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Inklings 13 Yearbook, Scottish Fantasy Literature, and Origins of Narrative

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Book Reviews

We are pleased to include book and journal reviews again in this issue. The absence of any reviews in number 14 was not due to any sudden loss of interest in MacDonald amongst publishers, but simply because we do not always learn of new books until some time after they are published. Now that we are on the Internet this situation should change rapidly.

The five volumes of MacDonald reprints brought out this year by Johannesen are exceptionally important. Not only have most of the titles been especially difficult to obtain on the second-hand market, but several of them are absolutely crucial to a proper understanding of MacDonald's thought. *Weighed and Wanting* is possibly the most powerful of all MacDonald's novels: much of it is painful reading, but when the glory of God does break through the dark clouds the effect is all the more glorious. *Far Above Rubies* is very important for the autobiographical details which it provides regarding events in MacDonald's adult life and his response to them. *Salted With Fire* has been described as the work of a tired man manipulating outworn symbols, but in fact MacDonald is making a last effort to show how these symbols are of universal and timeless value. *A Dish of Orts* collects together all MacDonald's essays which he wished to preserve. Despite lyrical passages their style in general is poor, as he readily admits, but the content places some of them in the forefront of Christian writing. *England's Antiphon* will be a delightful surprise to most MacDonald enthusiasts. Some of the works of religious poets which he explores will never again be popular, but his insight into the great poems illuminates the spiritual core of each poem in a truly remarkable way. The book also contains a series of important observations on the way in which mainstream science came to be opposed to the spiritual development of Britain.

The Johannesen's enormous publishing venture will be completed by the spring of 1997. It is astonishing that this family, self-taught in printing and publishing, have been able to defy "the rulers of the darkness of this world" and bring out all the volumes according to their original schedule! It is now our task to see that these "principalities [and] powers" do not achieve their ends by promoting total neglect of the venture.

***Inklings* 13 Yearbook of the Inklings Gesellschaft 1995. p.p.243 p/b.**

This issue of *Inklings* includes all the papers delivered at the 1995 *Lilith* Symposium. Difficulties experienced in bringing out this number are reflected in less meticulous proof-reading than in recent issues—most obviously perhaps in the scene from the dramatic production *The Wanderer* (also published in **[end of page 46]** *North Wind* 14, pp. 73-74). Translations of all the papers delivered in German were published in *North Wind* 14, so are not considered here.

When Manfred Siebald read his fine paper on the *Diary of an Old Soul*, it set many of us excitedly returning to the book with fresh eyes. But, alas, MacDonald's fantastically tortured syntax makes it incomprehensible to the ordinary reader. Siebald suggests that the problem occurs because MacDonald never had time to polish the verses. That is highly unlikely, since virtually all his verse which he revised becomes more convoluted with each successive polishing. Study of this undeniably important work must be left to those—such as connoisseurs of nineteenth century hymns—who have gained the patience and skill to unravel confused syntax!

Giorgio Spina contributes a richly stimulating paper on "Contrapositions, Correspondences and Symmetries in George MacDonald's Fantasy." He brings out the extraordinary mathematical harmonies in the fantasies and examines how MacDonald explores the parallelism between the laws of physics and equally all-pervasive moral laws. Drawing upon Stephen Prickett's paper on "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald" in *North Wind* 2, he suggests that "the central core" at the base of the fantasies is the contrapuntal relationship between the material and spiritual worlds. He shows how MacDonald's approach is akin to the vertical eschatological approach of Dante. He contrasts this with an approach like Shakespeare's, where "the contraposition of the two worlds in the representation of the human existential drama ranges on the earthly surface."

John Docherty demonstrates the remarkable extent to which the structure of *Lilith* derives from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. Hubert Nicholson recognised some of MacDonald's apparent borrowings in *A Voyage to Wonderland* (1947), but he (like Raphael Shaberman who followed him very closely) concluded that they must arise because both books were "built with stones fetched from the same ruined chapels and buried temples." This hypothesis, however, is refuted by the way the many complex allusions appear in the same sequence as in Carroll's text and subtly counter-point it.

Roderick McGillis explores the initial reception of *Lilith* and its

subsequent treatment by critics. He points out that Greville MacDonald's assessment of the book's reception changed totally between 1895 and 1924.

Stephen Prickett explores MacDonald's treatment of death in *Lilith*. He considers C.S. Lewis's analysis of the book (in a letter to Arthur Greeves of 1 Sept. 1933) and suggests that Lilith derives from Coleridge's Geraldine in "Christabel." Examining the fragments of poetry which are the centrepiece of *Lilith* he points out that they are "in a language which Vane had never heard before but which he nevertheless understood perfectly." Thus they are "in [47] some sense Lilith." It necessarily follows that "she takes the form of her victim's most cherished and noblest desires." "Only those who have . . . 'died', it is implied, will be proof against the temptations of idealism embodied in Lilith." That is to say: death, seen from the other side, is the "sacrament" which acknowledges man's total dependence upon God. The problem remains of Lilith's erotic attraction, so Prickett proposes that: "Just as the intellectual attraction of what Lilith stands for is transmuted into a strong sexual attraction for Lilith herself, so now the attraction of Mr Raven's 'house of death' carries an almost equivalent erotic charge." This is not easily comprehensible and seems to raise more difficulties than it solves, although it is in accord with Swedenborg's psychological/spiritual teachings. What Prickett terms the "extraordinary ending" of the book occurs when Vane has accepted "death" and begins to "dream," then, in accordance with Novalis' aphorism, he "is actually wider awake than in his original state." His task from this point onwards is to insist on the ultimate congruity of the two worlds.

***Scottish Fantasy Literature.* by Colin Manlove. Edinburgh: Cannongate, 1994. p.p. 263. h/b.**

Colin Manlove is that rare phenomenon: a critic whose books are as unputdownable as any of the works he analyses—and he tends to analyse very exciting books. The basis of his appeal is his zest, and in *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (1983) he identifies a similar zest as characteristic of all good fantasy literature.

Whether characterising a genre, summarising an aspect of a work—see for example his synopsis of King Arthur's aims in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (IFL 103-05)—or engaged in detailed analyses of a particular passages, he is equally stimulating. He is one of those rare critics who primarily wish to understand, not to pontificate, and his exuberant delight in some particular aspect of a book not infrequently means that he

fails to provide a rounded picture of the work. Another result of this approach is that he frequently changes his opinions. *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* seems to have been written primarily to correct some of the misassessments and one-sidedness in *Modern Fantasy*. He cheerfully acknowledges this. A good example of his ability to change his opinions is his understanding of the “discordant modes of the style” of *Phantastes* (MF 78). At first he claims that:

One is “purple” and highly emotive Interlaced with this emotive style, there is a much more forensic and pompous one which seems to be present to supply the kind of sober accuracy of sensation that the other lacks, but which in so doing becomes simply bleak The first . . . is a [48] would-be musician of the emotions, and the second a police witness (MF 78). In *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (73) he refers to “a *curious* mixture of precision and vagueness.” (my italics)

In *Scottish Fantasy Literature* he looks for positive reasons for this contrast of styles:

the language continually shifts from the vague or mysterious to the forensic and precise, as though nothing can quite be brought into focus: in this way the fixing power of the shadow is countered (86). Indeed it may be that the mixture of ascertainable significance and lack of it is a larger mirror of the mixture of precision and vagueness in the style; and that each undercuts the other, so that we can rest on neither clarity nor the lack of it. (87)

He similarly corrects his early assessment that Anodos’ “adventures in *Phantastes* are random and apparently unconnected” (MF 55), and now recognises (SFL 85) that this is merely how Anodos himself sees them.

Manlove has the courage, lacked by plodding critics, to recognise that only parts of a work may be of any real value. For example, with James Hogg’s poem “Kilmenney” there is a powerful temptation for a critic to suggest either that it is one of the most beautiful and mysterious poems ever written, or that the weak later stanzas in some way nullify the beginning. Manlove, however, brings out the beauty of the beginning so effectively that one would have to have a heart of stone not to weep, then analyses the weaknesses of the ending in such a way as to lead us to a compassionate understanding of Hogg’s loss of the vision (SFL 51-55). Here, both tasks attract him equally, but not because of any pedestrian sense of a necessity for

completeness.

Manlove's recognition of the life-enhancing qualities of the best fantasy writing sometimes makes him determined to analyse the characteristics which make escapist fantasy so debilitating, despite all its seductive charms (although he finds none of the works examined in *Scottish Fantasy Literature* deserving of such treatment). C. S. Lewis describes how, when "waist deep in [what he terms] Romanticism, and likely enough, at any moment, to flounder into its darker and more evil forms" he made his providential purchase of *Phantastes* from the bookstall at Leatherhead station. People who have slid into those depths, provided they retain some recognition that all is not well with them, should find a lifeline in Manlove books. Especially will this be so if they have slid into the particularly treacherous region of the pit represented by much so-called "Christian fantasy literature." In that situation his *Christian Fantasy* (1992), reviewed in *North Wind* 12, will provide the lifeline.

MacDonald's writings occupy a pivotal position in all Manlove's studies of fantasy literature, not because he chooses to place them in such a position but [49] because this is their indisputable natural place. Such familiarity with MacDonald's mythopoeia can lead to failure to double-check references and failure to check whether previous analyses require revision in the light of more recent research. For example, discussing *The Princess and the Goblin* (SFL 95) he makes an original and telling contrast between how, while the grandmother figure "seems to expand [ever] further beyond the walls of her room . . . [t]he Goblins, by contrast, are enclosed in their caverns." But he goes directly on to refer to the goblins being drowned ("choked") in these caverns "by the floods released by Curdie." This is inaccurate. It is crucial to MacDonald's imagery that most of the Goblins have left their caverns to attack Irene's castle and that they themselves released the flood—Curdie and his fellow miners merely dammed it back to protect themselves, with the result that it flowed along the passage the Goblins dug to attack the castle. Another example is where he describes Anodos, at the end of *Phantastes*, giving "his life to save other people," (87) when in fact Anodos' only conscious concern is that the knight to whom he is squire should not be misled. Another example again is his allusion to where "a pigeon is transformed to a prayer" in *Lilith*, although MacDonald emphasises that no transformation is involved (92). This creates a feeling of tiredness and unoriginality in much of the MacDonald chapter, in striking contrast to the fascination of the rest of the book.

At the beginning of *Scottish Fantasy Literature*, Manlove attempts to analyse the determining characteristics of the genre and very convincingly demonstrates that there is a distinctive collection of qualities associated with it, although in no case exclusively. It is highly instructive to see MacDonald's works placed in this context, although most of the examples drawn from MacDonald misinterpret his intent. In particular, Manlove repeatedly describes Anodos' discovery that his white lady is married to the knight (*Phantastes* ch.19) as a "loss." Yet it has been shown that these two figures can be seen primarily as Anodos' feminine and masculine ideals, which only become truly his when "married." However, Manlove's arguments in this section are too powerful to be weakened by any specific misinterpretations. Most chapters of *Scottish Fantasy Literature* are devoted to writers only indirectly relevant to the student of MacDonald, but those on Hogg and Carlyle can scarcely fail to suggest new directions of exploration. One gains the impression, for example, that a major stimulus to MacDonald's writing was a desire to continue the explorations of the spirit by these two writers beyond where they themselves were able to go, and that he does this in part directly and in part by going back to their sources and beginning anew. [50]

***Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* by Stephen Prickett. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996 p.p. 288. h/b.**

This volume continues the explorations begun in Prickett's highly acclaimed *Romanticism and Religion* (1976) and *Words and The Word* (1986). The subtitle indicates its importance to MacDonald students. Prickett explores how:

During the later eighteenth century the Bible underwent a shift in interpretation so radical as to make it a virtually different book While formal religion declined, the prestige of the Bible as a literary and aesthetic model rose to new heights. Not merely was English, German and even French Romanticism steeped in biblical references of a new kind, but hermeneutics and, increasingly, theories of literature and criticism were biblically derived, the Romantic bible became simultaneously a single novel-like narrative work, an on-going tradition of interpretation and a "metatype": an all-embracing literary form giving meaning to all other writing. (i)

George MacDonald's writings exhibit the processes of Romantic appropriation, and Prickett provides us with a solid basis for understanding

them from this aspect, much as Robb's studies have given us an understanding of their Scottish social background. But MacDonald is a maverick writer, borrowing from earlier literary traditions much more consciously and extensively than his contemporaries, and from this aspect Prickett's book is most valuable in helping us to understand why MacDonald's work has been so misunderstood.

Origins of Narrative is such a perpetual fireworks display of dazzling new concepts, old concepts made clearer than ever before, and neglected concepts revived that one would like to quote at length from most sections. His own summary must however suffice as a description of the overall aims of the book, although some sections particularly relevant to MacDonald need to be noted.

The discussions on the difficulties of translation, carried on from *Words and The Word*, could be helpful in understanding MacDonald's approach to translation, which he describes at the beginning of *Rampolli*. And the short section on Sterne gives some clues to MacDonald's antipathy towards a writer with whom one would have expected him have felt some kinship. The most directly useful parts of the book for the MacDonald student, however, are those which widen our understanding of the sources of some of the ideas of F.D. Maurice and his circle. There is a whole section on Julius Hare, the finest German scholar of the time in England, who was Maurice's tutor when he was at Cambridge and a lifelong friend. When rector of Hurstmonceux, he and his brothers "saw themselves in some way the English counterpart of the Schlegel brothers" (207), although his writings are "more explicitly religious than anything produced by the Jena circle," and the very different class structure in [51] England gave him far more awareness of the state of the poor (208). Hare's delight in fragments recalls that of the Jena group, but Prickett stresses that this only applies to fragments as "seeds," not as "ruins" (210-11). He describes Hare's *Guesses at Truth* as "perhaps the best source of second-generation romantic critical theory in the English language" (207).

Charles Kingsley worked closely with Maurice over a long period, and another section of Prickett's book is devoted to a detailed examination of Kingsley's novel *Hypatia*. The core of *Hypatia* is Kingsley's conception that: "It is only through self-consciously sexual love that the Fall is to be reversed and humanity restored to its proper relation with nature" (235). Prickett shows that this is "congruent with the religious intuitions of Schleiermacher," whom Kingsley had read, and he emphasises how both writers stress the

crucial link with ego-consciousness—the “I.” These are concepts which we see reflected by MacDonald in several of the short tales in *Adela Cathcart*. Kingsley told Maurice that his aim was to expose Emersonian (Neoplatonic) transcendentalism as “beguilingly like the very Christianity to which, Kingsley believed, it was in fact fundamentally inimical” (231). Hypatia, the pagan lecturer, is his Emerson-figure: “Thus Hypatia’s own lectures sound, in places, astonishingly like Schleiermacher.” Prickett does not explore the validity of Kingsley’s views on Emerson and “Neoplatonism” (and in fact “Neo-Platonism” is an unacknowledged editorial emendation by Mrs Kingsley of her husband’s letter). But he is surprisingly dismissive of the extent to which Neoplatonic concepts, in Mrs Kingsley’s sense of the term, were important for the Jena circle. He sees Novalis’ regard for Bohme and Neoplatonism primarily as a mystical looking-backwards (154); he mentions various of Schelling’s ideas, but not his debt to Giordano Bruno; and the tentative ideas within the circle on ways of loosening the more rigid aspects of the traditional Judaeo-Christian world picture he dismisses as an “extraordinary dream,” linking them with French anti-Semitism (71). This is a pity, because in *Words and The Word* he accepts Kathleen Raine’s analysis of “the ways in which the platonic tradition ‘lived on as the learning of the [English] poets’” (127). But in MacDonald’s writings the conspicuous Neoplatonic element seems likely to have been derived—in part via his friends in F.D. Maurice’s circle—more from the ideas of the Jena group than from the English Romantics.

Many other matters relevant to Prickett’s theme, had he been able to include them, might have thrown light upon MacDonald’s thought. For example, in his account of the Schlegels and their circle (180-203) he tells us very little about their attitude to that other great book “the book of nature” (although there is a brief mention of this matter in *Words and The Word*). But the field he has chosen is a vast one. We look forward to the further study due in 2006. [52]