The Author in Person: Materialising Scotland on the Nineteenth-Century Literary Tour

By John Corbett

This paper is a modest extension of Amanda Adams's fascinating study, *Performing Authorship in the Nineteenth Century Transatlantic Lecture Tour* (2016). Adams takes a number of case studies from both the UK and the USA – Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Martineau, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Matthew Arnold and Henry James – and considers how their transatlantic tours, in both directions, address issues relevant to literature, marketing, celebrity and politics. Adams shows that the material incarnation of the author, particularly the materialisation of the author on the other side of the Atlantic, connects the writer and his or her readership in culturally specific and problematical ways. The problems that she raises are to do with race, gender and celebrity, namely the ambivalence or scepticism that some authors felt about performing an expected version of themselves before a live audience, and about constructing a persona that might be taken as representative of a particular community, race or gender. Here I borrow Adams's critical framework and apply it to a further case study, that of Ian Maclaren, the popular kailyard author, most famously of *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*. Maclaren made two tours of the USA, dying of tonsillitis on his second trip; he lies buried in Iowa. The reception given to Maclaren, particularly on his first trip, raises particular issues about the American public's response to Maclaren's representation of a specific set of national characteristics, namely sentimental Scottishness. The questions raised here are: 'How did Maclaren perform Scottishness on tour, and what were the responses?'

One difficulty about asking this question, obviously, is that we were not part of Maclaren's live audience. We can gather information about the performances only from 'paratexts' – the few remaining written records about the events (and events like it) – in newspapers and magazines and memoirs. When reading these paratexts, we can pay particular attention to details that focus on aspects of the

performance: the author's physical appearance and demeanour, the tone of voice, any gestures, and references to the 'here and now', as well as the content of what is said. The texts might be straight descriptions or accounts of the event, but, as we shall see, they might also include parody.

'Ian Maclaren,' the pen name of the Reverend John Watson, a moderate Presbyterian minister, is one of the most prominent of those late nineteenth-century Scottish authors whose work was extremely popular at the time – in Scotland and abroad – but whose reputation suffered, particularly, in the later backlash against homely sentimentality. Despite the best efforts of critics like Andrew Nash to rehabilitate those authors tarred with the 'kailyard' brush, it is still perhaps easier for most scholars today to address Maclaren's *oeuvre* as a social phenomenon rather than as a body of work with its own merit. The success of Maclaren's homely fictions was unarguably a phenomenon. However, it is clear, as Andrew Nash observes, that the sentimentality of his treatment of the fictional, rural village of Drumtochty, a secluded space on the border of the Highlands and Lowlands, was a deliberate aesthetic and moral strategy. Maclaren's fiction extolled the virtues of a caring, educational meritocracy, encouraged the preacher to focus his teaching on the Christian heart rather than theological issues (though those issues might be debated amongst educated individuals), and endorsed a nostalgic agrarian ethos that privileged community values.

The public persona of 'Ian Maclaren' was moulded at the pulpit, latterly in Liverpool, by which time the Rev. John Watson had developed from a self-confessedly poor preacher to someone who could hold the attention of a diverse, urban congregation. While Maclaren's stories portray ministers shying away from a concern with such dogma as the current debates around German Biblical scholarship towards simpler tales that evoked Christian feeling, the Reverend Watson wrote on spiritual matters, and penned a life of Christ. Indeed, his first literary tour of America, in 1896, actually came about as an adjunct to an invitation to give a series of lectures at Yale University on 'Practical Theology'. The lectures were published, in the same year, as *The Cure of Souls*. While in America for the Yale lectures, Maclaren was engaged by the entrepreneur, abolitionist and sometime Union army officer and printer, Major James B. Pond. In 1874, Pond had acquired the Lyceum Theatre Lecture Bureau, an agency that managed speakers of different kinds: political, religious, theatrical and literary. In a career that he detailed in his unreliable memoir *Eccentricities of Genius* (1900),

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Pond's memoir is full of details of Maclaren's tour and the impact he had on his audience. He gives a fulsome physical description of the minister (he has 'well-moulded refined features that bear the impress of kindly shrewdness, intellectual sagacity, and spiritual clearness, tempered, too, with a mingled sense of keen humor and grave dignity' – Pond, 405), and he lauds his delivery:

> *His voice is excellent, because its tones express the feeling to be conveyed. It is skilfully used, with fine inflections and tonal shadings that give emphasis and delicacy to his delivery. The doctor's mobile mouth easily lends itself to vocal changes. He is not an orator in the usual sense of the word, but he is a speaker who readily holds an audience to the last moment. No one leaves while he speaks, and that is the finest test. (Pond, 405–06).*

Pond's descriptions accord with Nash's observation that Maclaren was not a 'fire and brimstone' preacher but one who sought deliberately to evoke his congregation's sympathy by appealing to their sentiments. The word 'sympathy' recurs in Pond's descriptions:

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As Nash comments, the notion of sympathy, a legacy of Enlightenment morality, is key to understanding Victorian literary aesthetics:

> *The act of feeling, or expressing sympathy, was a sign that author and reader shared the same moral values. It is this sharing of moral values that is the key to understanding Victorian ideas of the sentimental. (Nash, 133)*

Pond's account suggests that the expression of sympathy permeated different performative genres: 'book, sermon, lecture, social intercourse'. His rich account of Maclaren's lectures is worth reading; it is a storehouse of information, part diary, part account book, part a series of anecdotes. At one point he reports Maclaren's account of his creative process when composing his fiction:

> *The actual composition of 'The Bonnie Briar Bush' [sic] stories occupied fifteen months. They were the more difficult, because in every case the character is revealed in dialogue exclusively. It is different where the writer has a plot—a murder, for instance —because then there is something definite to hold the attention, and one can dash ahead compared with the slow progress I was forced to make. (Pond, 431)*

The account bears out Nash's assertion that Maclaren's sentimental characters were carefully contrived, according to a systematic aesthetic and moral set of principles. The results were nevertheless lucrative. Pond also records that in the ten weeks between 1 October and 16 December 1896, Maclaren gave ninety-six lectures in the USA, clearing $35,795.91 in receipts. One of many highlights was in Boston:

> *The crush at the box office had been unbroken for a week. The advance sales were nearly $10,000. It was in Tremont Temple, Wednesday afternoon, November 25th, at two o'clock, that he made his first bow to a Boston audience and the great house was overflowing with people who came to see and to hear—who remained to laugh and cry ; and, when the lecture was at an end, to stand in their places for many minutes with eyes and opera glasses levelled upon the tall and kindly visaged Scotchman. He bore well the scrutiny of those thousands, for there were thousands present, as he shook hands with his brethren of the ministry who occupied the platform seats. (Pond, 433–34)*

So far, so triumphant. But an audience is not a single entity and a rather different response suggested by an alternative paratext, entitled, 'Donald Macslushey in

Boston', published in *Life* Magazine on 14 January 1897, just over a month after Maclaren's lectures there. A short squib, featuring two cartoons in which banners fly, and fireworks spelling out pseudo-Scots ('Ma wee galoot!') explode in the skies above Boston as MacSlushey arrives in triumph, the parody purports to be a straight-faced report of the event:

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Maclaren's fiction and Watson's related lectures and sermons *were* sentimental but their aim was to evoke human sympathy in the service of community. When performed live to an appreciative audience there was seldom, by all accounts, even the critical ones, not a dry eye in the house. It is Oscar Wilde who is sometimes credited with acknowledging the public's changing tastes when he

remarked, ‘one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing’ (Ellmann 1987: 441). But in the audience’s responses to the materialisation of the visiting author, ‘Ian Maclaren’, and his imagined alter ego, ‘Donald MacSlushey’, we can also see tensions beginning to emerge in the attitude of the reading public to the import into America of a Scottish theology of moral sentiment.

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