

Sir Gibbie



George MacDonald

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Sir Gibbie



George MacDonald

A New Edition Updated and Introduced by Michael
Phillips for *The Cullen Collection* of the Fiction of
George MacDonald



Generations
PASSING ON THE FAITH

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-0-000000-00-0

Production Management: Joshua Schwisow

Cover Design and Typography: Justin Turley

Generations

19039 Plaza Dr. Ste. 210

Parker, Colorado 80134

www.generations.org

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Foreword

Among the millions of books produced in this world, there are to be found some very bad books (not worth reading), some good books (worth reading once), some very good books (worth reading ten times), and then, there are a few extraordinary books that put themselves in a league beyond all other human-produced literature. These are books written by a true master — one singularly gifted by God to communicate a message at an altogether different level than all the others. The reader picks up the book and reads a few pages, and almost immediately he discovers as Elizabeth Yates put it when she first read Sir Gibbie: “This is not only a book. It is an experience.” And, “I could not put the book down until it was finished, and yet I could not bear to come to its end.”

C.S. Lewis came upon a copy of George MacDonald’s work at a book stall in a train station near London in October of 1916. Writing on this encounter, Lewis wrote, “A few hours later, I knew I had crossed a great frontier. . .” In an introduction to George MacDonald’s writings, Lewis professed, “I have never

concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master: indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honesty drives me to emphasize it.”

What some regard as the greatest Christian fictional author of our time would spare no adjectives to describe the genius of MacDonald. Lewis goes on to say: “Most myths were made in prehistoric times. . . but every now and then there appears in the modern world a genius. . . who can make such a story. MacDonald is the greatest genius of this kind I know. . . “

Standing in 19th century literary field of deists, apostates, skeptics, transcendentalists, agnostics, and atheists, MacDonald stands a genius still and a Christian, but he stands almost entirely alone. One would have a hard time finding a self-identified orthodox Christian writer of MacDonald’s gifts among the likes of Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jack London, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Emily Dickinson, and the rest. MacDonald’s relationship and competition with Mark Twain is well known, in that both set out to write a story of an orphan boy around the same time (although, Sir Gibbie actually came first). Both boys confronted an extreme hypocrisy and deeply encrusted, externalist-ridden faith. Huckleberry Finn reacted by turning to gross skepticism, and consigning himself to hell, but just the opposite occurred with Sir Gibbie. George MacDonald’s popularity faded, but Mark Twain’s only advanced for another century in that post-Christian era.

Without question George MacDonald writes with a theological agenda in mind. He sets out to correct a lifeless Christianity, a works-less faith, and a person-less Christ. He reacts to a very bad show of religion, and savagely rips and shreds a hideous caricature of the true faith, which no doubt was very much a reality in his day as well as our own. He reacted strongly to a

“corrupted Calvinism” and a “theology” that turned into a head religion sans heart and life. While the evangelical Christian must still be aware of certain esoteric or eccentric views maintained in some of MacDonald’s writings, none would place him in the realm of unorthodoxy (at least as measured by the historic creeds of the church). The reader, child or parent either way, is encouraged to carefully consider his views here or elsewhere presented according to the rule of Scripture.

The faith of Sir Gibbie is a simple faith — core faith. Jesus died for our sins. He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. All sins, drunkenness and greed included, are fit for the fire. More emphasis is placed on following Christ than rendering mere verbal assent to certain teachings about Him. The New Testament is preferred over the Old Testament, but Mistress Croal is recommended to Psalm 107, for obvious reasons. Christ is presented more as a living Person than a dead letter. And, a faith without true repentance and Christ life, is reprobated by the author. Such teachings may serve as a tonic to those who have limited the faith to the memorization of a few doctrines and mere assent to a theological system of thought. While it is impossible to escape a set of propositions and emphases about God, sin, salvation, etc., the bigger problem for many Christians is their failure to love a Person, believe in a Person, and internalize the core faith at a heart level.

MacDonald conveys in the most poignant and powerful way how God abases the proud and exalts the humble. We discover how the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the righteous, and how the meek inherits the earth. Hardly any human story has ever portrayed so well how one loves his enemies, and how barriers in human relationship due to sin can be obliterated by the power and vitality of God’s love. The author’s goal is to incarnate the truths of Scripture for better understanding and application to life, in the form of illustration and story. This is well accomplished by *Sir Gibbie*. One cannot read a book like

this without being profoundly impacted by it.

For this edition some of the more intense language has been softened, especially relating to the violent actions and language used by the malevolent characters in the story. This publisher would still exhort parents to review the material before sharing it with their children.

Kevin Swanson, Publisher, February, 2023.

Introduction

I first heard the name George MacDonald shortly after I had read and fallen in love with *The Chronicles of Narnia*. C.S. Lewis had become my favorite author, and when someone told me that MacDonald was Lewis's favorite author—I could hardly believe it!

“Who is George MacDonald?” I wondered.

I soon learned that he was a famous Scottish author during the nineteenth century, living from 1824 to 1905. MacDonald wrote over fifty books—yet I had never heard of him! How could that be? Even more astonishing, I learned that Lewis talks about him over and over in his books, and even called George MacDonald his master when he wrote: “I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him...Honesty drives me to emphasise it.”

I immediately went to our local library and found three books by George MacDonald. The first was called *The Princess and the Goblin*. It was a fairy tale, and reminded me of Narnia. The

second was *At the Back of the North Wind*—part fairy tale, part real. But it was the third book I found that day that changed me forever. It was no fairy tale at all, but the story of a boy who lived in the mountains of Scotland a century ago. The title of that book was *Sir Gibbie*.

The boy called Gibbie grabbed my imagination and my heart just as strongly as had all the Narnian boys and girls and animals and places. But the interesting thing about Gibbie was that he lived in no fairy tale world, but in a real place. So while I found myself falling in love with the story about Gibbie, I also found myself falling in love with the mountainous region of Scotland, that part of north-central Scotland called “the Highlands.” Though it was a real country you could actually locate on a map, I found my imagination being drawn to Gibbie’s homeland just as much as it had to the land of Narnia.

By then I wanted to read more books by George MacDonald. I began a search to find what I could, though it was difficult and took a long time. In the end, though I still loved *Narnia*, I discovered that I had a new favorite author!

I also discovered why most people I knew had never heard of MacDonald. After his death in 1905, George MacDonald’s writings fell off dramatically in sales and popularity. This was due to several factors. Most importantly, the increasingly secular age clashed with the powerful spiritual themes of MacDonald’s writings. Also, the fact that many of his novels were written in heavy Scots dialect made them virtually unreadable to modern readers outside Scotland. Changing literary tastes, the pace of MacDonald’s novels, and his long sentences, also took their toll on his popularity and made his books difficult reading for the fast-paced new century. Bluntly put, MacDonald’s novels quickly became “yesterday’s news.”

MacDonald was not completely forgotten, however, and not only by C.S. Lewis. G.K. Chesterton said *The Princess and the Goblin* was “a book that has made a difference to my whole existence”

and spoke of MacDonald's significance as "a Scot of genius who could write fairy tales that made all experience a fairy tale." But this was the great secular century, at just past the halfway point of which came the announcement: God is dead. By 1950 the name George MacDonald was also all but unknown.

Sir Gibbie was not the only novel by George MacDonald my wife and I discovered. There were dozens of them. One of my other favorites was *Malcolm*, as well as the sequel to *Sir Gibbie*, entitled *Donal Grant*. But all three of these great stories were long and filled with confusing Scottish dialect. Donal Grant, in fact, was George MacDonald's longest book—786 pages!

To give you an idea of what reading these books was like, the original of *Sir Gibbie* had some very odd-looking passages, such as:

"My certie! but ye're no blate to craw sae lood i' my hoose, an' that's a nearer fit nor perris! . . . Alloo me to tell ye, sir, ye're the first 'at ever daured threep my hoose was no a dacent ane . . . An' what's my chop but my hoose? Haith! my hoose wad be o' fell sma' consideration wantin' the chop."

and:

"Ye dinna ken her sae well as I dee, sir . . . She wad caw her horns intil a man-o-war 'at angert her. An' up yon'er ye cudna get a whack at her, for hurtin' ane 'a didna deserve 't. I s' dee her no mischeef, I s' warran."

and:

"Ken 'im? I wad ken 'im gien he had grown a gran'father. Ken 'im, quo' she! Wha ever kenned 'im as I did, bairn 'at he was, an' wadna ken 'im gien he war deid an' an angel made o' 'im!—But well I wat, it's little differ that wad mak!"

There were hundreds of pages of such dialect. They were hard books to read!

Yet hidden beneath the dialect was pure gold. The stories and the characters and the spiritual themes woven by MacDonald through *Sir Gibbie* and *Donal Grant* and *Malcolm* and his other novels were like no books I had ever read. They radiated with the light of God's truth!

I loved them so much I wanted to share them with everyone. But at the time not a single one of MacDonald's long novels were in print. And even if they had been, I doubted any of my friends would have been interested in a 786 page book full of dialect they couldn't understand!

So what I decided to do was publish new editions of MacDonald's books which would hopefully find a new audience. I wanted to make the name "George MacDonald" widely known again. For my new editions, I cut down the books in length and translated most of the Scottish dialect into recognizable English that readers in today's world could understand. (Though I kept enough of the dialect so that the flavor of Scotland's homeland still came through!) *Malcolm* and *Sir Gibbie* and *Donal Grant* were three of the first new editions I published.

That was back in the 1980s. Since then I have published new editions of all MacDonald's novels, and people around the world have been enjoying MacDonald's storytelling genius ever since. I hope you enjoy this new special edition of Gibbie's story! If you do, find some of George MacDonald's other books to read in *The Cullen Collection*. You may discover, as we all have in my family, that George MacDonald is becoming one of your good friends through his books.

Michael Phillips
Folsom, California
United States, 2023

The City's Urchin

“Come out o’ the gutter, ye nickum!” cried a woman in a harsh, half-masculine voice, standing on the curbstone of a short, narrow, dirty lane at right angles to an important thoroughfare.

About thirty yards from her, a child, apparently about six but in reality about eight, was down on his knees raking with both hands in the grey dirt of the street.

The woman was dressed in dark petticoat and print wrapper. One of her shoes was down at the heel revealing a great hole in her stocking. Had her black hair been brushed, it would have revealed a thready glitter of grey, but all that was now visible of it was only two or three untidy tresses that dropped from under a cap of black net and green ribbons, which looked as if she had slept in it. Her face must have been handsome when it was young, but now looked weathered and aging. Her black eyes looked resolute, almost fierce.

At her cry the boy lifted his head, ceased his search, raised himself without getting up and looked at her. They were notable eyes out of which he looked—a deep blue and having long lashes,

but more notable for their bewitching expression of confidence. Whatever was at the heart of the expression, it was something that enticed question and might want investigation. The face as well as the eyes was lovely—not very clean but chiefly remarkable from a general effect of something I can only call luminosity. The hair, which stuck out from his head in every direction, would have been of the red-gold kind had it not been sunburned into a sort of human hay. An odd creature altogether the child appeared, as from his bare knees on the curbstone he shook the gutter-drops from his dirty little hands and gazed at the woman of rebuke. It was but for a moment. The next, he was down raking in the gutter again.

The woman took a step forward. But the sound of a sharp, imperative little bell made her turn at once and re-enter the shop from which she had just come, following a man inside who had set the bell ringing. Above the door was a small board upon which was painted in lead-colour on black the words, “Licensed to sell beer, spirits, and tobacco to be drunk on the premises.” There was no other sign. “Them ’at likes my whusky will not be askin’ my name,” said Mistress Croale. As the day went on she would have more and more customers, and in the evening on to midnight, her parlour would be well filled. Then she would be always at hand. Now, however, the bell was needed to recall her from house affairs.

Meantime the boy’s attention seemed entirely absorbed in the gutter. Whatever passed him by, he never lifted his head but went creeping slowly on his knees along the curb still searching in the flow of the sluggish, nearly motionless current of black muck.

It was a gloomy morning toward the close of autumn. The days began and ended with a fog, but often between, a golden sunshine glorified the streets of the grey city. At this moment a ray of sunlight from between the gables of two tall houses fell upon the pavement and gutter, revealing to the boy the glistening

object of his search.

Suddenly the boy made a dart upon all fours, and pounced like a creature of prey upon something in the gutter. He had found what he had been looking for so long. He sprang to his feet and bounded with it into the sun, rubbing it as he ran upon what he had for trousers, of which there was nothing below the knees but a few streamers, and nothing above the knees but the body of the garment, which had been—I will not say made for, but last worn by a boy three times his size. His feet were bare as well as his knees and legs. But though they were dirty, red, and rough, they were nicely shaped little legs, and the feet were dainty.

He held up his find and regarded it admiringly. It was a little earring of amethyst-coloured glass, and in the sun looked lovely. The boy was in an ecstasy over it. He rubbed it on his sleeve, sucked it to clear the last of the gutter from it, and held it up once more in the sun, where, for a few blissful moments, he contemplated it speechless. He then caused it to disappear somewhere about his garments—I will not venture to say in a pocket—and ran off, his little bare feet sounding thud, thud, thud on the pavement, and the collar of his jacket sticking halfway up the back of his head. Through street after street he sped—all built of granite, all with flagged footways, and all paved with granite blocks—a hard, severe city, not beautiful or stately with its thick, grey, sparkling walls, for the houses were not high, and the windows were small, yet in the better parts, nevertheless, handsome as well as massive and strong.

To the boy the great city was but a house of many rooms, all for his use, his sport, his life. He did not know much of what lay within the houses. But that only added the joy of mystery. They were jewel-closets, treasure-caves indeed, with secret fountains of life. And every street was a channel into which they overflowed.

It was in one of a third-rate sort that the urchin at length ceased his trot and drew up at the divided door of a baker's shop,

opening in the middle by a latch of bright brass. But the child did not lift the latch—only raised himself on tiptoe by the help of its handle to look through the upper half of the door into the tantalizing shop. The smell that came through it seemed to the child as that of the Paradise of which he had never heard—scones and rolls, biscuits hard and soft, and those brown discs of delicate piecrust known as buns. But most enticing of all to the eyes of the little wanderer of the street were the penny loaves, hot smoking from the oven. The main point which made them more attractive than all the rest to him was that sometimes he did have a penny, and a penny loaf was the largest thing that could be had for a penny in the shop. So, lawless as he looked, the desires of the child were moderate, and his imagination within the bounds of reason.

Behind the counter sat the baker's wife, a stout, fresh-coloured woman, simple and honest. She was knitting and dozing over her work, and never saw the forehead and eyes which gazed at her over the horizon of the door. There was no greed in those eyes—only much interest. He did not want to get in, had to wait, and while waiting enjoyed the scene before him. He knew that Mysie, the baker's daughter, was at school and would be home within half an hour. He had seen her with tear-filled eyes as she went, and learned from her the cause, and had in consequence unwittingly roused Mrs. Croale's anger. But though he was waiting for Mysie, such was the absorbing power of the spectacle before him that he never heard her approaching footsteps.

"Let me in," said Mysie with a touch of indignation at being impeded on the very threshold of her father's shop.

The boy started and turned, but instead of moving out of the way, began searching in some mysterious receptacle hid in the recesses of his rags. A look of anxiety once appeared but the same moment vanished, and he held out in his hand the little crop of amethystine splendour. Mysie's face changed, and she clutched it eagerly.

“That’s real guid of ye, wee Gibbie!” she cried. “Whaur did ye find it?”

He pointed to the gutter, and drew back from the door.

“I thank ye,” she said heartily and, pressing down the thumbstall of the latch, went in.

“Who’s that ye’re talkin’ wi’, Mysie?” asked her mother.

“It’s only wee Gibbie, mother,” answered the girl.

“What do ye hae to say to him?” resumed the mother. “He’s no fit company for the likes of you that has a father an’ mother. Ye must hae little to say to such a runabout laddie.”

“Gibbie has a father, though they say he never had nae mother,” answered the child.

“A fine father!” rejoined the mother with a small scornful laugh. “Such a father, lassie, as is as guid as sayin’ he had none! What did ye say to him?”

“I thanked him, cause I lost my earring gaein’ to school this morning and he found it for me. He was waiting for me by the door. They say he’s always finding things.”

“He’s a good-hearted creature!” returned the mother, “—for one, that is, that’s been so ill brought up.”

She rose, took from the shelf a penny loaf, and went to the door.

“Here, Gibbie!” she cried as she opened it. “Here’s a fine piece for ye.”

But no Gibbie was there. Up and down the street not a child was to be seen. The baker’s wife drew back, shut the door, and resumed her knitting.

Turnip and Dulse

Though the sun remained hot for an hour or two in the middle of the day, in the shadows dwelt the cold breath of coming winter. To Gibbie, however, barelegged, barefooted, almost bare-bodied as he was, sun or shadow made small difference except as one of the musical intervals of the life that make the melody of existence. Hardy through hardship, he knew nothing better than a constant good-humoured sparring with nature and circumstances for the privilege of being, enjoyed what came to him thoroughly, never mourned over what he had not and, like the animals, was at peace.

To him the city was all a show. He knew many of the people—some of them who thought no small things of themselves—better than they would have chosen he or anyone else should know them. He knew all the vendors, most of the bakers, most of the small grocers and tradespeople. Animal as he was, he was laying in a great stock for the time when he would be something more, for the time of reflection, whenever that might come.

Chiefly, his experience was a wonderful provision for the future perception of character, for he knew how any one of his many acquaintances would behave to him in circumstances within the scope of that experience.

When Gibbie was not looking in at a shop window or turning on one heel to take in all at a sweep, he was oftenest seen trotting. Seldom he walked. A gentle trot was one of his natural modes of being. And though this day he had been on the trot all the sunshine through, nevertheless, when the sun was going down there was wee Gibbie upon the trot in the chilling and darkening streets.

He had not had much to eat. He had been very near having a penny loaf. Half a cookie, which a stormy child had thrown away to ease his temper, had done further and perhaps better service in easing Gibbie's hunger. The green-grocer woman at the entrance of the court where his father lived, a good way down the same street in which he had found the lost earring, had given him a small yellow turnip—to Gibbie nearly as welcome as an apple. A fishwife from Finstone with a creel on her back, had given him all his hands could hold of the sea-weed called dulse, presumably not from its sweetness, although it is good eating. She had added to the gift a small crab, but that, because it was alive, he had carried to the seashore and set free. These, the half-cookie, the turnip, and the dulse, with the smell of the baker's bread, was all he had had. It had been one of his meager days.

But it is wonderful upon how little those rare natures capable of making the most of things will live and thrive. There is a great deal more to be gotten out of things than is generally gotten out of them, whether the thing be a chapter of the Bible or a yellow turnip. Truly Gibbie got no fat out of his food, but what he did receive was far better. What he carried was all muscle—small but hard and healthy, and knotting up like whipcord. There are all degrees of health in poverty as well as in riches, and Gibbie's health was splendid. His senses also were marvellously acute. I

have already hinted at his gift for finding things. His eyes were sharp, quick, and roving. His success, however, not all these considerations could well account for, and he was regarded as born with a special luck in finding.

While Gibbie thus lived in the streets like a town sparrow, the human father of him would all the day be sitting in a certain dark court, as hard at work as an aching head and bloodless system would afford. The said court was off the narrowest part of a long, poverty-stricken street called the Widdiehill. In the court, against a wing of an old house, around which yet clung a musty fame of departed grandeur, rose an outside stair leading to the first floor. Under this stairway was a rickety wooden shed. In the shed sat the father of Gibbie, cobbling boots and shoes as long as, at this time of the year, the light lasted. Up that stair, and two more flights inside the house, he went to his lodging, for he slept in the garret. But when or how he got to bed, George Galbraith never knew, for by then, invariably, he was drunk. In the morning, however, he always found himself in it—generally with an aching head and always with a mingled disgust at and desire for drink. During the day, alas! the disgust departed while the desire remained, strengthening with the approach of evening. All day he worked with might and main, such might and main as he had—worked as if for his life, and all to procure the means of death.

He was a man of such inborn honesty, that the usurping demon of a vile thirst had not even yet, at the age of forty, been able to cast it out. The last little glory-cloud of his origin was trailing behind him—but yet it trailed. Doubtless it needs but time to make of a drunkard a thief, but not yet, even when longing was at the highest, would he have stolen a forgotten glass of whisky. In spite of sickness and aches innumerable, George laboured daily that he might have wherewith to make himself drunk honestly. Strange honesty!

Wee Gibbie was his only child, but about him or his well-

being he gave himself almost as little trouble as Gibbie caused him. Not that he was hard-hearted. If he had seen the child in want, he would, at the drunkest, have shared his whisky with him. If he had fancied him cold, he would have put his last garment upon him. But to his whisky-dimmed eyes the child scarcely seemed to want anything, and the thought never entered his mind that, while Gibbie always looked smiling and contented, his father did so little to make him so. He did not do well for himself, and he shamefully neglected his child. But he did well by his neighbours. He gave the best of work and made the lowest of charges.

His friends addressed Galbraith as “Sir George,” and he accepted the title with a certain unassumed dignity. For if it was not universally known in the city, it was known to the best lawyers in it that he was a baronet by direct derivation from the hand of King James the Sixth. The bearer of the title, however, had seen better days.

George had had a good mother, and his father was a man of some character who had given his son more than a fair education, not without some distinction. But beyond this his father had entirely neglected his future, not even revealing to him the fact—of which, indeed, he was himself but dimly aware—that from wilful oversight on his part and design on that of others, his property had all but entirely slipped from his possession.

While his father was yet alive, George married the daughter of a small laird in a neighbouring county. He took her home to the ancient family house in the city—the same in which he now occupied a garret and under whose outer stair he now cobbled shoes. During his father’s life they lived there in peace and tolerable comfort, though in a poor enough way. His wife died, however, soon after Gibbie was born, and then George began to lose himself altogether. The next year his father died, and creditors appeared who claimed everything. Mortgaged land and houses were sold, and George was left without a penny or

any means of livelihood. For heavy work he was altogether unfit, and had it not been for a bottle companion—a merry, hard-drinking shoemaker—he would have died of starvation or sunk into beggary.

The man taught him his trade, and George was glad enough to work at it, both to deaden the stings of conscience and memory and to procure the means of deadening them still further.

How Gibbie had got thus far alive was a puzzle not a creature could have solved. It must have been by charity and ministration of more than one humble woman, but no one now claimed any particular interest in him—except Mrs. Croale, and hers was not very tender. It was a sad sight to some eyes to see him roving the streets, but an infinitely sadder sight was his father—he looked the pale picture of misery. When the poor fellow sat with his drinking companions in Mistress Croale's parlour, seldom a flash broke from the reverie in which he seemed sunk. For even the damned must at times become aware of what they are, and then surely a terrible though momentary hush must fall upon the forsaken region. Yet those drinking companions would have missed George Galbraith, silent as he was. For he was courteous, always ready to share what he had, and never looked beyond the present tumbler—altogether a genial, kindly, honest nature.