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**Robb, David. *George MacDonald*. Scottish Academic Press. £4.95.**

**Edmund Cusick**

**D**avid Robb's *George MacDonald* is a welcome addition to the regrettably small body of a scholarly work on MacDonald. While the author does include an introductory chapter which briefly sketches MacDonald's biography, this book will be of most value to readers who are already familiar with MacDonald's life and work.

This first chapter is more than a chronicle of MacDonald's life, however. It sets the pattern for Robb's book—one of patient and thoughtful connection between MacDonald's fiction and the vision that underlies it. In the following chapters he examines how this vision finds expression in the fantasy works, children's fiction, and the Scottish novels, making a particularly detailed study of *Alec Forbes*, *Malcolm*, and *The Marquis of Lossie*. In his second chapter, he observes, for example, a "literary Calvinism" in the degree of autonomy from the narrator that MacDonald allows to the characters in his novels.

In the course of this analysis, Robb takes inspiration from the description of Cosmo in *Castle Warlock* who had "the power to read the hieroglyphic aspect of things." Robb relates MacDonald's vision of the universe as full of symbolic meaning to the author's fictional creation: As Cosmo can read the meaning hidden in the hieroglyphs of nature, so we can read the symbolic meanings hidden in MacDonald's fictional universe. Robb presents many of the "Rosetta stones" religious, [sic] philosophical and literary, that aid the reader in recognising and interpreting these hieroglyphs. In *Malcolm*, for example, the underlying influence of Spenser gives new meaning to the "hieroglyph" of Florimel's name, and in *Malcolm* the Christian symbolism that runs throughout the novel adds a new dimension to Malcolm being wounded in both the hand and the foot. Robb's discussion of place names in the novels is particularly interesting. Arnstead in *David Elginbrod*, he points out, means "the place of the Alder." This hieroglyph acquires a fresh significance when we relate it to Anodos's experience with the Alder-maiden in *Phantastes*.

Though this approach throws a new and fascinating light on the novels, it is perhaps at its weakest when extended to the fantasy [end of

**page 38]** works. There the symbols *are* the reality, and to interpret them is perhaps to lead the reader further from the heart of the works' meaning. *Lilith* and *Phantastes* must communicate through their symbols at an emotional level or their visions have failed to touch us at all. An intellectual understanding of the meaning of these works may be interesting to the critic, but it will always fall short of explaining the emotional power of MacDonald's fantasy.

The overwhelming impression left by Robb's investigation of MacDonald's work is one of a satisfying coherence and unity between his beliefs and his art. Further he highlights MacDonald's unique gift for communicating on a number of levels apart from the literal one of conventional prose fiction. In his last chapter, however, Robb grapples with the paradox that while this gift only becomes apparent when MacDonald's works are read in bulk, MacDonald has suffered from a readership that historically has only been interested in parts, or aspects, of his work. Until his work can be considered as a whole, his place "between oblivion and universal acclaim" has yet to be decided. **[39]**