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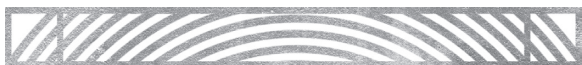
Taken from *Diary of an Old Soul* by George MacDonald.

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INTRODUCTION

Timothy Larsen



HAVING LONG and eagerly planned for the moment, you are now meandering pleasantly through a forest in an area of the country famed for its natural beauty. The leaves on the trees—each according to their own kind—fill you with a sense of well-being; you ponder contentedly what species of bird must be making that slightly comic sound. Your chosen path is the rocky bed of a stream that has temporarily gone dry. With each step you sweep past scores of stones—all of them ordinary, uninteresting, unworthy of your time. Then a particular one catches your eye. It is obviously made of the same materials as innumerable others behind and before you; it is not a gemstone nor marbled with precious metal. Yet there is something about its shape, or its color, or the pattern that it displays—or, in truth, some combination thereof—that pleases you. The very act of attending to it deepens your admiration for it. You will bring it home and put it on your dresser as a simple but beguiling memento of your trip. Many years later it will still

delight you to pick it up and examine its features. After a good dinner in which some anecdote about your trip unexpectedly entered into the conversation, you will go and retrieve it and share its charms with your friends.

I once went to hear the poet Christian Wiman speak at a simple question-and-answer session on the campus of Wheaton College, where I work. It was mesmerizing. As the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Wiman had been reading improbably large stacks of poems in season and out of season for years on end. One of the things from the event that has always stayed with me is Wiman's remarks about the "rareness" of poetry. It is a mistake to assume that we should find every poem we read deeply meaningful and that—if we do not—the fault must be either with the poem and its author or with ourselves as readers. Instead, we should not fret about the poems with which we do not feel a leap of connection, but rather rejoice over the rare and precious ones that somehow catch our eye. It is also true, however, that many more stones and poems would evoke wonder and delight in us if we only gave them the gift of our full, unhurried attention.

Some of the poems in George MacDonald's *A Book of Strife in the Form of the Diary of an Old Soul* (1880) immediately spoke to me: I have found a special stone and I want to share it with others so that they will take the time to see it truly, and so also delight in it.¹ There are, however, some

¹For scholarly treatments of *The Diary of an Old Soul*, see J. Patrick Pazdziora, "The Path of Pain: George MacDonald's Portrayal of Death in *The Diary of an Old Soul*," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* 36 (2017): 96-117; Stephen Prickett, "George MacDonald and the Poetics of Realism," in *The*

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poems in this collection that I look at only to step over them without feeling any great urge to break my stride. This is not a failure. It is the rarity of poetry—it makes my finds true finds. Still, some poems in *The Diary of an Old Soul* that I once stepped over I have come to delight in when I have revisited them. All of them are certainly more likely to speak to us if we give them the gift of our attention. Poetry is designed to slow us down. In the way that I believe George MacDonald intended us to do, I have read these poems as part of my daily devotions. And my standard practice has been to read each one twice over. Entering a poem is like entering another world; it takes time for our eyes to adjust to the light.



These are devotional poems, and devotional exercises are also intended to slow us down. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Victorian Christians across the denominations widely believed that the best way to pursue a life of faith included daily devotions. It was surprisingly common for people from all walks of life, from full-time caregivers to business tycoons, from nurses and teachers to coal miners and factory workers, to engage in devotional exercises four times a day—alone in the morning and evening, and then again in both the morning and the evening as part of family or household devotions. As I

Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age, ed. Kath Filmer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 82-89.

began to study the spiritual lives of the Victorians, I was humbled by just how unremarkable and typical this pattern was to them.² Given such widespread spiritual habits, there also developed a desire for books that would help structure and enrich them. One enormously popular volume was John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827).³ He, too, wrote a poem for every entry. Keble, however, was a founder of the Tractarian or Oxford Movement, a High-Church impulse in the Church of England that would give rise to Anglo-Catholicism. His volume therefore followed the liturgical calendar, beginning with the first Sunday of Advent, and giving an entry for every Sunday thereafter until the annual cycle came back to where it started, as well as additional entries for saints' days and other holy days. In other words, it was not a daily devotional but a weekly one with some special, sacred days added in.

One of the greatest poets of nineteenth-century England, Christina Rossetti, was also a devout Christian who was deeply committed to the Oxford Movement. She wrote *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885).⁴ Many of its entries were in prose, although some were poems. It was a true daily devotional, following the calendar year. Still, its

²I show examples of this in my book: Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³John Keble, *The Christian Year: Thoughts in Verse for the Sundays and Holydays Throughout the Year* (London: Methuen and Co., 1845 [originally 1827]). For an analysis of this work, see G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁴Christina G. Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (London: SPCK, 1897 [originally 1885]). For a spiritual life of Rossetti, see Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

contents were also thoroughly tied to the liturgical year. The first entry, January 1, is announced to be a mediation for “The Feast of the Circumcision,” and the last one, December 31, is for the “Feast of St. Silvester.” Moreover, Rossetti was so determined to cover the entire church year that she also included an appendix with entries for “certain movable Holy Days,” beginning with Advent Sunday and ending with “Trinitytide: Ember Saturday.”

George MacDonald (1824–1905), however, was raised as a staunch, Low-Church Protestant in Scotland and had trained for the ministry in a Congregational college, a tradition that prided itself on being the heirs of the Puritans and the Separatists.⁵ In *The Diary of an Old Soul*, therefore, with the sole exception of Christmas Day, MacDonald ignores the liturgical calendar—and he even apologizes for that solitary departure from the general plan: *Thou hast not made, or taught me, Lord, to care / For times and seasons* (December 25).

In that poem, MacDonald is referring to *liturgical* times and seasons, but neither is *The Diary of an Old Soul* organized around nature’s times and seasons. Occasionally, one will glimpse a remark in which there is a mention of weather that seems apt for the time of year, but this is not a book for attending closely to nature’s annual rhythms. One must look elsewhere for a volume to use as a companion as one tracks the course of summer and winter and

⁵For MacDonald’s life, see the biography written by his son: Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, with an introduction by G. K. Chesterton (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924). For a scholarly biography, see William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, England: Lion Publishing, 1987).

springtime and harvest.⁶ Nor is *The Diary of an Old Soul* a record of the outward circumstances of life that MacDonald faced during 1879, the year in which he wrote it. Life's concrete happenings also occasionally can be glimpsed in these poems—his daughter's engagement, the need to give up their family home, and so on—but the vast majority of these poems do not latch on to events in MacDonald's exterior life in that way. These entries are not about the kind of events that many people would be inclined to record in an ordinary daily diary.

A resolutely Protestant alternative to a devotional book organized around the liturgical year is one organized around reading Scripture. The Baptist minister Charles Haddon Spurgeon was the most celebrated preacher of the Victorian age. His Metropolitan Tabernacle in London was the home of the largest congregation in the world.⁷ Spurgeon's sermons and other writings were avidly read by numerous people in places all around the globe from Russia to Australia and beyond. Spurgeon sought to help meet the need for aids to devotion by writing various works, including *Morning by Morning: Or, Daily Readings for the Family or the Closet* (1865) and *Evening by Evening: Or,*

⁶An example would be Francis H. Allen, *Nature's Diary* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1897). For each day of the year it has a suitable, seasonal quotation from an author such as Thoreau, Emerson, or Hawthorne. As MacDonald also did for the original edition of *The Diary of an Old Soul*, beside these daily entries there is also an accompanying blank page so that readers can add their own observations and reflections.

⁷For Spurgeon and his ministry, see Thomas Breimaier, *Tethered to the Cross: The Life and Preaching of C. H. Spurgeon* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

Readings at Eventide for the Family or Closet (1868).⁸ The word *closet* is a reference to individual, private devotions drawn from the language of the King James Version of the Bible: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret” (Matthew 6:6).

A structure based around biblical passages, however, was not the way that MacDonald chose for his daily devotional either. For sure, the poems in *The Diary of an Old Soul* are replete with allusions to biblical texts—some of them even have direct quotations complete with quotation marks. (I have not made annotations identifying these scriptural connections in the text of this edition unless it seemed that not grasping the allusion would make what was being said incomprehensible to the reader.) Still, MacDonald did *not* choose to organize his devotional as reflections on scriptural passages. The reason for this, I think, is that MacDonald assumed that one’s daily devotions would include *more* Bible than such a practice would provide. Spurgeon’s entries for *Morning by Morning* and *Evening by Evening* are all based on texts of Scripture that are at most a sentence in length. The entry for the evening of May 18, for instance, has a text that is just one word: “Afterward”—Hebrews 12:11. MacDonald assumed (and Spurgeon at least hoped) that as part of their daily devotions people would be systematically reading through the Bible at the rate of, at

⁸C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning by Morning: Or, Daily Readings for the Family or the Closet* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1865); C. H. Spurgeon, *Evening by Evening: Or, Readings at Eventide for the Family or Closet* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1868).

minimum, a whole chapter at each sitting. The poems in *The Diary of an Old Soul* are therefore intended as an *additional* spiritual reflection—often in the form of a prayer—rather than as a substitute for daily Bible reading.



George MacDonald deeply admired the writings of the great medieval Christian poet Dante Alighieri. He prophesied that Dante’s “books will last as long as there are enough men in the world worthy of having them.”⁹ I fear that when I first acquired the three paperback volumes in the Penguin Classics edition of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (translated by Dorothy L. Sayers), I was not a person worthy of having them. I did not exactly step over them as uninteresting stones along my path. Still, as assigned reading in a required general education literature course as an undergraduate student, I experienced them more as a chore to complete than as a rare find to rejoice over. Years later, however, I felt a yearning to read them again—this time in an unforced and unhurried way for pleasure, instruction, and edification, rather than as an imposition with a looming deadline. On this second reading, I discovered an exquisite stone with the most elaborate and pleasing pattern—indeed, many of them. Joy!

⁹George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind* (London: J. M. Dent, 1959 [originally 1871]), 94. MacDonald is most famous for his fairy tales and works of fantasy such as this one. To explore that part of his writings more, see Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker* (Nashville: StarSong, 1993); Daniel Gabelman, *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity* (Baylor: Baylor University Press, 2013); Michael Partridge and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson, eds., *Informing the Inklings: George MacDonald and the Victorian Roots of Modern Fantasy* (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2018).

Something mystical also happened. *The Inferno* begins:

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.¹⁰

Dante is evoking the psalmist's observation that an average human life span is around seventy years. ("The days of our years are threescore and ten," Psalm 90:10.)¹¹ By "midway this way of life," in a poetic manner Dante is telling us how old he was when this adventure he is about to narrate happened. As Dorothy Sayers puts it, "at the age of 35, the middle point of man's earthly pilgrimage of three-score and ten years."¹² Here was the mystical moment that caused me to feel vibrations from the realm of the spirit: I suddenly realized that, after having ignored Dante for fifteen years, I had serendipitously found my way back to him when I was thirty-five years old. Some deep, mysterious current of grace knew that midway through my life it was time for me to examine the trajectory it was on and to ponder whether it was the right road to take into eternity.

George MacDonald has often been called a mystic.¹³ And, strangely, with this book of his I have had a second such mystical moment. I read *The Diary of an Old Soul* once

¹⁰Dante, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1949), 71.

¹¹I am usually quoting from the King James Version because that is the translation of the Bible that George MacDonald used. Indeed, he often incorporated its distinctive phrases into his own writings.

¹²Dante, *Hell*, 76.

¹³This claim is even included in the title of a book: Dean Hardy, *Waking the Dead: George MacDonald as Philosopher, Mystic, and Apologist* (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2020).

years ago—and enjoyed it. I had even picked up and stored away a few poems, or lines from them, like prized stones, forever mine to cherish and to share. Therefore, when Jon Boyd, an editor at InterVarsity Press, approached me about doing an annotated edition of the book, I eagerly agreed. As I began to think about *The Diary of an Old Soul* in a more scholarly way, however, it eventually occurred to me that I needed to know how old MacDonald had been when he wrote it. The answer turned out to be fifty-five—the exact same age that I am now that *The Diary of an Old Soul* has come back to me. Indeed, I have been fifty-five years old the whole time I have been rereading it, preparing these annotations, and writing this introduction. In my fifty-fifth year, quite serendipitously, I have found myself accompanying George MacDonald through his fifty-fifth year.

Which leads on to the secondary and more commonly used title that MacDonald gave to this book, *The Diary of an Old Soul*. MacDonald was, of course, playfully evoking a double meaning. An “old soul” is a phrase for someone who is wise beyond their years. MacDonald, however, is also using it literally to express the fact that he is—or at least feels—old. I am with MacDonald on this one. My mother-in-law and father-in-law are both active, independent, and able to take care of themselves (and each other), despite being in their nineties. So I know what people mean when they hear someone in his fifties complain that he is old, and they confidently retort, “You’re not old!” Yet, at the age of fifty-five, I have felt old in a substantially different way than I did just a few years ago. Perhaps if I wait patiently for the

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Lord, my youth will be renewed like the eagle's (Psalm 103:5): "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Or, as MacDonald poetically puts it: *Slowly travelling, his way through centuries winning—/A child at length arrives at never ending birth* (July 10). In these poems, George MacDonald lets breathe both his sense of aged weariness and his full confidence in the renewing power that comes to those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Here is the entry for October 16:

Now I grow old, and the soft-gathered years
Have calmed, yea dulled the heart's swift
 fluttering beat;
But a quiet hope that keeps its household seat
Is better than recurrent glories fleet.
To know thee, Lord, is worth a many tears;
And when this mildew, age, has dried away,
My heart will beat again as young and strong and gay.

Like the biblical Psalms, one of the delights and strengths of these poems is the way that they give voice to the deflating emotions, feelings, experiences, and struggles that we all have sometimes. *I lay last night and knew not why I was sad* (December 6). One of the enduring strengths of this book is the way that MacDonald, generation after generation, continues to give voice to things that readers also feel.

Which leads on to MacDonald's main title, *A Book of Strife*. Again, MacDonald does not mean the battle of life in the exterior, concrete way that we often think of it—the struggle to

make a living, to get the roof repaired, to try to patch up a relationship with a prickly member of the extended family, to sort out some tiresome travel arrangements, and so on. The word *strife* appears eleven times in these poems, but it is meant to evoke a different kind of obstacle in the battle of life—destructive doubts, questions that perturb us, temptations, besetting sins. Already in the first month of the year, MacDonald is confessing: *Sometimes, hard-trying, it seems I cannot pray—/For doubt, and pain, and anger, and all strife* (January 14). By the end, this strife could sometimes combine with the tiredness of feeling his age. Here is the poem for December 1:

I am a little weary of my life—
Not thy life, blessed Father! Or the blood
Too slowly laves [washes] the coral shores of thought,
Or I am weary of weariness and strife.
Open my soul-gates to thy living flood;
I ask not larger heart-throbs, vigour-fraught,
I pray thy presence, with strong patience rife.

That poem is addressed to God, and many of the poems in *The Diary of an Old Soul* are also prayers. Perhaps, like Augustine's *Confessions*, the entire book is being spoken to the Almighty. Sometimes I found that I could not resist imagining titles for some of the poems that are readily identifiable as prayers: for instance, *The Tempted Sinner's Prayer* (May 11), or *A Prayer of Consecration* (September 25; October 14 also fits that title well). More whimsically, I have imagined the entry for May 24 as *The Introvert's Prayer*:

O God of man, my heart would worship all
My fellow men, the flashes from thy fire;

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Them in good sooth my lofty kindred call,
Born of the same one heart, the perfect sire;
Love of my kind alone can set me free;
Help me to welcome all that come to me,
Not close my doors and dream solitude liberty!

And one poem (November 15) I even have come to think of as *A Prayer for When We Feel We Cannot Pray*:

My poor clay-sparrow seems turned to a stone,
And from my heart will neither fly nor run.
I cannot feel as thou and I both would,
But, Father, I am willing—make me good.
What art thou father for, but to help thy son?
Look deep, yet deeper, in my heart, and there,
Beyond where I can feel, read thou the prayer.



I have tried to make clear what MacDonald is *not* doing in *The Diary of an Old Soul*: he is not following the liturgical calendar, nor the seasons of nature, nor a cycle of scriptural readings. I have one last category to add to that list. Though *The Diary of an Old Soul* is in many ways a collection of prayers, it is not a book of the standard petitionary prayers that people are often apt to bring before the Lord. MacDonald is *not* praying for bodily health (though he tells us sometimes that he is ill) nor financial provision (though we know that he is sometimes in need). He is not praying for some job prospect to come through or some important event to go well.

Instead, MacDonald's prayers and meditations draw close to the heart of the deepest forms of spiritual devotion.

I first studied MacDonald intently in order to write a series of addresses for the Hansen Lectures at the Wade Center, Wheaton College, that went on to become the book *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment* (2018).¹⁴ The first lecture I called “George MacDonald in the Age of the Incarnation.” I knew what I was going to do in it. It would be about MacDonald and his writings and the Victorian Christmas. It would be the first fruits of my emerging and now ongoing interest in Christmas studies.¹⁵ The second lecture I called “George MacDonald and the Crisis of Doubt.” This, I knew, would apply to MacDonald’s life and writings, work that I had previously done on the much-discussed and much-misunderstood Victorian crisis of faith.¹⁶

The third lecture I called “George MacDonald and the Reenchantment of the World.” This title was merely a placeholder. Perhaps even a bluff. In truth, I had to submit the titles for all the lectures in advance, but at the time I still had no idea what theme I would address in that third lecture. I had not yet read most of MacDonald’s major books. I simply decided that the third lecture would explore something that I discovered along the way to be a quintessentially MacDonalidian theme—and that “the reenchantment of the world” sounded like a splendidly MacDonalidian title. I also hoped

¹⁴Timothy Larsen, *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

¹⁵The main result so far is Timothy Larsen, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christmas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁶See Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

that it was so grand a title that most any topic could be made to fit beneath its capacious canopy.



To my own surprise, that final lecture turned out to be about sanctification. What I discovered along the way was that George MacDonald was a prophet of holiness. Such a person is not to be trifled with. It can be an unsettling thing to encounter someone whose deepest desire really is to be in complete communion with God, and who genuinely, utterly believes that without holiness no one can see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). MacDonald can make us uneasy because he did believe these things with his whole heart. For those of us with motives that are still somewhat mixed, it can be hard to sit long in a room without fidgeting when with someone who radiates the purity of heart that wills only one thing. These poems can be unsettling because they so thoroughly set aside the many things of this world that we still care so much about in order to attend to the one thing needful. MacDonald is disconcertingly ready and willing to sell all—bodily health, financial security, everything—to obtain the pearl of great price.

In the Christian tradition across the centuries, one mystical way to think about sanctification and the beatific vision—the quest to see and know God—is through a three-stage process: purgation, illumination, and union. Almost in their entirety, the poems in *The Diary of an Old Soul* are about those three things. The prophet of holiness will call you back to them again and again, day after day, month by month. Take a warning from the poet himself:

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How oft I say the same things in these lines! (November 23). To begin, MacDonald is vigilantly committed to rooting out all sinful ways in his life (see, for instance, the poem for February 16). More than that, he has an unflinching conviction that the trials of life—illness, pain, loss—should be accepted as part of God’s gracious and loving plan to sanctify us. Here is the poem for October 2:

But thou art making me, I thank thee, sire.
What thou hast done and doest thou know’st well,
And I will help thee:—gently in thy fire
I will lie burning; on thy potter’s-wheel
I will whirl patient, though my brain should reel:
Thy grace shall be enough the grief to quell,
And growing strength perfect through
 weakness dire.

MacDonald accepts all the hard things that come his way as a part of God’s good work in his life. *By loss on loss I have severely gained* (May 27). The poem for July 17 begins:

I cannot tell why this day I am ill;
But I am well because it is thy will—
Which is to make me pure and right like thee.

My own sense is that MacDonald overdoes this, that he risks not seeing evils as evils and responding to them appropriately as such. Still, I suspect I am too inclined the *other* way, and I know for sure that I need MacDonald as a corrective in my life. At any rate, MacDonald and I agree that the key response to whatever comes our way in life is to give God our trust and obedience. Many of us spend much of our prayer time focused on petitions, on “Give us

this day our daily bread,” but MacDonald’s perpetual prayer was: *Thy will be done. I yield up everything* (January 16). Day after day in this book he is calling himself to conform to the will of God. MacDonald had not yet made it to paradise, but he could already say truly, to evoke Dante once again: “His will is our peace.”¹⁷

Or, in MacDonald’s own words: *The life that hath not willed itself to be, / Must clasp the life that willed, and be at peace* (December 16). This is essential, for that clinging to Almighty God is the true reason and *telos* (purposeful end) of our very existence: the beatific vision, the vision of God, union with Christ. The MacDonald we find day by day throughout the year of our Lord 1879 is someone who passionately wants to know God. Yet more than that, he wants God to become his all in all. As he says in the poem for February 12:

Be thou the well by which I lie and rest;
Be thou my tree of life, my garden ground;
Be thou my home, my fire, my chamber blest,
My book of wisdom, loved of all the best;
Oh, be my friend, each day still newer found,
As the eternal days and nights go round!
Nay, nay—thou art my God, in whom all loves
are bound!

This is the heart of devotion. It can be unsettling in its uncompromising purity and intensity. But perhaps, dear reader, this is your year to be unsettled. In the end, whatever losses you have experienced along the way, you

¹⁷Dante, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradise*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 75.

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might nevertheless be able to say truly with George MacDonald, poet and prophet of holiness: *To have thee, Lord, is to have all thy best* (October 26).



The blank pages in the print edition of this book are therefore just as important as the printed ones. They are there for you to write on them. It is on those pages that you can make the Word become flesh in your own life; that you can name your own doubts and disappointments and strife; that you can rally your strength when weary; that you can resolve to forsake sin and selfishness; that you can learn to submit to the will of God, and so come to see the Lord and enjoy blissful union with Christ without end. Then, no matter how old you are—or may someday become—you will still continue to feel the evergreen vitality of your first love, and Christ shall be all in all:

When I no more can stir my soul to move,
And life is but the ashes of a fire;
When I can but remember that my heart
Once used to live and love, long and aspire,—
Oh, be thou then the first, the one thou art;
Be thou the calling, before all answering love,
And in me wake hope, fear, boundless desire.¹⁸



It only remains for me to make a few comments on this book as a book and this text as a text. MacDonald wrote these

¹⁸The poem for January 10.

poems as a personal, spiritual practice. He was trying to find a way to bear faithfully the weighty burdens of his life at that time, most especially the recent deaths of his daughter Mary Josephine and then his son Maurice. The original *The Diary of an Old Soul* (1880) had on its title page: “Printed for the Author.” In other words, a publisher had not taken on the risk, but MacDonald himself was making this book available for those who might be interested. He was emphatically not trying to turn it into a source of income, though that was much needed at that time. His son observed that his father “probably made no money at all” from it.¹⁹

George MacDonald loved books as physical objects. In his novel *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1869), its clergyman narrator (who is, no doubt, a stand-in for MacDonald himself) admits:

I am foolishly fond of the bodies of books as distinguished from their souls. . . . I delight in seeing books about me. . . . Nay, more: I confess that if they are nicely bound, so as to glow and shine in such a fire-light as that by which I was then sitting, I like them ever so much the better.²⁰

In another book, MacDonald reminisced about discovering the joys of learning in his youth: “The very outside of a book had a charm to me. It was a kind of sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”²¹

¹⁹Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 496.

²⁰George MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (London: Alexander Stranhan, 1869), 214-15.

²¹George MacDonald, *The Portent* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1884), 81-82.

As it was printed at his own expense, it was MacDonald himself who would have decided that, despite the additional cost this creates, *The Diary of an Old Soul* would have a blank page facing every page of poems so that readers could continue the devotional conversation by writing down their own concerns and convictions, their own puzzles and prayers. It is easy enough today to find a cheaply produced, unattractive, paperback version of *The Diary of an Old Soul*, but for this “revival” edition InterVarsity Press has sought to fulfill George MacDonald’s desire for an aesthetically pleasing, charming physical object, right down to its interwoven blank pages.

Four years after the original edition, the eminent Victorian intellectual and arbiter of taste John Ruskin praised *The Diary of an Old Soul* in a public lecture at the University of Oxford. He extolled it as proof that worthy religious poetry could still be written in the modern age.²² This created a widespread, public demand for MacDonald’s daily devotional, and editions of varying quality have appeared intermittently ever since. We hope this one will find its place as a particularly worthy one in that succession.

As to the text itself, it must first be admitted that all nineteenth-century writers sometimes used terms and expressions that most people today would no longer use. The reader should expect this and be willing to navigate the otherness of the past. For instance, as Victorians standardly did, MacDonald used gender-specific words such as

²²John Ruskin, *The Pleasures of England, Lectures Given at Oxford* (London: George Allen, 1884), 61.

Introduction

man and *men* when referring to people generally. As to the notes in this edition, I have sought to annotate those words and phrases that are likely to be incomprehensible for many readers today. But otherwise, Jon Boyd and Rebecca Carhart of IVP Academic have prepared the text of the *Diary* to faithfully convey MacDonald's original text as it appeared in the earliest editions without altering vocabulary, spelling, or punctuation.

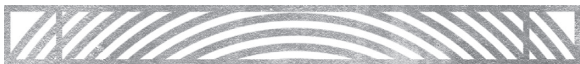


I am grateful for my Wheaton College colleagues—not least at the Wade Center—for being eager, learned, and (on a good day) dazzling conversation partners on the subjects of George MacDonald, literature, art, faith, devotion, theology, the life of the mind, and so much more. My special, heartfelt thanks go to Christine Colón, Elaine Hooker, Dyanne Martin, Marj Mead, and Carol Schultz who graciously (re)read *The Diary of an Old Soul* and shared with me their reactions to the poems.

DEDICATION

*Sweet friends, receive my offering. You will find
Against each worded page a white page set:—
This is the mirror of each friendly mind
Reflecting that. In this book we are met.
Make it, dear hearts, of worth to you indeed:—
Let your white page be ground, my print be seed,
Growing to golden ears, that faith and hope shall feed.*

YOUR OLD SOUL.



JANUARY



1.

LORD, what I once had done with youthful might,
Had I been from the first true to the truth,
Grant me, now old, to do—with better sight,
And humbler heart, if not the brain of youth;
So wilt thou, in thy gentleness and ruth,¹
Lead back thy old soul, by the path of pain,
Round to his best—young eyes and heart and brain.

2.

A dim aurora rises in my east,
Beyond the line of jagged questions hoar,²
As if the head of our intombed High Priest
Began to glow behind the unopened door:
Sure the gold wings will soon rise from the gray!—
They rise not. Up I rise, press on the more,
To meet the slow coming of the Master's day.

¹Compassion or pity.

²Aged as indicated by gray hair. The theme of the poem is an old person greeting a new day.

January

3.

Sometimes I wake, and, lo! I have forgot,
And drifted out upon an ebbing sea!
My soul that was at rest now resteth not,
For I am with myself and not with thee;
Truth seems a blind moon in a glaring morn,
Where nothing is but sick-heart vanity:
Oh, thou who knowest! save thy child forlorn.

4.

Death, like high faith, levelling, lifteth all.
When I awake, my daughter and my son,³
Grown sister and brother, in my arms shall fall,
Tenfold my girl and boy. Sure every one
Of all the brood to the old wings will run.
Whole-hearted is my worship of the man
From whom my earthly history began.

5.

Thy fishes breathe but where thy waters roll;
Thy birds fly but within thy airy sea;
My soul breathes only in thy infinite soul;
I breathe, I think, I love, I live but thee.
Oh breathe, oh think,—O Love, live into me;
Unworthy is my life till all divine,
Till thou see in me only what is thine.

³*The Diary of an Old Soul* was published in 1880. In the year before, George MacDonald's son Maurice had died, and in the year before that he had lost a daughter, Mary Josephine. MacDonald is reminding himself of the comforting thought that his own death will reunite him with them.

January

6.

Then shall I breathe in sweetest sharing, then
Think in harmonious consort with my kin;
Then shall I love well all my father's men,
Feel one with theirs the life my heart within.
Oh brothers! sisters holy! hearts divine!
Then I shall be all yours, and nothing mine—
To every human heart a mother-twin.

7.

I see a child before an empty house,
Knocking and knocking at the closed door;
He wakes dull echoes—but nor man nor mouse,
If he stood knocking there for evermore.—
A mother angel⁴, see! folding each wing,
Soft-walking, crosses straight the empty floor,
And opens to the obstinate praying thing.

8.

Were there but some deep, holy spell, whereby
Always I should remember thee—some mode
Of feeling the pure heat-throb momentarily
Of the spirit-fire still uttering this *I!*—
Lord, see thou to it, take thou remembrance' load:
Only when I bethink me can I cry;
Remember thou, and prick me with love's goad.⁵

⁴MacDonald's writings often include benevolent, female figures with spiritual, supernatural, or mysterious identities and powers, not least Great-Great-Grandmother Irene (the Lady of the Silver Moon) in *The Princess and the Goblin* and North Wind in *At the Back of the North Wind*.

⁵A stick with a sharp end used to drive livestock.

January

9.

If to myself—“God sometimes interferes”—
I said, my faith at once would be struck blind.
I see him all in all, the lifing⁶ mind,
Or nowhere in the vacant miles and years.
A love he is that watches and that hears,
Or but a mist fumed up from minds of men,
Whose fear and hope reach out beyond their ken.⁷

10.

When I no more can stir my soul to move,
And life is but the ashes of a fire;
When I can but remember that my heart
Once used to live and love, long and aspire,—
Oh, be thou then the first, the one thou art;
Be thou the calling, before all answering love,
And in me wake hope, fear, boundless desire.

11.

I thought that I had lost thee; but, behold!
Thou comest to me from the horizon low,
Across the fields outspread of green and gold—
Fair carpet for thy feet to come and go.
Whence I know not, or how to me thou art come!—
Not less my spirit with calm bliss doth glow,
Meeting thee only thus, in nature vague and dumb.

⁶To bring to life—that is, life-ing. This word is so rare, and MacDonald was so fond of it (he uses it three times in this book), that one of the three examples of its use in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from *The Diary of an Old Soul*.

⁷Vision—that is, whose fear and hope reach out beyond what they are able to see.

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