



# THE SCOTTISH GENEALOGIST

SEPTEMBER 2019

Ogilvie  
Brownlow  
MacDonald  
Otto

QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE SCOTTISH GENEALOGY SOCIETY

---

Vol. LXVI No. 3

# Charles Francis Macdonald (1823-1901)

Terry Jenkins

The biographies of famous men usually include a brief mention of other members of the family during the course of the narrative. The information is likely to be fragmentary, but often will be the only details that we possess about a particular person. It is easy then to characterize someone from a handful of throw-away remarks. Such is the fate of Charles Francis Macdonald, elder brother of the Victorian author, George Macdonald (1824-1905).

Charles Francis has suffered the added indignity of having incorrect information about him published online. Many genealogical "name-chasers" have investigated the life of George Macdonald - understandably so, as he was an influential figure in literary history. As an adjunct they have also posted information about his siblings and other members of his family. Their research into these side-branches is invariably perfunctory and superficial, and leads to incorrect assumptions and results. Unfortunately, these are then posted online for posterity to view. One such site states that Charles had eight children (he had three<sup>1</sup>) by conflating him with another Charles Macdonald. This error has subsequently been copied unquestioningly by other people, and thus the incorrect information proliferates. It is very easy to post such errors online - far more difficult to persuade the perpetrators to correct them. The interloper is a shepherd who was married in Huntly at a Roman Catholic ceremony held at the Bogie Inn on 6 August 1856. It is not immediately apparent why he should have been married in Huntly, and in the local inn! The Catholic church of St Margaret's was built in the town in 1834. This other Charles Macdonald was born in Crathie, Aberdeenshire, about forty miles south-west of Huntly, and he subsequently lived for a time in Dull, Perthshire, where his first children were born. Anybody who has done any research into the author George Macdonald will know that you are not likely to find a Roman Catholic amongst the members of his family. Certainly not in the nineteenth century. The family abandoned that religion after Culloden, and George and Charles Francis's grandmother Isabel (who died in 1848) was a strict Calvinist - a follower of the Seceders, the Revs. George Cowie and John Hill, as the names of her grandchildren (below) testify.

Charles Francis was born in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, in 1823, the eldest son of George Macdonald and his first wife Helen McKay. He was followed by brother George in 1824, and other brothers who died young: James MacKay (1826-34), Alexander Cowie (1827-53), John Hill (1830-1858).<sup>2</sup> The details of their mutual ancestry can be found in any of the biographies of the author. Although George Macdonald is remembered now as an author and poet, his first vocation was to the church and he trained as a Congregational minister in London. Charles Francis, like his father and grandfather before him, went into business. Not in Scotland, however, but in England - neither George nor Charles ever lived in

Scotland as adults. By the 1850s Charles Francis was married and working in Manchester as a commission agent in the cotton business - buying and selling cotton goods and making his profit.

All we have really known about Charles thus far, as a person, comes from a handful of disparaging remarks in Greville Macdonald's biography of his father, *George Macdonald and his wife*, published in 1924. For example, Greville quotes a letter written in 1857 by George Macdonald from Algiers to his father in Huntly: "... I feel with you in the fact that your sons have needed so much to be done for them" This carries a footnote: "My Uncle Charles was leaving for Sydney after his father had settled his heavy debts".<sup>3</sup>

Note that George Macdonald wrote "sons" There were three sons in the family at this time who were still alive: George, Charles Francis and John Hill (who died in 1858). What authority does Greville have for implying, by this footnote, that his father was referring solely to Charles's finances? I cannot believe that George had no debts of his own. In 1857, when he wrote this letter, ill-health had forced him to give up the ministry.<sup>4</sup> He was not earning any money, and was residing in Algiers thanks to the philanthropic benevolence of Lady Byron. All he had published thus far was a dramatic poem, *Within and Without*. This was published privately in 1855, and his first book, *Phantastes*, did not appear until 1858. He was heavily reliant on financial support from other people simply to stay alive and to feed his family. It seems invidious, therefore, to imply that Charles Francis was the only son to have debts. I think all three sons needed 'much to be done for them' - and it is not unusual for a parent to be put in this position!

I detect an inbuilt antipathy to Charles from Greville throughout his biography - all the references are disparaging in one way or another. Elsewhere in the book he writes: "In Charles the ambition to get rich without labour seemed most easily indulged by exploiting patents and gold-mines or other men's money" (p. 161). This is a very strange accusation. Being an author is hardly the most 'laborious' of careers, and the biography clearly shows that George Macdonald relied heavily on 'other men's money' throughout his life. An over-riding impression given by Greville is his father's continual lack of money, and all George Macdonald's more recent biographers also record how he constantly struggled with poverty. In his early days, for example, he did not even have the money to take his wife Louisa to Scotland to introduce her to his father until 1856, by which time they had been married for five years. Later in life, we find he was down to his last £50 in 1877 and grateful for a gift of £200 from a friend. In 1878, he received a bequest of £500 that "went far to clear off his accumulating debts" and in 1885 was "spending borrowed money now, and see no way but to borrow more."<sup>5</sup> He would not have been able to live the life that he did without the continuing financial support from wealthy patrons.

Greville, meanwhile, gives the impression that Charles was the black sheep of the family. As I will show, this opinion does not bear close scrutiny, and I suggest it is advisable to be wary of a biography written by a close family member. It

may contain first-hand information, but is likely to be biased in favour of its subject. Unfortunately, Greville's remarks have been quoted and even embellished by later writers and, I fear, give a distorted, and incorrect, picture of the man. However, newly available archives now allow us to correct this, and to obtain a proper understanding of Charles's life and achievements.

Newspapers show that Charles took an active interest in local politics in Manchester. He was a Liberal supporter and particularly interested in the social aspects of politics. In this he was unlike his brother George, who had little interest in such matters. Greville writes, "Though my father upheld the Liberalism of Cobden and Bright, he was little of a politician" (p. 191). George appeared to be only concerned with a person's spiritual well-being; Charles was interested in the realities of their life here on earth.

In January 1855, Charles was a member of the Executive Committee that organised a 'Soirée' for Manchester's two MPs - an event at which businessmen could meet their Members of Parliament and raise local issues.<sup>6</sup> The chairman of this committee was George Wilson (1808-1870), a Manchester businessman much involved in political reform.<sup>7</sup> And it was Wilson who recommended Charles to the Master of the Royal Mint when extra staff were needed to deal with the withdrawal of the old copper coinage in 1861. The government had decided that it was no longer possible to maintain the issue of pure copper coins (a penny was supposedly made with a penny's worth of the metal),<sup>8</sup> and all the copper coinage in circulation was withdrawn and replaced by new bronze coins. These coins, bearing the head of Queen Victoria, remained legal tender until decimalisation in 1971. It's interesting that we still call low-denomination coins 'coppers', although they have been made of bronze for over 150 years.

The Master of the Mint sought authority from the Treasury for this appointment in December 1861, and wrote:

"Owing to the constant expansion of the new Service, it becomes necessary to provide more fully for it and to separate it more completely from the ordinary business of the Mint. I have to propose at present

1. The appointment of another Temporary Senior Clerk to be employed chiefly on the correspondence and out door duty of the service. It is in my power to suggest the name of a Gentleman whom I consider highly qualified for this office, Mr C.F. Macdonald of Manchester.

Mr Macdonald was recommended to me strongly by Mr George Wilson who has a good idea of the qualifications required for the Office. The Chancellor of the Exchequer also when lately in Lancashire obtained information respecting Mr McDonald, & writes that he "is described to me from a trustworthy source as a person of high intelligence & unexceptionable character".<sup>9</sup>

Then follows the proposed salary and other financial arrangements for the appointment.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer who endorsed the recommendation was none other than William Ewart Gladstone, who became Prime Minister in 1868. He was at the time the Liberal M.P. for South Lancashire, and this shows that Charles was well-known in political circles in the north-west of the country. Charles worked for the Royal Mint until 1864, when the work was deemed to be complete.<sup>10</sup> While he was there, he became a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society (all members were called 'Fellows'). This seems an unexpected move - nothing about his life thus far has indicated that he had any interest in statistics. But the Society was formed with the object of "... procuring, arranging and publishing facts to illustrate the condition and prospects of society", and this was clearly of great interest to him. He also attended a meeting in London during his employment at the Mint that led to the formation of the Emancipation Society - emancipation, that is, for the negro slaves of the USA. In October, President Lincoln had made a proclamation that the Federal Government would make all slaves unconditionally free on 1st January 1863. This policy was not universally welcomed in the U.K., and the meeting in November 1862 noted the sympathy of this country with the Southern Confederacy, and resolved to support the North in its efforts to end slavery. A list of the General Committee of the Society was published, and includes the name of C.F. Macdonald.<sup>11</sup>

By 1866 Charles and his family had permanently moved to London. Despite the move, he continued to attend political events in Manchester. When he attended a banquet at the Free Trade Hall promoted by the National Reform Union on 20 November 1866, he was listed as 'C.F. Macdonald, London'.<sup>12</sup> The National Reform Union was a pressure group working to force the government into extending the suffrage to working men, and most of the leading Liberals from the north-west of the country were present at the banquet. Gladstone had actually introduced a Reform Bill in 1866 but this was initially defeated, leading to massive country-wide riots and demonstrations. It was re-considered in 1867 and there was a further public meeting at the Free Trade Hall on 6 August 1867, to consider amendments to the Bill. Charles also attended this meeting, and was distinguished enough to be seated on the platform with the other notables.<sup>13</sup>

The Free Trade Hall in Manchester, where all these large meetings took place, opened in 1856. It was built on land in St Peter's Fields, the site of the Peterloo Massacre, given by the Liberal statesman Richard Cobden. Cobden was originally a Manchester businessman, but retired to live in Midhurst, Sussex, where he died in April 1865. His funeral was attended by large numbers of people from all over the country who travelled to the town by special train from London. The names of the passengers were listed in the newspaper reports of the event, and one can find the name of Mr. C. F. Macdonald amongst them.<sup>14</sup> And the name immediately preceding his in these reports was that of Mr. J. Noble.

After he left the Royal Mint in 1864, Charles immediately went into partnership with John Noble. They set themselves up as 'financial and general agents' with

offices in Bridge St. Westminster - just across the road from the Houses of Parliament. Noble was a great proponent of free trade and in 1865 founded the Free Trade Association. He wrote several books on the subject, and his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* describes him as "active in lecturing on the free breakfast-table programme"(!). This was a popular title given to the efforts to remove the still-existing tariffs on tea, coffee and sugar.

One of the first projects undertaken by the partnership involved the somewhat insalubrious subject of sewage disposal. The Government had sought to alleviate the hardships caused by the collapse of the cotton business in Lancashire during the American civil war by facilitating schemes for improvements to public utilities - thus providing alternative employment for those out of work. One area to profit from this initiative was the provision of a modern system of sewers. The rapid expansion of industrial cities throughout the country had meant that the existing sewers, some dating back to medieval times, were totally unable to cope. London had suffered the 'Great Stink' in 1858, when the stench from the river Thames finally caused Parliament to act and appoint Joseph Bazalgette to build a modern network of sewers. The same problems existed in every other major town and city, and the whole subject was debated in October 1866 at a Congress in Leamington. One of the speakers at the Congress was Charles Francis Macdonald who explained plans for the proposed utilization of sewage in Liverpool.<sup>15</sup>

Charles and John Noble intended to build a new sewer to take the effluent northwards out of the city, where it would be sprayed on farmland as fertilizer. And they formed the Liverpool Sewage Utilization Company for the purpose.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, as with any new idea, there were many people who objected to the scheme. The Earls of Derby and Sefton, both major landowners in the area, objected to the sewer passing through their land. There were others who foresaw hideous smells and pollution. Nonetheless, a pilot scheme was set up and a farm was purchased north of the city. The sewer was built, the waste was sprayed - and the Directors claimed increased crop yields were obtained as a result. Many local farmers expressed interested but the costs could not be reduced to a profitable level, and the company was in financial difficulties by 1871. Although Liverpool Council had purchased a substantial number of shares, it was not prepared to take the company over as a going concern, and it eventually closed in 1876.<sup>17</sup> Once again sewage was simply discharged into the Mersey. It is worth commenting that the disposal of sewage sludge on farmland - after treatment and with certain restrictions - is nowadays the EU's preferred option. Charles and Noble were simply ahead of their time.

The next project to occupy them in Liverpool was an urban tramway. In 1860, an American entrepreneur (with the appropriate name of George Francis Train) had opened several short sections of tramway in different parts of the country. They were speculative ventures, and most were soon ripped up following objections from other road-users. The one place where they survived was

Birkenhead, just across the Mersey from Liverpool. The horse-drawn trams clearly offered a much smoother ride to the passengers than the existing omnibuses, and considerably reduced the work-load on the horses that pulled them. Charles and Noble set about the process of obtaining parliamentary authority for a tramway in Liverpool, and on 12 December 1865 the Liverpool Tramway Company was registered, with Charles Francis Macdonald, John Noble and three others as Directors.<sup>18</sup> They started the procedure to obtain the necessary Act of Parliament.<sup>19</sup> It was not an easy task and took three years - their Bill was defeated in 1866 and 1867 and it was not until 31 August 1868 that the Liverpool Tramways Act successfully passed through both Houses of Parliament and received the Royal Assent. Construction work began immediately and trams started to run on 1st November 1869. The omnibus companies did everything they could to disrupt the service, but the trams were immediately popular and within weeks the Company was seeking powers to extend the lines.

By the time the tramway opened in Liverpool, Charles was actively involved in the final stages of obtaining parliamentary authority for tramways in London. He and Noble had formed the Metropolitan Tramway Company for the purpose in 1865,<sup>20</sup> at the same time as forming the Liverpool company, but it took them a whole year longer to get the necessary approval. Eventually success came in September 1869, when three separate Acts for tramways in London received the Royal Assent.<sup>21</sup> The first of these, the *Metropolitan Tramways Act*, gave the promoters authority to build a line in East London from Whitechapel out to Bow, and the North Metropolitan Tramways Company was incorporated to carry out the project. The Act specified that the Company should have six directors, and Charles Francis Macdonald was one of the three specifically named in the text. The Minutes of the Board fortunately still exist, and are the only such records of these early tramway companies to survive. The first directors' meeting was held on 16 September 1869 and various reimbursements were authorized, including one of £1,098 to Charles himself, which was expenditure incurred in getting the Bill through Parliament.<sup>22</sup> The first trams ran in London at the beginning of May 1870<sup>23</sup> and, as in Liverpool, there was an immediate application to extend the system. At an extraordinary meeting of the company on 12 October 1870, it was resolved to raise a further £240,000 for the purpose. Charles was no stranger to large sums of money! The company thrived and eventually became the largest of the tramway companies in the capital.

The granting of these specific Acts of Parliament led to the *Tramways Act, 1870*. This clarified the legal position and, importantly, gave local councils the authority to grant concessions to tramway companies. Very soon every town and city in the country had a tram network. And for this we have to thank the pioneers: Charles Francis Macdonald and his associates. The sewage scheme might have been a failure, the trams certainly were not.

None of this appears in Greville's biography of George Macdonald. This is understandable: the book is about his father after all. But none of the projects

described were 'get-rich-quick' schemes either. All appear to have been genuinely motivated by humanitarian concerns, and a desire to improve society - and all of them took years of dogged work and determination to bring to fruition. They also needed investors to finance the costs ('other people's money' in Greville's phrase), but that is the very nature of business projects. The costs of building a new brick sewer through the heart of Liverpool must have been considerable. And *The Times* newspaper hazarded that the cost of laying the London tramway would 'not exceed £12,000 per mile'.<sup>24</sup>

The final mention of Charles in Greville's biography reports his return from Australia in 1858. He writes: "About this time my Uncle Charles returned home from Sydney, apparently with schemes for making his fortune and that of his many friends. He assured my mother that in a few months he would be able to write her a cheque for a thousand pounds, and never miss it. Though his intentions were honest and generous, his brother throughout his long life had constantly to supplement his precarious supplies." From the descriptions of George's own finances, I don't think he would ever have had the money to supplement his brother's 'precarious supplies'! However, he might have been invited to invest in one of his brother's projects.

The trip to Australia in 1857-58 is a curious episode. The shipping records show that Charles arrived in Sydney on 30 June 1857, accompanied by his five-year old son, George.<sup>25</sup> We also know that he was back in Manchester by 16 March 1858. A letter in the Sutton collection at Nottingham University shows that he wrote to a friend on that date from a new address in Salford.<sup>26</sup> The journey to and from Australia took over three months in each direction, and so he can have spent barely six months in the country before returning. We can thus discount out-of-hand the fanciful embellishments found in Rolland Hein's *George MacDonald, Victorian Mythmaker*, where he writes: "Charles, having had significant business reversals, had gone so heavily into debt that his father must now assume responsibility for his bills. Charles's inclination to make somewhat risky business investments had caught up with him. Unable to right himself in England, he was preparing to embark for Sydney, Australia, leaving Jane behind. The family no doubt were haunted by memories of his uncle Charles's having absconded twenty years earlier and cringed from the irony."<sup>27</sup> I consider this to be all pie-in-the-sky supposition. If Charles Francis had been fleeing from creditors, he would not have returned to Manchester within the year. More importantly, I think it highly unlikely that he would have been recommended, and accepted, for a post at the Royal Mint if there were any doubts about his financial probity, or hints of problems in his professional life. I think we have to look elsewhere for the reason for the trip.

In February 1855, Charles is recorded in the Manchester newspapers as attending a lecture given by George Thompson on 'The Origin and Probable Issues of the War'.<sup>28</sup> The American Civil War did not officially break out until 1861, but it had apparently been clear for years that it would happen sooner or later, and there



was growing alarm in Lancashire at the disruption in the supplies of raw cotton that this would bring. There were people in the cotton industry who had been concerned for years about the reliance on a single source in North America for their supplies. Alternative sources were being considered, and I think it was in this climate that Charles decided to go to Australia. I suggest that he saw an opportunity to get ahead of the game, and travelled there to establish contacts, and to set up a supply chain in preparation for importing cotton from 'down-under'. This can only be speculation, but it seems a sensible suggestion and how I believe an entrepreneur in the cotton industry might have reacted to the looming crisis. And, for all I know, he may have had some success. But, I fear Australia was too far away to make the supplies financially viable. In fact, when the American Civil War did break out, the cotton industry in Lancashire totally collapsed, leading to the 'Lancashire Cotton Famine' of 1862, mentioned earlier. Charles was fortunate to be working for the Royal Mint by then, and so was personally unaffected.

Greville's biography *George Macdonald and his Wife* was published in 1924, sixty-six years after the events of 1857-58. Greville was only born in 1856, and can have had no first-hand knowledge of them. He also implies that George and his brother had little contact with each other after their father's death (which also occurred in 1858). A letter in the Nottingham collection disproves this, and shows that the two families holidayed together in Broadstairs in September 1869.<sup>29</sup> I believe Greville gives a false impression of Charles, and one wonders why...

An obituary published in *The British Weekly: a Journal of Social and Christian Progress* on 7 February 1901 gives a different idea of the man, and describes Charles as "one of the greatest admirers and students of his brother's works", and comments that "probably no one was so qualified to comment upon them". The author who knew Charles personally, continued: "His was a mind exceptionally gifted and well-furnished. He had a large, charitable, tender nature, and spoke evil of no one". I think it is time for Greville's calumnies to be corrected.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> The 1911 census @118 Adelaide Road, Hampstead shows that Charles's wife Jane M Macdonald (b. 1824) bore him three children.
- <sup>2</sup> There was possibly one other child. Their mother died in 1832, and father George remarried Margaret McColl in 1839 by whom he had three further daughters.
- <sup>3</sup> Macdonald, Greville: *George Macdonald and his Wife* (London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1924), p. 272.
- <sup>4</sup> He resigned as minister in Arundel in 1853, and preached privately until he was offered a post in Bolton early in 1857. He was unable to fulfil these duties to ill-health. He never held any further positions in the church.
- <sup>5</sup> Macdonald, Greville: *George Macdonald and his Wife*, pp. 479 & 531. Also Raeper, William: *George Macdonald* (Tring, Lion Publishing, 1987), pp. 340 & 343.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles was similarly involved in organizing the soirée in 1856. see *Manchester Times*, Wednesday 10 January 1855, and Saturday, 5 January 1856.
- <sup>7</sup> see *Wikipedia* etc.
- <sup>8</sup> "An Act to extend the Enactments relating to the Copper Coin to Coin of mixed Metal" received the Royal assent in 1859.
- <sup>9</sup> National Archives: MINT 8/36, pp. 274-75; MINT 21/7, pp. 257-58.
- <sup>10</sup> National Archives: MINT 8/37, Doc. 2026 dated Sept. 21, 1864.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Caledonian Mercury*, 1st January 1863. George Wilson was also a member, as was J. Noble (see later).

- <sup>12</sup> see *Leeds Mercury*, Wednesday 21 November 1866.
- <sup>13</sup> see *The Manchester Weekly Times*, Saturday 10 August 1867.
- <sup>14</sup> see: *The Sussex Advertiser*, 11 April 1865.
- <sup>15</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, Thursday 25 October 1866.
- <sup>16</sup> see *The London Gazette*, 28 Nov. 1865; and *London Daily News*, 31 July 1866. Surprisingly, the Board of Trade files at the National Archives do not contain any records of the company. There are some documents in Liverpool, which I have not seen.
- <sup>17</sup> The progress and decline of the Company can be followed in the Liverpool newspapers. These confirm that C F Macdonald was a Director of the Company, and regularly attended the half-yearly meetings.
- <sup>18</sup> The National Archives: BT 31/1197/2680C
- <sup>19</sup> This followed the method by which all railways had been authorised since the 1840s. See also *Tramway Companies in Liverpool, 1859-97* by S Alasdair Munro, available on hslc.org.uk.
- <sup>20</sup> The National Archives: BT 31/1194/2659C.
- <sup>21</sup> see *London Gazette*: 21 November 1865, pp. 5634-35; 26 November 1867, pp. 6393-96; 16 July 1869, p. 4006.
- <sup>22</sup> London Metropolitan Archives: ACC/1297/NMT/01/001, Minutes 1869-73.
- <sup>23</sup> see *The Graphic*, 14 May 1870.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Times*, 26 May 1869.
- <sup>25</sup> see: New South Wales, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1826-1922 on *Ancestry.co.uk*; and *The Empire* newspaper, Tuesday 30 June 1857 (accessed on *trove.nla.gov.au*).
- <sup>26</sup> Nottingham University Library, Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections: The Briggs Collection of Literary Papers and Correspondence from the Sutton family, Nottingham, 1818-1915. Ref: Bg 39 (the date has been mis-transcribed in the index as 16 March 1856). These letters appear to have been unknown to earlier researchers.
- <sup>27</sup> Hein, Rolland: *George MacDonald, Victorian Mythmaker* (Nashville, Star Song Publishing, 1993), pp. 128-29.
- <sup>28</sup> *Manchester Times*, Wednesday 21 February 1855.
- <sup>29</sup> Nottingham University Library, Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections: The Briggs Collection of Literary Papers and Correspondence from the Sutton family, Nottingham, 1818-1915. Ref: Bg 78.

**The Scottish Genealogy Society holds  
Scottish Family History Evening Workshops....**

**“YOUR AIN FOLK”**

*.... at their Library and Family History Centre at  
15 Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh.*

**We welcome enquiries from Local History Societies,  
Family History Groups, Church Groups, Clubs, etc.... in fact any  
groups interested in researching family history.  
All facilities in our Library, including 'our complete collection of  
Scottish Old Parish Records microfilms' will be available to you.**

**The maximum number per group is 12,  
and volunteers will be there to offer advice.**

For further details contact Ramsay Tubb at  
enquiries@scotsgenealogy.com or 0131-220 3677