George MacDonald

Literary Heritage and Heirs

essays on the background and legacy of his writing

Roderick McGillis

editor

George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs
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For Kate and Kyla Again

And in memory of Muriel Hutton and Bill Raeper

George MacDonald

Literary Heritage and Heirs

Introduction
Rodrick McGillis 1

Part 1 ***Precursors and Sources***

Chapter 1. *David Robb* — Perhaps He Will Need To Love Scotland Too': The Importance of MacDonald's Scottish Sources 7

Chapter 2. *Gisela Kreglinger* — Poets, dreamers and mediators: the metaphors of dreams, night and death in Novalis's *Hymns to the night* and George MacDonald's *Lilith* 25

Chapter 3. *Robert Trexler* — Mr. Vane's Pilgrimage into the Land of Promise: MacDonald's "Historical Imagination" in *Lilith* 39

Chapter 4. *Fernando Soto* — Kore Motifs in the Princess Books: Mythic Threads Between Irenes and Eirinys 59

Chapter 5. *David L. Neuhouser* — George MacDonald and Universalism 75

Part 2 ***His Master's Voice***

Chapter 6. *Jan Susina* — "More is Meant Than Meets the Ear": Narrative Framing in the Three Versions of George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* 89

Chapter 7. *John Docherty* — An Ambivalent Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Some Aspects of Irony in *Lilith* 103

Chapter 8. *Ginger Stelle*	Phantastic Parallels in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* and *St. George and St. Michael*	123
Chapter 9. *Kirstin Johnson*	Curdie's Intertextual Dialogue: Engaging Maurice, Arnold, and Isaiah	137
Chapter 10. *Susan Ang*	George MacDonald and 'Ethicized' Gothic'	159
Chapter 11. *Roderick McGillis*	Fantasy as Miracle: Tentative Beginning Without Conclusion	177

Part 3 ***Some Children***

Chapter 12. *Geoffrey Reiter*	'Travelling Beastward': George MacDonald's Princess Books and Late Victorian Supernatural Degeneration Fiction	193
Chapter 13. *Colin Manlove*	Parent or Associate? George MacDonald and the Inklings	203

Part 4 ***MacDonald's Reputation***

Chapter 14. John Pennington	A 'Wolff' in Sheep's Clothing: The George MacDonald Industry and the Difficult Rehabilitation of a Reputation	215

List of Contributors 234

Introduction

Roderick McGillis

George MacDonald died at Ashstead, Surrey, on September 18, 1905. Between September 16 and 19, 2005, a number of scholars from around the world gathered at the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University in Waco, Texas, for a centenary celebration of the great nineteenth-century writer's passing. The conference, organized by the Library's Director Stephen Prickett, had the title: "George MacDonald and His Children: the Development of Fantasy Literature." Perhaps the title captured the spirit of the conference, but not its letter. Over three full days, attendants at the conference heard papers on MacDonald's precursors, on his own work, and on the writers he has influenced. Scholars who presented papers included those familiar to MacDonald studies and those beginning to take MacDonald studies in new directions. This conference was not only excellent in its organization, but it also marked an auspicious development in MacDonald studies. I dare say, this conference will stand as a crucial moment; perhaps for the first time the various voices who speak about and for George MacDonald came together and shared ideas. At the Armstrong Browning Library in 2005, theologians and literary theorists and literary historians, mythographers and biographers, fans and professionals, formalists and moralists came together in a genuinely productive conversation that focused on George MacDonald, the sources of his work and vision, and his legacy. The Baylor conference gives notice that MacDonald studies not only continue as an important but modest academic pursuit, but that these studies are also expanding and expanding provocatively. The MacDonald who emerges from this conference is a writer no longer under the shadow of C. S. Lewis's famous assertion that the "texture of [MacDonald's] writing as a whole is undistinguished, at times fumbling" (14).

The essays collected in this volume derive from the Baylor conference. They deal not only with MacDonald's fantasy and its progeny in the twentieth century, but also with the connections of this fantasy with MacDonald's full vision in realistic novels and in his theological writing. The impact of the essays here is to illustrate the cohesion of MacDonald's work, and its consistency. Like Blake, MacDonald is a writer whose vision may expand as the years pass, but it does not fundamentally alter. MacDonald's deep-rooted Romanticism, his acceptance of Romanticism's challenge to the Enlightenment, is as clear in his last works as

it was in his first ones. We might quibble over whether MacDonald begins in youthful optimism and ends in the bitterness and pessimism of old age, as Wolff seems to argue in *The Golden Key* (1961), but we cannot deny the fierce belief that for MacDonald a great good is coming. In 1880, at the age of 56, MacDonald published the following poem in *A Book of Strife in the form of 'The Diary of An Old Soul'*:

> Well may this body poorer, feebler grow!
> It is undressing for its last sweet bed;
> But why should the soul, which death shall never know,
> Authority, and power, and memory shed?
> It is that love with absolute faith would wed:
> God takes the inmost garments off his child,
> To have him in his arms, naked and undefiled.
> (August 11; p. 163)

The vision of a return to the pristine celebrates, as it were, the aging process. MacDonald, rarely considered an accomplished poet, here uses rhyme masterfully. Growing leads to knowing; beds and weddings connect intimately; and the child is, thoroughly, undefiled. The "shedding" here is absent, like death to the soul. The rhymes, "bed," "shed," and "wed" fold nouns and verbs, and in the middle is "shed," both a verb and a noun. MacDonald's vision is unifying, blending, and, we might say, loving. This short verse concerns the immaterial (the soul), and yet reminds us just how material the immaterial is. MacDonald's fantasy is a fantasy of desire's fulfillment, a fantasy consistent (even in its clothing metaphor) throughout MacDonald's career. We might even think of Lord and Lady Cokayne in *Lilith*, that grotesque skeletal pair who are completely without clothing (fabric or flesh), naked, and on the path to a condition we can call "undefiled." In a late letter to his old friend J. S. Blackie, in November 1894, MacDonald writes:

> Next month I shall be 70, and I am humbler a good deal than when I was 20. To be rid of self is to have the heart bare to God and so to the neighbour – to have all life own, and possess all things. I see, in my mind's eye, the little children clambering up to sit on the throne with Jesus. My God, art thou not as good as we are capable of imagining thee? Shall we dream a better goodness than thou hast ever thought of? Be thyself, and all is well with us. (Sadler 362-363)

For MacDonald, hope is eternal as is the vision of eternal childhood.

When I say, a little light music, I attempt to capture the intricacy of MacDonald's Romantic spirit. His work derives, to a great extent, from German and English (including Scottish) literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is a literature that hails the oral culture and folds it into the still emerging literary culture. MacDonald finds such a combination of the literary and the oral stimulating and suggestive. Logos represents such a combination. Accordingly, MacDonald's writing delights in paradox, oxymoron, synaesthesia, polysemy, metaphor, and allusion. The attention to language apparent in such rhetorical intensity pursues the Romantic desire for a language that is itself "naked and undefiled," an unmediated language that brings subject and object, material and immaterial, word and deed together. The essays in this volume trace MacDonald's sources in Romantic literature. They place him in the context of his precursors and also in the context of his contemporaries. Finally, they consider his continuing reputation and influence.

The first section, Precursors and Sources, includes essays on MacDonald's Scottish sources, on Novalis, on American transcendentalism and its seventeenth-century origins, on MacDonald's refashioning of Greek myth, and on his universalism. David Robb traces connections between MacDonald's writing and such Scottish forbears as Scott and Hogg; he also demonstrates the extent of MacDonald's borrowings from Sir Thomas Dick Lauder's *Account of the Great Floods of August 1829 in the Province of Moray, and Adjoining Districts* (1830). Robb places MacDonald squarely where he belongs – among the major Scottish writers who preceded him. And he shows how a great writer – MacDonald – uses a minor writer and historian such as Lauder. Although the English and German Romantic writers proved hugely influential on MacDonald when he was a university student and continued to inform his work throughout his life, his first exposure to literature was surely to that of his own country. The folktales and literary tradition of Scotland are the ground of MacDonald's literary life.

But from first to last MacDonald openly testified to the importance of the German writer Novalis (Friederich von Hardenburg) to his own writing. Gisela Kreglinger carefully outlines the influence of Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* on MacDonald, especially on MacDonald's last great fantasy, *Lilith*. From here, the essays take a less familiar turn. Robert Trexler painstakingly and convincingly demonstrates a connection between MacDonald's character Mr. Vane, in *Lilith*, and the seventeenth-century divine, Sir Henry Vane. This essay is a model of literary archaeology. Another sort of literary archaeology appears in Fernando Soto's densely focused study of MacDonald's recasting of Greek mythology in his work, especially the two "Princess" books. We see in Soto's reading a MacDonald deeply

familiar with myth and deeply understanding of myth's spiritual implications. Finally, this first section offers an explanation and consideration of MacDonald as a "Universalist." David Neuhouser carefully places MacDonald among other universalists in the nineteenth century not to argue for this position, but to explain the context for MacDonald's apparent claim that all will be saved once the final bell has rung. Universalism is a potent idea for MacDonald, and a full understanding of his work requires that we set him in the context of nineteenth-century approaches to it. Neuhouser does this, and he does this with scholarly grace.

In section two, His Master's Voice, we have essays that focus directly on MacDonald and his writing. Jan Susina gives a thorough description of the three versions of "The Light Princess," explaining along the way the thematic implications of the various framing devices. This is a masterful reading of one of MacDonald's most accessible stories, and Susina goes a long way to confront the question of audience. This story appeals to both an adult and a child audience, and MacDonald appears to have intended this embracing of what we now think of as "cross-writing," writing for both adult and child. John Docherty, always a meticulous reader of MacDonald's literary conversations with other writers, analyzes the connections between the work of William Blake and MacDonald's *Lilith*. Ginger Stelle demonstrates, in her study of *Phantastes* and *St. George and St. Michael*, the consistency of MacDonald's ideas and images in his realistic fiction and his fantasy. Kirstin Johnson's focus is the "debate" between MacDonald and Matthew Arnold in regard to the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. She concludes that MacDonald's Maurice-influenced fantasy, *The Princess and Curdie*, offers a counter reading of Isaiah to Arnold's. Whereas Arnold looks to the strict letter in any interpretation of the biblical text, MacDonald is more willing to allow the language of Isaiah to mean many things.

MacDonald's Bible thrives on many readings and re-readings; its great code is interpretively rich. From the Bible to the Gothic, the next essay is Susan Ang's study of MacDonald's use of the Gothic in his short story, "The Cruel Painter." This is the only sustained reading of this story that I know of, and Ang brings a fresh approach that will prove useful to future commentators of this and the rest of MacDonald's work. Clearly, MacDonald has something of a "Gothic" imagination; he delights in mystery, the unknown, and the teasingly transgressive. His fantasies and realistic novels contain much of the mise en scene of the Gothic: large and labyrinthine houses, dark and even stormy nights, pale women and demonic men, hints of taboo subjects, the grotesque and the fearsome, and even vampires and wsrewolves. We might see MacDonald as a writer who sets out to rehabilitate

a form – the Gothic – that traditionally plays with blasphemy. All in all, this section presents a MacDonald who is willing to experiment and debate in his public discourse. Finally, this sections contains my own contribution, "Fantasy as Miracle: George MacDonald's The Miracles of Our Lord." This essay attempts to show how MacDonald's sermons can inform our reading of his fantasies.

Section three is shorter than the previous sections, containing just two essays. The first is Geoffrey Reiter's, "'Travelling Beastward': George MacDonald's Princess Books and Late Victorian Supernatural Degeneration Fiction," a study of MacDonald in the context of what Max Nordau termed "degeneration." Once again, we have MacDonald placed in the company of Gothic writers such as Bram Stoker and Arthur Machen. Reiter makes a connection between the impact of Darwin on Victorian literature and the late-century slide into the fin de siecle dark. The second essay in this section is Colin Manlove's response to the question of MacDonald's ties to the Inklings. He concludes that MacDonald "differs from Williams, Lewis and Tolkien much more than he is like them," and that the practice of linking him with the other three writers has more to do with arguing for MacDonald's importance than it does with MacDonald's real similarity with them.

Serving as something of a coda to all the essays is the single essay in the final section: John Pennington's "A 'Wolff' in Sheep's Clothing: The George MacDonald Industry and the Difficult Rehabilitation of a Reputation." Pennington reflects on the influence of C. S. Lewis's well-known commentary on MacDonald, and on recent treatment of MacDonald by Evangelical writers such as Kathryn Lindskoog and Michael Phillips. He takes a close look at how such writers appropriate MacDonald for their own purposes, and in the process turn the focus on MacDonald awry. Pennington's essay fittingly closes this volume because it argues for a full, disinterested treatment of MacDonald as a writer. And if the essays in this volume are any indication, then this is precisely what is happening. I know of two other collections of essays on MacDonald in publication as I write this Introduction. Clearly, MacDonald studies are as healthy as they have ever been, and what a reader will be left with from a reading of this volume is a more complete sense of MacDonald than we have yet had, as well as a clear sense of what remains to be done.

Without doubt, the MacDonald who works through these pages is a writer worth caring about and worth serious study not just for the myth that may be inherent in his writing, but for that writing itself. We need close rhetorical analyses of MacDonald's work, and not just the fantasies. We also need a fuller understanding of the various contexts in which MacDonald situated his writing.

Many of us tend to fix on Romanticism as the most important context for MacDonald, but a book such as *England's Antiphon* ought to remind us just how expansive MacDonald's knowledge is. Over and above the literary, however, we have the Protestant legacy stemming from at least the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists, through William Law to Frederick Denison Maurice. Then we have teasing allusions to the likes of Dante and Origen, and the even more silent echoing of Greek myth that Fernando Soto has begun to locate in MacDonald's work. This volume presents a beginning in these areas. My hope is that it stimulates further research on a great writer whose work continues to inspire both academic interest and personal faith.

Note: contributors to this volume wish to express appreciation to Stephen Prickett, The Armstrong Browning Library, and Baylor University for their generosity in organizing the Centenary celebration of George MacDonald's passing. Without the September 2005 conference at the Armstrong Browning Library, this volume would not exist.

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Part 1: Precursors and Sources

Chapter 1:

“Perhaps He Will Need To Love Scotland Too”
The Importance of MacDonald’s Scottish Sources

David Robb

C. S. Lewis’s well-known essay on MacDonald, the Introduction to his 1946 collection of quotations, contains the judgement on MacDonald’s novels — “none is very good” — which still stands to this day (17). The quotation in my title sets one of Lewis’s three preconditions for getting anything out of them at all (the others are a love of holiness and a love of MacDonald), and the conjunction of these conditions would appear to be still sufficiently rare in the world of literary academia (even in Scotland) for the pleasures of the realistic novels continue to be largely ignored. Yet when any substantial discussion of MacDonald includes an element of biography, MacDonald’s Scottishness is always made much of, as if his peculiar northern roots and family background help explain the extraordinarily idiosyncratic writer he became. In such discussions, however, more emphasis tends to be given to his family history and to his psychological and religious inheritance than to his Scottish literary background, and when discussion of previous Scottish writers who may have influenced him does take place, it tends to be the obvious ones (Burns and Scott) who are gestured towards. In this chapter, I investigate this aspect of the influences on MacDonald a little more. It seems to me that to best understand MacDonald and what he wrote, we have to acknowledge a Scottish literary background alongside the other major sources of literary influence upon him although when one has contemplated the immense scope and wealth of the writing from German and English directions which filled his awareness, it is easy to feel that one has largely accounted for the nourishment which sanctioned and fed his distinctive creative originality.

I suggest, therefore, that elements of a distinctively Scottish kind helped make him the writer he became. In particular, his sense of fantasy and fairytale obviously began in Huntly in the 1820s and early 1830s long before he encountered much else in the way of great literature, and the oral folk-material he encountered there and then has to be regarded as his literary starting-point (the Bible apart). The

latter part of this chapter, therefore, is a reminder of the influence of such material on his mature writing. Scottish fairytales were not simply a juvenile starting-point for his literary and creative journey, but a conscious companion throughout its long route. The same can be said, also, for his awareness of Scotland's well-known writers, not merely those of the great generation that preceded him (in particular, Scott and Hogg) but also, in at least one unexpected instance, of Stevenson as well.

I want to begin, however, with a far less widely known and now unread volume, and to use it to consider the balance in MacDonald's adult awareness between the Scotland that he actually lived in during his first twenty years, and the Scotland he encountered in a variety of literary sources. How much did he get from life, and how much did he get from books? In *Sir Gibbie* (232-3), MacDonald (bringing to a close the novel's major episode of the flood) cites as his source *Sir Thomas Dick Lauder's Account of the Great Floods of August 1829 in the Province of Moray, and Adjoining Districts*, which was published in 1830. Indeed, at this point MacDonald has just incorporated several actual lines from Lauder's book, giving them to a farmer's housekeeper as her description in a letter of how she had discovered that the receding waters had deposited a pile of edible game and vegetables at the back of the house — one of the rare instances of the calamity offering sustenance rather than its more usual cataclysmic destruction (see Lauder 181-182).

Lauder's book describes in great and systematic detail the events and devastation visited upon a large part of the north-east of Scotland when terrific storms caused all the leading rivers, in particular the Spey, the Findhorn, the Don and the Dee, with all their subsidiary streams, to suddenly burst their banks and rise to an almost unheard-of extent. This occurred in August 1829, and while there was a comparatively small loss of life there was an immense amount of destruction in a region which had recently been making substantial economic strides thanks to the greatly improved infrastructure post-1745 and also to the developments in agricultural practices in the same period. Lauder (1784-1848) was a local landowner and a minor novelist and man-of-letters. This book on the great flood is his masterpiece, however, thanks to his painstaking research and his identification with the area and with its inhabitants. It might seem a wearisome prospect to read nearly four hundred pages of disaster and destruction. Lauder seems to describe the loss of every bridge, the fall of every cottage and the destruction inflicted upon every mansion house and estate throughout North-East Scotland. He recounts how abnormally high each body of water became on the 3-4 August 1829, and on page after page sketches the terrors experienced

by countless families and communities, both in the region's towns and villages, and in innumerable isolated spots. Deeds of heroism, miraculous escapes and the occasional tragedy are sprinkled throughout his account, as well as the various bizarre details which a freak of nature such as this produces. In fact, the book is surprisingly readable, thanks to the author's evident knowledge and love of the region, and to his combination of scientific and what we might call 'romantic' interest in the phenomena and spectacle of the episode.

It seems to have been one of those books that helped consolidate the Highlands of Scotland in the imaginations of people in the Victorian period. In it, the terror implicit in the acknowledged sublimity of these highland and northern districts was made manifest. The 'awfulness' of those high, wild, rocky regions had proved capable of inflicting an awesome degree of destruction, and the image of life-threatening, home-destroying storms and floods became part of what people associated with the Scottish Highlands. In Aberdeen Art Gallery, for example, there is a spectacular large painting by Sir Edwin Landseer (he of 'The Monarch of the Glen') entitled Flood in the Highlands and painted between the mid-1840s and 1860. It depicts a three-generation Highland family (and their sheep and goats, and dogs, and cats, and poultry) clinging to the thatched roof of an inn as agonised cattle and an ominously driverless horse and cart are swept past. Lauder's cumulative account, similarly awe-struck and detailed, is imaginatively memorable and transcends its lamentations to become a positive evocation of what was then a still fairly out-of-the-way and very distinctive part of Scotland.

Even so, the warmth and personal involvement of MacDonald's commendation is noticeable. In the *Sir Gibbie* footnote, he describes Lauder's Account as,

> an enchanting book, especially to one whose earliest memories are interwoven with water-floods. For details in such kind here given, I am much indebted to it. Again and again, as I have been writing, has it rendered me miserable — my tale showing so flat and poor beside Sir Thomas's narrative. Known to me from childhood, it wakes in me far more wonder and pleasure now, than it did even in the days when the marvel of things came more to the surface. (232-3)

The book clearly intertwined with and helped fix his own dim memories of the event — he would have been just over four and a half years old when the flood struck. MacDonald's description of events in the novel is vivid, but closely follows the spirit, and many of the letters, of Lauder's account. That earlier volume provided him with quite a few idiosyncratic details, including (189-90) the woman who managed to float on the floods on a 'brander' (a word normally reserved for a

gridiron but which was also used for a makeshift raft or for any lattice-like wooden structure) — a detail which MacDonald utilised to invest Mistress Croale with something of the aura of a witch. Mistress Croale, however, may also have derived something from Lauder's account elsewhere (151-2) of a "strange witch-looking woman" perilously isolated on a tiny piece of solid ground.

Nor was *Sir Gibbie* the only novel of MacDonald's to make use of Lauder's volume. The other great flood MacDonald unleashed was in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, where we also find that he is writing his account with Lauder's book at hand, once more drawing from it details along with the general spirit of the event. In particular, the account of Alec's single-handed rescue of Annie Anderson from Tibbie's flooded cottage closely parallels one of Lauder's many heroic tales, as well as the latter's story of Isabella Morrison who, trapped in a cottage with her elderly aunt, failed to keep her alive as the waters rose about them and who deliriously thought that a drowned hen which kept floating into her was a detached head, a detail MacDonald uses to vivify his account of Annie's dire situation. Similarly, the account of the deaths of Malison the schoolmaster and the crippled lad Truffey when the town bridge is swept away can be related to several different incidents recounted by Lauder.

Others before me have noted MacDonald's fondness for fictional floods and the late William Raeper in particular, in his biography of the writer, noted a number of other novels of MacDonald's in which floods feature (394n.). Raeper concluded, surely correctly, that MacDonald was able to remember the 1829 event as seen through his own young eyes — the *Sir Gibbie* footnote suggests as much — and no doubt the memory would have remained with him under any circumstances. But it seems to me that we have enough evidence to suppose that Lauder's account played an immense part in the vividness with which the memory stuck, and in the importance that the image of a great flood retained for him. By MacDonald's own account Lauder's book was an important part of his childhood, and its narrative must have developed into a strong influence, perhaps even a dominating influence, in his memory of the event itself. It is clear that MacDonald, in adult life, leaned heavily on Lauder's work when he came to write his fictions. After all, what is MacDonald likely to have retained from his own unaided childhood observation? Perhaps a single image of vastly flooded fields, and nothing much more. It seems to me highly probable that his sense of the 1829 floods, in all likelihood, derived from literature rather than from his own memories.

Lauder's book seems to me particularly characteristic of its Scottish time and place and one which, moreover, helps underline how MacDonald was also

a product of his Scottish time and place. While the driving force of Lauder's account is simple and straightforward (but indefatigable) journalistic reportage, his narrative frequently takes the opportunity to recount many of the striking episodes of history and legend with which, for the native of the place, the landscape was steeped. Just as Tam o' Shanter does not simply ride home across an empty tract of country, but rather traverses a dark region throbbingly alive with the memories of deaths, disasters and murders, so Lauder's North-East is a network of recollected episodes of clan warfare and civil war, and of human interaction with fairies. Equally, however, Lauder's perspective includes the analytical and scientific. His explanations and descriptions of what has happened to the landscape are geologically informed, just as his explanation of the meteorological events which brought about the catastrophe in the first place would not disgrace a television weather presenter. The awareness that he brings to his task covers a spectrum running from the scientific, through a lively immediate response to the world of the senses, and on to a more imaginative and at times near-superstitious openness to legend and folk-lore. I doubt if this combination of characteristics can be claimed as exclusive to nineteenth-century Scots, but I do wonder if that particular spectrum — and its shortness, with the scientific responses to reality living cheek by jowl with the archaic, folkloristic and the imaginative in the mind of a writer like Lauder — was not particularly marked in this small country where a technological and rational future co-existed especially closely with a primitively heroic and legend-filled past for these early-nineteenth-century generations. It is a combination which is perhaps most especially exemplified by a prominent contemporary of both Lauder and MacDonald, namely Hugh Miller (1802 – 1856), immensely talented journalist, self-taught geologist and scientific communicator of something approaching genius, loving apologist for the landscape and people of the Highlands, and assiduous collector of legends and fairy-lore — this last encouraged by his own openness to belief in the supernatural. Whether or not the contradictions in Miller's ways of apprehending reality contributed to his eventual suicide is still not clear. MacDonald, fortunately, was a far less fiery and aggressive person than Miller, and in him the spectrum I'm considering here ran far less to extremes — but he retained his undergraduate interest in Chemistry in particular, and maintained (equally) a disposition to want to believe in ghosts even though he found that he lacked the Celtic faculty of the Second Sight.

Even with all these considerations, however, one wonders why MacDonald was so fond of this book, and equally why he was so fond of putting floods (and, perhaps, their near relatives, storms and blizzards) into his own works. Why did he relish this tale of disaster so much? He seems to have responded with positive

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