm walking along a track that leads to Ba' Hill. It's the most prominent landmark to the south of the house, and the most natural place to head for a stroll after dinner. George would have regularly been along here. Indeed, *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* mentions Ba' Hill as the site of a couple of vivid childhood escapades.

MacDonald tells the reader that the hill was visited by groups of children in the summer, because bilberries grew on the slope of the hill. On one occasion Ranald had not gone with the bilberry pickers, most of who were younger. But on their return from the expedition, he was disturbed to hear that a particular young friend of his had been caught by the landowner in the act of breaking a young fir tree, and as a punishment the boy was being kept in the man's farmhouse overnight.

At ten o'clock, when it was dark, Ranald slipped out of his house and crept to the farm buildings that belonged to the house (such out-buildings still exist today, though they are owned by someone else). He went through the dark stable, located his father's horse, fitted Missy with a bridle and mounted her bareback. It's not a long walk to Ba' Hill, but I suppose there was a sense of adventure about riding a horse for the first time at night.

As soon as Ranald let the horse walk off the hard road, it sped up, and from then on ignored his efforts to control it. Ranald lost his sense of direction as they sped through what was for him pitch darkness. But after a few minutes, Missy pulled up at a cottage Ranald recognised. From it there came a cacophony which so scared Missy that she ran straight back to the stables. Then what? Well, Ranald's young friend was still in need of assistance, so he'd try again. But this time Ranald made contact with the man in charge of the stables, told him what he was trying to achieve, and got assistance to get Missy saddled and himself spurred before setting off again towards Ba' Hill.

No problems this time; the ride only took a few minutes. At the cottage of the ill-natured farmer, Ranald approached the stable with the room atop where he reckoned his young friend would be locked up for the night. He dismounted from Missy, tied her up, and ascended the ladder. Sure enough there was the boy fast asleep, his wrist bound by a rope to prevent his escape. However, on being woken, the boy was at first terrified - until Ranald identified himself - and then not at all pleased that he was being rescued. He insisted that he would be fine sleeping there, and that the rope was there for him to pull if he needed assistance. Earlier he'd been given a good meal by the farmer and his sister and had been treated with kindness. (Not so very different from my own position at The Farm. The last thing I need right now is rescuing.)

As Ranald pondered the information he'd been given, a light came on in the farmhouse and a figure appeared at the bottom of the ladder. It was the farmer's sister, who further reassured Ranald about the boy's well-being. So Ranald came down from the hut and got back on his horse and rode home. There's not much more to it than that. MacDonald, the middle-aged author, simply remembering the magic of the night when as a boy he'd first explored his world on horseback. Pleased to recall that as a boy he'd acted as his conscience dictated as regards a friend. Pleased to rediscover the glow that went with the discovery that his neighbours were more friendly than was their reputation.

I've reached the hill itself. I go into a field and mount the grassy slope. Three-quarters of the way up, I'm reminded of the other Ba' Hill incident recounted in *RBB*. Ranald and

an older boy, Turkey, were out exploring one night. They were taken by surprise by the presence of an animal. This turned out to be a bull, which trapped Ranald in a corner of the field they were in. Right here, perhaps, because the junction of dry stone wall and fence would not be at all easy to negotiate. Luckily, Turkey's day job was as cowherd, and he didn't go anywhere without his little whip. So a couple of well-aimed switches to the bull's nose and the aggressive animal was put on the back foot.

How did the boys then get from the field into the fir wood beyond? I don't know. More to the point, how am I to get further up this hillside? Maybe via this weird gate, but it is set at an alarming angle for climbing, leaning back down the hill. However, there is a gap under the gate, which I could just about squeeze through, after all the ground is bone dry. As I'm in the middle of this manoeuvre, I pause... I'm conscious of passing through a barrier. Something to do with the outlandish size of the gate, the unusual position I've got myself in, the whole George MacDonald investigation... Something to do with the rusty pipe that I'm now aware of, emerging horizontally from the grassy slope... I think I need to stop right here and really take stock of where I am.

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, Irene goes underground, led by a thread. How does that come about again? First, she's given a ball of spun thread by her great-great-grandmother and told that these will be of great value to her one day. One morning of the next spring, Irene finds herself following the invisible thread which she feels between thumb and forefinger. She's not keen on the idea of going underground, but that's where the thread goes, choosing a route that Irene can follow providing she's careful and brave... Down through the dark, Irene travels, until she gets to the place that the goblins have imprisoned her friend, Curdie. (Another rescue mission. That seems to be the way my own thread is leading me tonight.) With the help of the old lady's invisible thread and Curdie's common sense, she gets him out of the cell. But they are miles underground! How do they get home without being captured by goblins, wonders Curdie? Well, the princess knows the answer to that! Simply by following her great-great-grandmother's thread, of course.

I realise I want to say something into the pipe. What, though?

"Anyone there?" I venture. And soon I'm having a conversation with George MacDonald. He wants to know how long he's been dead. What shall I tell him? The truth, obviously. I do the calculation and tell him the answer: one hundred and one years.

A sigh reaches my ear from down the pipe. So I ask him how long it feels like he's been dead. "About two seconds," says George. Oh, dear. But I rather thought that would be the way of it.

"Who are you?" asks the voice from the pipe.

"I'm your *daughter's son's daughter's son*," I say, craftily.

"Who are you, really?" says George, who's no fool for all the time he's been cooped up underground.

I come clean and tell him that I'm an author and a visual arts writer from the year 2006, and that I've been commissioned by Deveron Arts - an arts organisation based in Huntly - to write a short text on the life and works of George MacDonald. What's wanted is an essay that might bring him to life for the modern reader.

He doesn't understand the concept of a commission. I have to explain that society these days is rich enough to support many more writers and artists than was the case in his own day. Many creative types like myself are paid considerable sums of tax-payers' money to

complete projects that might end up being of interest only to a few people, and, in the worst case scenario, only to the commissioning body and the commissioned artist. What is that weird sound coming out of the pipe? Oh, I get it: it's George laughing. He's laughing, because he realises I'm not being serious. It's the first joke he's heard in what he now understands to be a very long time. He has already worked out that in at least one respect I'm just like him: driven to communicate at any price with as many of our fellow creatures as possible. He tells me proudly that he was awarded a pension by Queen Victoria, for services to literature. True, but only after a lifetime struggling to support his wife and family.

George wants to know about my family. I tell him that although I am in my forties, I have neither wife nor children.

"I don't believe you, great-great-grandson."

So I have to explain to George about washing machines and contraceptive devices. It is not an altogether serious conversation that George and I are having, and George understands this. He makes it clear that he is just so pleased to be conscious again, that he is happy to babble on nonsensically. He confesses to me that he is wearing a condom for the first time, and that it's not as uncomfortable as I'd led him to believe. He makes me laugh, does George. Eventually we settle down a bit.

"Deveron Arts," muses George. "Is there a Bogie Arts as well?"

There isn't. But surely it can be just a matter of time before both the rivers that wind round Huntly have an arts organisation to their name.

I talk to him about the Scottish Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. But in doing so I feel I create a distance between us. And I don't want that. I want to get back to the feeling of togetherness that we briefly and tentatively had, and it's up to me to get us there, since George is understandably still a bit sluggish from his century in oblivion. Heritage, that is the key word. So I say: "I got this wonderful object through the post recently."

"Did you?" says George, no doubt remembering some of the wonderful things he received through the post in his time.

I bought a book on the Internet, which is a special kind of shop we have nowadays. And the next day there it was inside my front door!" I pause to see if George is interested in what I've got to say.

"What on earth was it?" asks George.

"An 1817 version of *Tales of My Landlord*. With original boards and spine. The paper is a bit warped, with nearly two-hundred years of damp integrated into it. But it's all there. Still very much a readable book."

"Sir Walter Scott," muses George. You know, although he died when I was a boy, his name loomed large all my life. Single-handedly, he brought history to life. That was his contribution."

"Yes, but what about the date?"

"1817?" says George. "Seven years before I was born..."

"Ten years before Scott admitted he was the author of all the novels that had been flowing from his pen from the day *Waverley* became an overnight sensation."

"I remember lecturing on Scott in both London and America. I remember having to explain that first there was Walter Scott, best-selling poet. Then there was 'the author of *Waverley*', also known as 'The Great Unknown', the author of a stream of novels set in

Scotland and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then there was the rival to The Great Unknown, who wrote *Tales of My Landlord*. And of course, in 1827, it was announced that all of it was written by a single hand, the trusty right one of Sir Walter Scott.”

“What name did he write *Tales of My Landlord* under again?” I ask, though I know the answer.

“The tales were collected and arranged by Jedediah Cleishbotham,” says George.

“Schoolmaster and parish priest of Gandercleugh,” I add.

“Scott quotes Burns on the title page of that book, doesn’t he?”

“He sure does.”

“Words that inspired me when I was a young man and made me want to become a writer myself. That combination of wit and wisdom did the trick. Because, if I admired Scott for his prodigious output and his intellect, I loved Burns for his common touch, his humanity.”

“I can quote the Burns verse for you now, George.”

“I would be in your debt if you did that. That is, if the dead can ever be held to owe anything to the living.”

I don’t dwell on these words. Instead I clear my throat, then speak into the pipe as if it was a microphone:

*“Hear, Land o’ Cakes and brither Scots,
Frae Maidenkirk to Jonny Groats’,
If there’s a hole in a’ your coats I rede you tent it.
A chiel’s amang you takin’ notes, An’ faith he’ll prent it.”*

I want to keep talking with George now that we’ve established we’ve got so much heritage in common. But all of a sudden I’m beyond words. George too, perhaps, cos all’s gone quiet from the earthy end of the pipe.

After a minute I turn onto my back and consider the night sky. It’s twilight still. So I sit up and take in the view through the gate from Ba’ Hill towards Huntly. There’s The Farm surrounded by trees, to which I’ll gladly return soon. But I’ll just sit here for a while longer with this feeling of *privilege* that’s descended on me, soaking up the last of the day’s twilight.

DAY FOUR

All’s quiet in The Farm again this morning. I’m in a ground floor lounge with a coffee and the old copy of *At the Back of the North Wind* that’s been handed down from owner to owner of this house.

I can’t help smiling. A few weeks ago I was in a second-hand bookshop in Cornwall with a special friend. I showed her the Everyman edition of this book, but only to make the point that I was going to be doing a short residency up in Aberdeenshire concerning its author. “*At the Back of the North Wind!*” she cried, grabbing the book out of my hand.

“I loved this story as a child,” she went on. “There was something wonderfully atmospheric about it. I’ve never seen it since or been able to remember who wrote it.”

So we bought the book and read the first few chapters together. I didn’t take to it in the way I was bowled over by *The Princess and the Goblin*, because I felt that sentimentality, present in a lot of Victorian writing, gets in the way. And my friend couldn’t match a single episode to her enthusiastic but vague recollections of the book.

I’ve since read the story on my own, and - having got on top of my knee-jerk reaction to sentiment - find it fascinating. It concerns a boy called Diamond. Little Diamond sleeps above a stable containing Big Diamond the horse, and the north wind penetrates the thin wooden walls of his bedroom. But the north wind turns out to be a woman of flexible size and challenging views. Little Diamond soon comes to trust North Wind implicitly, and to go with her on wide-ranging and sensual travels.

A strange thing about the first section of the book is that it’s supposed to take place in London. Now at the time of writing, MacDonald did live in Hammersmith, and there was a stable attached to the house with a room above it. But the feel of the start of the book is much more rural, with much talk of hay bales. The Farm, Huntly, with the stables a short distance from the house - that’s what seems to make sense. That’s where Little Diamond really lived his early life. Little Diamond and Princess Irene both.

Now when George MacDonald was living in The Farm, he lost a little brother. He also lost his mother when he was eight-years-old, his only memory being of her hugging his head to her bosom while she was dying. Or at least that’s how Ranald Bannerman puts it when talking about *his* mother who died when he was about that age. The absence of the mother, together with the imaginative longing of the child: right there lies the key to all that’s most magical and poignant in both *The Princess and the Goblin* and *At the Back of the North Wind*.

I’m tempted to think there is quite a lot of suppressed autobiography in the book. So let’s tease that out a bit. Little Diamond isn’t very well and goes to stay with his aunt in Sandwich. Well, it was another town on the south coast of England where George and his wife and kids stayed for a few years, Hastings. Then when Diamond gets better, he’s taken back to London where things are a lot less financially stable for his family. Never mind, because Little Diamond and Big Diamond together make a fine taxi service, and for chapter after chapter we find Little Diamond charming the pants off the rough men and the poor kids of London. ‘God’s Baby’, he’s known as. Similarly, when George’s family moved to London, he was working like a demon, driving his muse to produce book after book so as to impress patrons and publishers alike. C.S. Lewis has subsequently said that there is a spiritual luminosity about everything that MacDonald wrote. God’s Baby, indeed.

The book is resting on the back of a pommel horse. That is an object in the style of a traditional piece of gymnastic equipment, complete with handles, but with a real horse’s tail emerging from one end. It’s a sculpture that was made in 2005 by David Blyth, currently Huntly’s artist-in-residence. It doesn’t usually belong in The Farm, but came here the same day I did, carried inside by Claudia Zeiske, Director of Deveron Arts, and me. I thought it would be appropriate to make use of the pommel pony when considering George MacDonald’s work, for at least two reasons. In *Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood*, Ranald describes how his father’s horse Missy (George’s father’s horse was also called Missy) was so placid that Ranald was in the habit of reading books when mounted on her

back. Also, in *At the Back of the North Wind*, Little Diamond's relationship with Big Diamond is touching, in every sense of the word.

So here I sit astride my Missy, flicking through the book, admiring Arthur Hughes original illustrations of Little Diamond and North Wind, whose long flowing hair, together with Big Diamond's broad solid back, provide the boy, the motherless boy, with lashings of comfort and intimations of joy.

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Today I'm not waiting for a gap in the traffic so as to cross the A96, but for the Volkswagen Polo I'm driving to be able to join the flow of multi-horsepower vehicles. I need to get to Oldmeldrum, about twenty miles south east of Huntly, where the administrative HQ of the county library is located.

Why are the George MacDonald manuscripts I'm intending to consult not kept at Huntly Library? The official answer is because the opening hours are too restrictive, and suitable security systems are not in place. I suppose that does make sense. These manuscripts must be worth a fortune. For sure, they must be kept safe for generations to come, not just for those of us who have time on our side now. I believe the physical siting of the manuscripts is still under discussion.

I've already been in touch with the library and I know that they have seven original manuscripts in their safekeeping. MacDonald wrote about 40 books of one sort or another, so that's not a huge proportion of his output. But the great thing is they have the three or four books that I seem to keep coming back to this week.

The drive is one easy swish through countryside. The library is not a library as such but an administrative building cum storage facility in an industrial estate on the edge of town. The books are ready and waiting for me when I walk in the door.

I go straight for the manuscript of *Princess and Goblin*, because that's where my first loyalties lie. Loose sheets kept in a red linen box. I turn to the page where Princess Irene explores the house, and scrutinise the scorings out. MacDonald's handwriting with the quill is neat, but when he makes a horizontal deletion, the line is broad and makes the deleted words hard to decipher. I turn back and forth; I turn to the beginning and the end. These are different from in the printed book. There are dialogues between the editor, or writer, and reader, or child. These don't find their way into print. MacDonald has indicated that these bits should be written in italics, but obviously the real editor has decided that they complicate things unnecessarily. Maybe so, but the ending of the manuscript seems smoother, and doesn't leave loose ends. In particular it acknowledges that there is more to say - about both Irene and Curdie's relationship and the old lady and Curdie's - that is to be covered in a further volume.

I give up possession of *P and G* so that a member of staff can make the photocopies I want, and turn to the second manuscript. As I'm looking at chapter one of *North Wind*, I realise what I should have asked for regarding photocopies of *P and G*. So when the librarian comes back with the few A4 copies I've requested from random parts of that manuscript, I thank her kindly, and ask if she will now copy the whole of the first chapter of *North Wind* in such a way that each page takes up the whole of an A3 sheet. Then I will have a better chance of comfortably reading the thing at my leisure. I look forward to doing that, because North Wind blows through the chapter in the form of thick black

horizontal lines. Watch out little Diamond or your name will be changed with a flick of the pen. Just as in the manuscript of *David Elginbrod*, the name 'Hugh Sutherland' replaces 'Ronald Hume' every time the main character crops up.

But *David Elginbrod* is not the third manuscript I'm going to concentrate on, *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* is. Reason being, it's a thing of beauty. The manuscript is kept in a wooden box that has the exact same dimensions as the iBook that I'm making notes on. You even have to open the box by pushing a button in the front edge and raising the back lid, as you do with the laptop. There's a metal plate across the top of the box, on which is inscribed the author's name and the work's title. This gold band is echoed in the box itself by a silk band, which encircles the loose pages. The best of these pointers to the love and care that have been lavished on this book, is the covering letter that lies on the manuscript. It was written in 1927 from an address in Kensington. I make note of the exact words on my iBook:

'Gentlemen, I have now the pleasure of sending you the original manuscript of George MacDoanld's 'Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood' which his son Dr. Greville MacDonald permits me to present to the Brander Library.

It is I think fitting that the manuscript should find a permanent home in Huntly. Not only is Huntly the author's birthplace and the town where he spent his schooldays, but Huntly, though unmentioned, is the scene of the story.'

Having written this down, I sit back to contemplate a few points. First, the letter was written by Charles Edward Troup. That is, George's son-in-law, the husband of his sixth-born child, Winifred Louisa. Mr. Troup refers to Greville having given permission to donate the manuscript, because Greville, being the oldest of George's children surviving at his death, would have inherited the literary estate.

Second, this Brander Library business. Having now seen how beautiful the box is - made from walnut by a craftsman called Mr. Edward Barnsley, the back of the letter informs me - I feel sure this book should be on display in Huntly. A new sculpture by Kenny Hunter, relating to the work of MacDonald, will be revealed to the public in the entrance hall of the Brander Library in a few months. That promises to be a significant event in Huntly's cultural calendar. It might be an appropriate time to reveal this superb object as well.

Third, I was told about another boxed manuscript yesterday. In the afternoon, I visited Morag Black who now lives in a small house in the middle of Huntly. But for 37 years she lived at The Farm, being the first non-MacDonald family member to own the property, the forerunner to the Johannesens, the Laws (who I know nothing about) and the Heinemeiers. Informal trusteeship of various books came with the house, including the manuscript of *Alec Forbes of Howglen* and the box made specially for it. At one stage Morag, conscious of the item's value, lodged it at the bank. But in 1993 a Mrs Troup (I'm not sure what her relationship to George was, so let's say his great-great-granddaughter) retrieved the book so that it could be sold. I didn't know what to make of that story yesterday, not having seen a box or manuscript. But now I'm thinking 'how generous'. How generous of whoever it was (Charles Edward Troup again?) to have the box made in tribute to the book. How generous of the MacDonald-Troups to leave the boxed book in the care of the new owner of The Farm. How generous of Morag Grant to look after the valuable box-book for as long as she did. All right, it would appear that financial considerations did for the book in the end. But maybe not. Maybe the book was bought by

some institution and is now available to be consulted by the general public. It would be nice to think so; it would be good to find out.

But for now I have three magnificent manuscripts on the desk in front of me. I take a few seconds to survey sample pages from each again. There's not much difference in the hand-writing, reminding me that the books were written close to each other in time when George lived at The Retreat, a large house in Hammersmith overlooking the River Thames. Each was clearly written in a flowing way, but was published in monthly parts in *Good Words for the Young*, which MacDonald edited for a year or two. *North Wind* appeared in the monthly issues of 1869, *RBB* in 1870, *P and G* in 1871. It was while the last of these was being serialised that he wrote to his wife saying that it was as good work of the kind that he could do, and that it would be the most complete thing he had ever done.

I agree that *The Princess and the Goblin* is out of the top drawer. Nevertheless, my eye is irresistibly drawn to the manuscript of *RBB*, the bulk of it still in its splendid wooden casing. So much so that I retrieve the first sheet from the desktop and let my eye flow along George's pen-strokes until it comes to a passage with little or no deletions. And I read:

I will clear the way for it by mentioning that my father was the clergyman of a county parish in the north of Scotland – a humble post this, involving plain living and plain ways altogether. There was a glebe or church-farm attached to the manse, or clergyman's house, and my father rented a small farm besides, for he needed all he could make by farming to supplement the smallness of the living.

'Plain living and plain ways... to supplement the smallness of the living'. These have been my watchwords since I began this project, and so they should remain.

*

After dinner at The Farm with Pam and Jo, I light out for Ba' Hill. As I bowl along the farm road I'm wondering whether the rusty old pipe will transport me as it has done on previous nights.

When I get into position – there's a hollow under the gate where my body has flattened the grass – I realise I don't have to worry. George pipes up, curious to know how I've got on today. So I update him on my *North Wind* reading and my Oldmeldrum library work. George is pleased that his manuscripts have been preserved: "I wrote those three books in London, you know."

I do know. But George carries on: "Of all the houses I lived in after Huntly, it's the one I have reason to recall most fondly, and I remember its study in particular... A long first-floor room...Crimson flock wallpaper with black *fleurs-de-lys* decoration stencilled upon it... The ceiling painted dark blue with stars of silver and gold and a crescent moon... The Thames rolling by outside: so much water shining up at me as I wrote all through what I remember as – despite the moon and stars - one long summer's afternoon. My grand study; my glory years..."

"I've been there. I've stood in the very room." And I explain to George that before embarking on the Huntly part of this project I spent a few days in London, the highlight of which was my visit to the impressive four-floor brick house where George lived from

1865 to 1874, from his 39th to his 48th year. The period George and Louisa, and their 11 kids spent at The Retreat was the happiest in George's life. Was it not?

"The gift from God that surpasses all the other gifts that he in his infinite wisdom bestowed upon me," says George, reminding me that he doesn't always have a light touch with words. "But memories fade, especially in the mind of the dead. Tell me about your recent visit."

So I tell George about how I met a woman from the William Morris Society in the basement. I have to remind my pipe-pal that it was to William Morris that the MacDonalds sold the house when they left its damp riverside location for health reasons. The William Morris Society owns the basement these days. The rest of the house is privately owned, but I'd made an arrangement with the present owners – Joy and Jock Birney - to see around it. And that's how I came to be standing in George's old study, his writing room, the same long room where the MacDonald family used to perform plays on special occasions.

"Jock and Joy," says George, "what evocative names!"

He tells me that his family used to stage plays in the coach room too. And also in the garden, depending on weather, and sets, and so on. "But tell me more about *now*," urges George.

"I saw all round the house, then was left by myself in the garden. It hasn't changed much since you had it. I know that, because when Morris bought the house, he described the garden in detail in a letter to his wife, in a successful effort to persuade her that this townhouse would feel sufficiently rural for her to think she was in the country. In a diagram, Morris marked the whereabouts of the walnut tree, the weeping ash and the tulip tree, which he noted was known as the biggest in England."

"Is the tulip tree still there?"

"I thought so. But on the way out I was informed that - splendid though the tree in question is – it's a magnolia."

George's reaction reaches my inner ear: a throaty chuckle. It prompts me to move up a gear. I remind George that his second eldest daughter, Mary, was one of Charles Dodgson's first child friends. Dodgson took photos of all the MacDonald family, singly and in combinations. There is a stately image of a seated MacDonald, with the erect bearing that was characteristic, and the long flowing beard, ditto. There is a cute photograph of Mary, reminiscent of photos taken by Dodgson of Alice Liddell around the same time. And there is a touching one with Dodgson himself, sitting on the lawn with Louisa MacDonald and three of her kids. Touching because, apart from with his own family, Dodgson never appeared with other people in his photographs. However, shy Dodgson trusted and admired MacDonald. And found he could communicate with him. Indeed, the solitary Oxford don found he had made bosom friends with an entire family! He was a regular visitor to The Retreat.

I give time for all this to sink in. I'm conscious that I'm building up to something and that I need to prepare the ground thoroughly. So that when the time comes, my great, great, grand George gets it. I want him to get it good.

On July 2nd, 1862, Charles Dodgson went for a boat trip with the three Liddell girls on the Thames at Oxford, and out of that came the first Alice book. That's well established. Less well known is that five days later, Dodgson bumped into George MacDonald on his way out of the house with the manuscript of *The Light Princess* in his hands, and they

walked together for a mile towards his publishers. Which was the more significant event in the evolution of *Alice*? Before meeting MacDonald, Dodgson had only published a few poems and short stories, and had shown no sign that he would set himself to writing fairy tales.

George's wind-pipe remains silent. But I know he's listening.

"Once the manuscript of what was then 'Alice's Adventures Underground' was written, it was you whom Dodgson asked if he should consider publishing it. You gave the manuscript to Louisa, who read it out to the kids *en masse*, and the verdict of the MacDonald clan was a resounding, 'YES!'. So, in 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published by Dodgson under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll."

"Delicious nonsense," says George, with a twinkle in his voice.

"A few years later, *Through the Looking Glass* was written. It begins and ends with Alice's kittens, one of whom has the same name as your family's kitten of the time."

"Snowdrop."

"The second Alice book was published in 1872. That is, just a year after *The Princess and the Goblin*. The absolute highlight of the second Alice book is a tribute to you, George. Though I don't know of anyone else who has reached the same conclusion."

"What do you mean, great-great-grandson?"

"I mean the poem, 'A-sitting on a Gate', which the White Knight recites to Alice just before she moves to the last square of the chess board and dons her crown. According to the narrator, of all the things that Alice saw on her journey through Looking Glass world, this was the one she would always remember most clearly."

"A-Sitting on a Gate," says George, thoughtfully.

"On one level, Carroll's poem is based on the Wordsworth poem called 'Resolution and Independence'. In the latter, the narrator, the young poet himself, acknowledges that he is a free spirit, full of positive perspectives, but wonders what his state of mind will be when he's a lot older.

"Ah," says George, now *that* poem I do remember." And he quotes: "*We Poets in our youth begin in gladness But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.*"

"That's it! On the bleak moorland, the poet comes across an old man. He asks him what he's doing. And the old man tells him that he's stirring pools of water in order to collect leeches. The poet notes that the old man speaks like a certain type of religious man from Scotland. But he realises that he hasn't listened properly to the old man's answer, so again he asks him..."

George interrupts, or rather he helps me out by quoting the exact words: "*My question eagerly did I renew: 'How is it that you live, and what is it you do?'*"

I'm not surprised that George can quote lines from the poem. That's what people did back in the nineteenth century – commit poems to memory. Besides, in George's own book, *David Elginbrod*, his protagonist, Hugh Sutherland, gives a book of Wordsworth's poems to Margaret Elginbrod. Her father shows an interest in the volume, and so Hugh reads 'Independence and Resolution' to the Elginbrods in their humble dwelling on the edge of the fir wood. So I know George will know what I'm going on about when I say: "When asked a second time what he does for a living, the old man repeats that he stirs puddles with a pole and in this way collects leeches, for which he gets paid a small amount of money. One of the quotes you insert in your novel is the last couplet, where the

poet resolves to think of the old man in the future, for inspiration when his own life gets tough. Can you help me out with the lines?

George clears his throat. Then says with feeling: "*‘God,’ said I, ‘be my help and stay secure; I’ll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!’*"

"Now Dodgson-Carroll read your Scottish-based novels. He commented in a letter to your Mary that *Alec Forbes* featured one of the nicest heroine’s - once you got used to the Scots’ dialect. And, according to his diary, Dodgson and you chatted about *David Elginbrod* itself shortly after its publication in 1863. So with all that in mind, and with Dodgson’s respect for you as a fellow fantasist and as a wise friend, just listen to this."

I can’t remember much poetry by heart. But I can read it aloud from a book all right. Which is why I’ve gone to the trouble of bringing with me to Ba’ Hill the bulky volume that I bought for £1.50 from the Red Cross shop in Huntly. It’s *The Complete Illustrated Works of Lewis Carroll*, and already I’ve taught it to fall open at a particular page.

"George, I believe this poem was written for you in Charles Dodgson’s rooms at Christ Church College, Oxford . And now it’s about to be read to you on rough grazing within sight of your childhood home. The verse is spoken by the White Knight, who’s mounted on a horse, and he’s speaking it to Alice. But, I repeat, it’s really Lewis Carroll himself talking, and he’s talking about you:

*I’ll tell thee everything I can;
There’s little to relate.
I saw an aged aged man,
A-sitting on a gate.
"Who are you, aged man?" I said,
"And how is it you live?"
And his answer trickled through my head
Like water through a sieve.*

*He said "I look for butterflies
That sleep among the wheat:
I make them into mutton-pies,
And sell them in the street.
I sell them unto men," he said,
"Who sail on stormy seas;
And that’s the way I get my bread--
A trifle, if you please."*

Early in his adult life, George was ordained as a minister. In his Lincolnshire parish, prosperous deacons didn’t like what he preached about salvation for everyone. So they cut his annual stipend of £150 by almost a third, just as George had been hoping to rent a larger house to accommodate his growing family. The congregation responded by bringing him home-grown fruit and home-made beer. That’s a story he would have told Charles Dodgson, who also had religious views that gave him difficulties with church hard-liners. But hang on, I must keep up with Carroll’s take on George if my spoken words are to sound convincing at the far end of the pipe...

*His accents mild took up the tale:
He said "I go my ways,
And when I find a mountain-rill,
I set it in a blaze;
And thence they make a stuff they call
Rowlands' Macassar Oil--
Yet twopence-halfpenny is all
They give me for my toil."*

In the book that Greville MacDonald published about his parents, he tells the story of how one day in 1860, Louisa lost her purse with the family's last sovereign in it. There was only just enough food in the house for the then six children's dinner. In the evening, George and Louisa stood hand-in-hand as if waiting some answer to their prayers. On cue, the postman walked up the steps and dropped a letter in the box. It was from Lady Byron's executors enclosing a cheque for £300, a legacy of which they had not been advised. But back to the sound of Lewis Carroll's playful yet rich tribute to George...

*He said "I hunt for haddocks' eyes
Among the heather bright,
And work them into waistcoat-buttons
In the silent night.
And these I do not sell for gold
Or coin of silvery shine
But for a copper halfpenny,
And that will purchase nine.*

MacDonald lived from the royalties he made from his books. This meant he had to write novels rather than the poetry he would have preferred to write. It also meant that he usually had three on the go at any one time. Dipping his quill into the manuscript of a Scottish novel, a children's book and an adult fantasy as inspiration – and periodical's publication requirements - came and went...

*"I sometimes dig for buttered rolls,
Or set limed twigs for crabs;
I sometimes search the grassy knolls
For wheels of Hansom-cabs.
And that's the way" (he gave a wink)
"By which I get my wealth--
And very gladly will I drink
Your Honour's noble health."*

Lectures provided another source of funds. In America George's lecture on Burns went down best, but his repertoire included Scott and Shakespeare. For 100 minutes a night, without the aid of notes, George spoke to the Yanks. From Cambridge Port, to Boston, then Chicago, Detroit, New York, Cincinnati, Delaware, Ohio, Altoona, Pennsylvania, Buffalo, Milton Massachusetts, Washington... Another time, in Scotland, he lectured

twenty-eight times in thirty-five days; never consecutively in the same town. *Frae Maidenkirk to Jonny Groats*. I wonder if he ever told Charles Dodgson about that ridiculous schedule...

*I thanked him much for telling me
The way he got his wealth,
But chiefly for his wish that he
Might drink my noble health.*

Quick reality check to make sure I'm on solid ground with this.... No, I don't have to do that: it makes wonderful sense. And never more so than when Carroll changes key in the middle of the last section:

*And now, if e'er by chance I put
My fingers into glue
Or madly squeeze a right-hand foot
Into a left-hand shoe,
Or if I drop upon my toe
A very heavy weight,
I weep, for it reminds me so,
Of that old man I used to know—
Whose look was mild, whose speech was slow,
Whose hair was whiter than the snow,
Whose face was very like a crow,
With eyes, like cinders, all aglow,
Who seemed distracted with his woe,
Who rocked his body to and fro,
And muttered mumblingly and low,
As if his mouth were full of dough,
Who snorted like a buffalo--
That summer evening, long ago,
A-sitting on a gate.'*

I turn over. I mean I drop the book and turn over onto my back. I suppose I've got to get myself home to The Farm now. As George MacDonald would have had to do so many evenings, so long ago. Or maybe I'll just stay here. A-lying under the gate. On the off chance that if I should crawl a few yards I might come across the wheel of an old Hansom cab amongst these grassy knolls. Think how much that would be worth today on e-Bay!

Yeah, I'll stay right here. A-lying above ground. By which I mean, a-lying under the stars.

DAY SEVEN

This morning, I leave The Farm at what feels like the crack of dawn, because breakfast is being laid on at Claudia's place. Her house is on the side of Battle Hill, about the same distance from The Farm as Ba' Hill, but north-east rather than south. I don't know if the mature fir wood that covers much of Battlehill would have been there in George's time, but if it was then he would have been a regular visitor, because it's got atmosphere has this wood, especially in a high wind like there is now. I can well imagine the protagonists of MacDonald's bleak adult fantasies - *Phantastes* and *Lilith* - wandering around hungry and lost in it.

Heather Delday is already sitting in the kitchen when I roll up. She is going to design the book in hand, and today she is going to take a few photographs with me. I'm nervous about mentioning the set-ups I've got in mind, they could seem self-indulgent or even plain daft. But she seems to grasp the reasoning behind why I'm taking the approach I am, so I start to relax about that. I must say it's great to be working with people who have a contemporary art background, where a flexible and imaginative approach comes as standard.

Yesterday I travelled from Huntly to Glasgow to visit Kenny Hunter in his studio. The big room was full of work-in-progress; several of the artist's assistants were quietly getting on with work that is to be shown this summer and autumn in a solo show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. The pieces seemed to be made up of sculpted objects, casts made from objects, and found objects. So you were constantly having to work out what the status of an object within a suite of objects was, and what the implications were for the sculpture as a whole.

The Deveron Arts commissioned sculpture seems to deal with a different set of ambiguities. It is well underway, indeed the finished piece is going to be part of the Yorkshire show - so that it gets seen in an art world context before being put on permanent display in the foyer of the Brander Library. For now, I have come back to Huntly with a colour photograph of the sculpture and Kenny Hunter's own reading copy of *Lilith*, the MacDonald book that has, in part, inspired it.

We all look at the image. The sculpture appears to feature a large member of the crow family, perched on the only real branch emanating from a wizened tree trunk that has a pool of water at its base.

"Is it a raven?" asks Heather.

I confirm that it is.

She wants to know how the sculpture was made. Well, I can tell her that because I asked the sculptor that very same question. First, Hunter made a detailed model in clay over a steel and wire frame armature. Then, a plaster mould was made of sections of clay. When the removed mould was dried out, it was sanded and treated with varnish and wax. The mould sections were then used to cast the object in glass-reinforced plastic, the resin being pigmented - black for the raven, grey for the tree - before casting. Once the plaster mould was broken off, the cast was refined using files and sandpaper. It may sound like a lot of work just to turn a clay model into the same thing made with another material. But that other material is permanent and colourfast; that other material has a smoky, steely presence to it.

Hunter told me he'd wanted to use a crow or a raven because of those creatures portentous nature, what with so much of MacDonald's work being permeated with allusions to death. He also wanted to use a mirror – the pool of water at the bottom of the tree is a real mirror – to acknowledge MacDonald's role in the use of such conduit devices in fantasy fiction, devices later developed by C.S. Lewis and others. The presence of the mirror in the sculpture also serves to communicate MacDonald's belief that fantasy writing is not wholly indulgent but a reflection of the real world. These were early elements in the sculptor's thinking about his commission. When he came across the opening section of *Lilith* he knew he had come to the core of the work he would make.

Heather has not read *Lilith* so I set the scene for her. In the novel, the protagonist, a man called Vane, follows a raven through a mirror into another world. The mirror is located in a garret at the top of his house, upstairs from his library. I show Heather and Claudia that this is one of several passages in his own copy of *Lilith* that Kenny has highlighted with a black line and an asterisk:

'The small chamber was full of light, but such as wells in places deserted: it had a dull disconsolate look, as if it found itself of no use, and regretted having come. A few rather dim sunrays, marking their track through the cloud of motes that had just been stirred up, fell upon a tall mirror with a dusty face, old-fashioned and rather narrow – in appearance an ordinary glass.'

These words may have indirectly influenced the form of the sculpture, for the entire surface has a lustre about it, putting a positive spin on the 'dull' and 'dim' of the quote. The viewer sees the bird and the tree as if through a bright mist. 'Other-worldly' is what comes to mind. Which is appropriate enough, as most of *Lilith* is about as other-worldly as Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The mirror is the means of going from our world to a parallel world. The shape-shifting creature goes from raven, bird, to Mr Raven, librarian, and back again. He - or it - is Vane's guide from one world to the other.

An appendix to the biography written by William Raeper mentions that there are eight pre-publication versions of *Lilith*, which was one of MacDonald's last books, published in 1895. These manuscripts, labelled A to H, were all given to the British Museum, so they should now be filed away in the new British Library at St. Pancras. (But you never know, they may have found their way to the county library at Oldmeldrum.) Apparently, the book's eventual title doesn't appear in *Lilith* A. 'Anacosm', meaning, 'Between Worlds' was one of the original titles. 'Through the Looking Glass' would have been perfect! Well, maybe not, because nothing could be further from the tone of Lewis Carroll's book than the darkness of *Lilith*.

In *Lilith*, the mirror is a conduit to another world. "What other world would that be then?" I ask Hunter's raven. "Where in? - Where at?" says the bird, parroting what the artist said to me yesterday when answering my question as to what was the sculpture's title.

However, I don't need to ask the bird again. I know that what Vane finds on the other side of the mirror located above his library is a variation on what Princess Irene found at the top of her house in the form of an old lady. I know that it's a variation on what Little Diamond found at the back of the North Wind, courtesy of North Wind herself. And that's death.

*

If you walk along the side of Battlehill, and then strike south for a couple of miles, you reach Drumblade Cemetery. I do the journey by car after the photography session. George MacDonald is not buried here, but there is a granite memorial to him attached to the stone boundary wall. Etched on it is the information that George - preacher, poet and storyteller - who died in 1905, is buried alongside Louisa in Bordighera, Italy, which is where the MacDonalds lived once they'd left The Retreat.

The memorial is supposed to be close to the family's graves, but the only one I can find lists members of the Troup family, most of who are related to George by marriage. Winifred L. Troup, MacDonald's daughter, is buried here. So is Sophie M. Troup, who in 1911 wrote her name at the front of the old copy of *The Princess and The Goblin* that is kept in the study of The Farm. So is C. Edward Troup, Winifred's husband, the bloke who donated the manuscript of *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* to Huntly. I assume he is buried in a fine walnut coffin.

I walk around Drumblade cemetery, in search of MacDonald graves and the wider picture. George's last visit to Huntly was in 1891, when he was 67, and after having written the first draft of *Lilith*. In a letter home to Louisa in Italy, he wrote about this cemetery 'where all my people are laid out', so the graves must indeed be here. He described it as a green place, very quiet, in the middle of undulating fields and bare hills. As it is now. He told his wife that he found the countryside to be more beautiful than he'd seen it in the past. Beautiful? Yes, but then everything this side of the mirror is beautiful.

One of the most striking images in *Lilith* comes in a chapter called 'The Cemetery'. In a sinister place that is on the far side of the mirror, there are aisles of couches, stretching in all directions. On each couch lies a figure draped in a white sheet. Dead? Well, yes and no. Mr. Raven believes that one day the resurrection-bell will toll, and the dead will rise and for the first time really live. Sometimes the chilly place is described as a chamber, implying walls and a ceiling; at others it is described as a moonlit landscape without boundary. In Kenny Hunter's copy of the book, he has asterisked a particular section in this chapter, something about how Vane found himself lost in a space larger than the imagination, a concept that scared him. Scared him? How could anything concerned with mortality do otherwise?

My walk ends up back at the Troup gravestone. *Lilith* is inspired by death, but not by these individuals deaths. The family tree that I've photocopied from the published volume of MacDonald letters reveals that his three eldest children - all daughters - predeceased him. At the age of 25, 30 and 39, Mary, Grace and Lilia died in 1878, 1884 and 1891, respectively.

Mary was the one whose weak lungs forced the MacDonald family to leave The Retreat and seek a dryer, sunnier climate. She was Charles Dodgson's favourite, and the photographs he took of her, and the playful letters he wrote her, live on. Grace, I don't know much about, except that her own child died just a few years after she did, again predeceasing George and Louisa. Lilia was the eldest daughter, the one who had acted as a surrogate mother to the younger children when Louisa herself couldn't cope with the amount of mothering such a large family required. Lilia was the only MacDonald that could really act, according to Dodgson. Her commitment to acting being such that when

her fiancée suggested she must choose between a rich marriage to him and such a dubious career, she - ever her father's child - chose the latter.

Obviously it would have come as a blow for these children, who survived the high child-mortality rates of Victorian times, to succumb to tubercular complaints when they were in their prime. Lilia only caught the disease because she journeyed half way across the world to tend to a friend who was ill with it. Apparently, George kept returning to her grave on the day of the funeral. He had to be led away in the end, in the pouring rain. He never really recovered, whether from the death of Lilia in particular or from the cumulative effects of the three deaths, I wouldn't like to say.

He soldiered on, though. After all two of his daughters – Irene and Winifred - were still alive, as were all but one of his sons. George had written the first manuscript version of *Lilith* in 1890, when Lilia was going downhill fast. He revised it after Lilia's death and called it *Lilith*. Might there have been some little connection between the names? Well, of course there is, although ostensibly Lilith is a selfish and evil character, she is above all a vain creature who wants to live forever.

When Vane first comes across her in the world beyond the mirror, she is lying in the forest. She is not breathing; there is no heartbeat; she is just skin and bone. But there is no sign of decay, so Vane squeezes a grape into her mouth and hopes for signs of life. He also lies with her at night in the hope that his heat will pass from him to her. For a week, every day he puts the body on a raft that floats on warm waters, and by night he sleeps with her in a cave. He goes on feeding her one grape per day, and the day comes that he realises she *is* alive. She is alive and putting on weight! Mind you, Vane is feeling pretty anaemic, what with being bitten every night by a leech he can't seem to catch in the act of feeding off his blood.

Equally engrossing is the long scene when - after Lilith's recovery, her showing off of quasi-sexual prowess – she is brought to heel after killing her own daughter, Lona. Mara (Mary?) and the mother figure Eve (Louisa?) are on hand to take Lilith to task. She must repent her living death in order to pull through to a real life. She must give up her dead life in order to live on the far side of death. 'Not for me the fate of worm-fodder', is the gist of her resistance. It's hard not to have a sneaking admiration for Lilith.

In a letter to his wife, shortly before Lilia's death, George wrote something about how he thought it would be better for his daughter if she gave herself up 'to him to whom she belongs'. Better for her if she consciously gave in 'to the will of God'. That poor woman – and here I mean Lilith again – really goes through Hell before she surrenders her ego, her individual life. Yes, eventually she agrees to lie on a couch and be draped in a white sheet. And having persuaded her to bite the mortal bullet, Vane feels it is time that he followed suit.

I walk out of the graveyard. As I go I'm recollecting a recent film made by Kenny Hunter. *X-Rex* features his young children. They are given the run of his studio and in the process they knock down and smash a plaster bust of their father. That's Kenny, in the middle of his life, doing voluntarily what Lilith found it so hard to do on her deathbed. Acknowledging that life passes on to the next generation

We must die so that our children can live. But what happens if one day we arrive at our studio - our library, our home - and find our children are either unborn or have died before us. What do we do with the gift of life then?

*

This is my last night in Huntly; my final time on Ba' Hill. I'm lying under the hill gate. That's to say, I've got myself stuck between this world and another.

If I look up and to my left I can see a tree with a branch. The set-up is similar to that in the Kenny Hunter sculpture, if I ignore the fact that the tree I'm looking at is alive whereas the tree in *Where in? - Where at?* would appear to be dead. A mere husk of a once living entity? I wonder if that's actually the case. In the photograph of the sculpture, it's as if the tree's branch is an extended arm, and that the bird is standing on an open palm, a helping hand.

There is no raven on the main branch of the tree before me here and now. I guess the raven has jumped down from the tree and is taking a close look at my mirror. I guess the raven is me.

Yesterday in Hunter's studio I put my head close to the raven's perch, in order to see myself in the mirror at the bottom of the tree. Why? Well, there's not much point in a mirror if one can't see oneself in it.

So here we are, having established a connection between this gate and that mirror, a connection between the raven and me. An excellent vantage point from which to consider the ending of *Lilith*.

What happens in the last twenty pages of the book? Vane is content to lie on the couch in the House of Death that Adam (aka Mr. Raven) makes available to him. In his death sleep, he dreams that all the other bodies have risen. Rising himself, he runs out of the place and meets Adam, who explains to him that he is dreaming, and that he is in fact still lying on his couch in the House of the Dead. So to wake himself from this disturbing dream, Vane throws himself into a pit. He wakes up sure enough, but on the other side of the mirror, back in his worldly home. However, when he goes to bed a couple of nights later, he wakes up in the House of the Dead with Lilith's daughter, Lona, standing beside him. Resurrection day! Overjoyed, he moves with her towards their final goal. The scenario owes a lot to Dante, and the bible, with angels, clouds and a gate. Just as Vane is about to step into heaven itself, a hand is placed on his back to help him take the last step. He turns round, only to discover that he is back in his library at home.

What happens next? Vane doesn't know if he is awake or asleep, dreaming or not. He decides he will not use the mirror again but wait patiently to die, or to be reborn, or to wake up, whatever it is.

MacDonald didn't speak much in the last few years, following a stroke. Louisa died and as George waited patiently for his own death, he would nevertheless look up when anyone entered a room, in the always-disappointed hope that he would be with his beloved again.

"George?" I knew I wasn't going to be able to resist one last conversation. I'm not sure whether to picture him sitting in his library at Casa Coraggio, or lying on his couch in the House of the Dead or...

"I hear you!" booms the trusty pipe.

Delicately, I negotiate permission to read him an extract from one of his own books. It's that timeless story whose main character, Princess Irene, is named after the daughter who was a child of his when George wrote *The Princess and the Goblin*, and Irene

managed to do the decent thing and outlive him by decades. The copy I'm reading from is the one that belongs at The Farm. Of course it is:

"Ready, great-great-grandfather?"

"Ready, direct descendant of the male line."

No time to consider this compliment, if compliment it is. I must press on:

"When she came to the top, she found herself in a little square place, with three doors, two opposite each other, and one opposite the top of the stair. She stood for a moment, without an idea in her little head what to do next. But as she stood, she began to hear a curious humming sound. Could it be the rain? No. It was much more gentle, and even monotonous than the sound of the rain, which now she scarcely heard. The low sweet humming sound went on, sometimes stopping for a little while and then beginning again. It was more like the hum of a very happy bee that had found a rich well of honey in some globular flower, than anything else I can think of at this moment. Where could it come from? She laid her ear first to one of the doors to hearken if it was there - then to another. When she laid her ear against the third door, there could be no doubt where it came from: it must be from something in that room. What could it be? She was rather afraid, but her curiosity was stronger than her fear, and she opened the door very gently and peeped in. What do you think she saw? A very old lady who sat spinning."

A strange sound comes clear through from the far end of the pipe to mine. The sound of a very old man spinning in his grave? Oh, I hope not. But I mustn't distract myself from my task:

"Perhaps you will wonder how the princess could tell that the old lady was an old lady, when I inform you that not only was she beautiful, but her skin was smooth and white. I will tell you more. Her hair was combed back from her forehead and face, and hung loose far down and all over her back. That is not much like an old lady - is it? Ah! but it was white almost as snow. And although her face was so smooth, her eyes looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing she must be old. The princess, though she could not have told you why, did think her very old indeed - quite fifty, she said to herself. But she was rather older than that, as you shall hear."

While the princess stared bewildered, with her head just inside the door, the old lady lifted hers, and said, in a sweet, but old and rather shaky voice, which mingled very pleasantly with the continued hum of her wheel:

'Come in, my dear; come in. I am glad to see you.'

That the princess was a real princess you might see now quite plainly; for she didn't hang on to the handle of the door, and stare without moving, as I have known some do who ought to have been princesses but were only rather vulgar little girls. She did as she was told, stepped inside the door at once, and shut it gently behind her.

'Come to me, my dear,' said the old lady.

And again the princess did as she was told. She approached the old lady - rather slowly, I confess - but did not stop until she stood by her side, and looked up in her face with her blue eyes and the two melted stars in them.

'Do you know my name, child?'

'No, I don't know it,' answered the princess.

'My name is Lilith.'

'That's my name!' cried the princess.

'I know that. I let you have mine. I haven't got your name. You've got mine.'

'How can that be?' asked the princess, bewildered. 'I've always had my name.'

'Your papa, the king, asked me if I had any objection to your having it; and, of course, I hadn't. I let you have it with pleasure.'

'It was very kind of you to give me your name - and such a pretty one,' said the princess.

'Oh, not so very kind!' said the old lady. 'A name is one of those things one can give away and keep all the same. I have a good many such things. Wouldn't you like to know who I am, child?'

'Yes, that I should - very much.'

'I'm your great-great-grandmother,' said the lady.

'What's that?' asked the princess.

'I'm your father's mother's father's mother.'

'Oh, dear! I can't understand that,' said the princess.

'I dare say not. I didn't expect you would. But that's no reason why I shouldn't say it.'

'Oh, no!' answered the princess.

'I will explain it all to you when you are older,' the lady went on. 'But you will be able to understand this much now: I came here to take care of you.'

As I close the book. I'm bracing myself for how George is going to react to my messing about with both his life's work *and* his nearest and dearest.

But it seems he's not going to object. All I can hear when I put my ear to the pipe is deep and easy breathing. It's difficult to resist the conclusion that George – my George, Huntly's George, *our* George - is sleeping like a baby.

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