

BACKGROUND TO *PAUL FABER: SURGEON*

George MacDonald was writing this novel during the mid 1870's, an especially difficult period in his life. Their second daughter Mary, beautiful and vivacious, now in her mid 20's, was suffering from tuberculosis and steadily declining in health. Desperate to do all they could to save her, the family determined to take her to the Mediterranean area in the hope that such a change climate would stem the progress of the disease; however, raising the necessary money to do so was a forbidding challenge.

The family was finally able to put together enough to afford Louisa's taking Mary and some of the family to southern Italy while MacDonald and two of his other daughters remained at the Retreat, their home on the Thames in a suburb of London. Struggling with ill health himself, he was writing *Paul Faber: Surgeon*, a sequel to the recently published *Thomas Wingfold: Curate*, in the hopes that the selling of it would yield them sufficient funds so that he and the remainder of the family could make the trip as well.

MacDonald's strong motivating purpose in writing this novel was to address what he rightly perceived to be a rapidly rising attitude becoming prevalent in his own day, that of naturalistic materialism. The Victorian period was a tempestuous time for Christianity, as there arose three strong currents of thought that offered strong challenges to traditional faith. The first was Darwinian evolutionary theory, springing from Darwin's publishing in 1859 *The Origin of the Species*. The second was the steady rise of materialism and logical positivism, fed by the writings of the French writer Auguste Comte. The third was the rise from Germany of the so-called higher criticism, which sought to undermine the historical validity of the Biblical texts. MacDonald was much concerned with the first; it is interesting that he does not seem overly bothered by the second two.

The result of these rising attitudes is that many were foreseeing the demise of Christianity. In his famous poem, published in 1867, Matthew Arnold, standing on the beach at Dover and watching the ebbing tide, wrote:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating to the breath

Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

MacDonald is intent on addressing this social phenomenon by showing the utter superiority of true Christian thought and the necessity for rightly understanding it as the sole force for the development of people's true humanity. As regarding the currents of materialism and positivism, the text of our novel offers air-tight arguments as to the utter superiority of Christian experience, as opposed to rational assent to abstract speculations based on scientific explorations.

As to evolutionary theory, MacDonald seems not to oppose it but rather to incorporate it in his thinking. As he contemplates spiritual birth and growth, he sees it developing in a manner not unlike biologists see it working on the physical level. There is an interesting passage in the beginning of Chapter XVIII *Paul Faber, Surgeon*:

It is not the world alone that requires the fulness of time to come, ere it can receive a revelation; the individual also has to pass through his various stages of Pagan, Guebre, Moslem, Jew, Essene—God know what all—before he can begin to see and understand the living Christ. The child [fetus] has to pass through all the phases of lower animal life; when change is arrested, he is born a monster; and in many a Christian the rudiments of former stages are far from extinct—not seldom revive, and for the time seem to reabsorb the development, making indeed a monstrous show.

“For myself”—I give a passage from Wingfold's notebook, written for his wife's reading—“I feel sometimes as if I were yet a pagan, struggling hard to break through where I see a glimmer of something better, called Christianity. In any case what I have, can be but a foretaste of what I have yet to *be*. . . .”

As on the physical level a fetus develops through various stages in the womb, so in the spiritual realm people grow from one stage to another. Or, sadly, if the opposite is true, they go “downhill to the animal's country,” a view that is suggested in the *Curdie* books. In MacDonald's thinking, all people are somewhere on this continuum of becoming.

As to the impact of higher criticism, MacDonald to my knowledge does not directly refer to it, but one can surmise that it did not bother him that much, as the emphasis in his apologetic is on the inner experience of the presence of Christ in

the believer's mind and heart, a presence that is received by a personal encounter and developed by earnest obedience to Christ's teachings, rather than a rational assent to abstract theological principles arising from Scripture, chiefly from the writings of Paul.

When his friend William Cowper-Temple read *Paul Faber: Surgeon*, he wrote MacDonald complementing him on his ability to draw believable characters ideal in virtue, MacDonald responded, stating his primary concern in all his novels:

Your letter says of my books just what I try to go upon—to make them true to the real and not the spoilt humanity. Why should I spend my labour on what one can have too much of without any labour? I will try to show what we might be, may be, must be, shall be—and something of the struggle to gain it.

Any novelist will say that it is so much easier to draw evil characters than good ones. MacDonald's ability to capture to nature of true virtue in realistically drawn characters is perhaps his chief achievement as a novelist.