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The *Lilith* Manuscripts

Rolland Hein

The *Lilith* manuscripts are freshly off the presses and handsomely bound by Johannesen Printing and Publishing. They are published in two volumes, the first containing manuscripts B and C, and the second D and E. The fascinating process by which the initial A manuscript evolved to become MacDonald's crowning work may now be viewed by all MacDonald readers.

The manuscripts have long been available only to those who had the time, money, and patience to consult either the originals, which were placed in the British Library in London by Greville and Winifred MacDonald, or the microfilm copies. Having viewed the originals and purchased the microfilms, I made xerox reproductions (some 1250 photographed pages) and set to work. Two very able students, Christopher Lapeyre and Teresa Caldwell Board, were invaluable assistants in the task of transcribing them to the computer. It was also my good fortune to have the help of Elizabeth MacDonald Weinrich, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia, who is doing her doctoral dissertation on the B manuscript. All together we worked for hundreds of hours in order to arrive at pure texts rendered accurately in readable form.

The immense effort MacDonald put into *Lilith* is intriguing. The original kernel version, dated 1890 and consisting of some 40,000 handwritten words, stands at such distance from the final fantasy that it could be positioned by itself as a separate tale and be seen as the product of an initial inspiration. Almost entirely free of any alterations, it exists in severe contrast to the succeeding four versions, each of which he labored over, cancelling out with heavy pen perhaps half of the respective texts, and adding in minute handwriting elaborate interlinear and marginal emendations and additions. The result is that the next four manuscripts contain far more words: MS. B consists of approximately 93,000; MS. C, 151,000; MS. D, **[end of page 15]** 144,000; and MS. E, 140,000. Three copies of printer's proofs also exist, containing a few minor last-minute revisions and, of course, final corrections in punctuation. The final published manuscript consists of about 96,000 words, in appreciable condensation.

The manuscripts following the initial handwritten one are all typewritten, obviously on different typewriters and with ribbons of different strengths. To further complicate the picture, the ribbons often produced faint

impressions. Some of these indistinct lines had been inked out, and so we constantly required magnifying glasses and sheets and often experienced eye-strain as we labored over and conferred as to what the original words were. Occasionally we had simply to give up and place a “?” in place of a word or phrase; at other times, when we were comfortable with an intelligent guess, we offered it, signalling the reader that such was the case.

Nor is this all. The B manuscript presents a set of mystifying problems quite its own. It consists of a pastiche of fragments obviously pieced together from other manuscripts (not extant), with elaborate crossouts and with connecting sentences that attempt to achieve a coherent narrative. MacDonald’s immense grief over Lilia’s death in November of 1891 no doubt explains his obvious struggle to regain his creative powers. Because we have not reproduced the crossed out lines themselves, readers of the published B manuscript will probably be struck by its cut-and-paste nature.

Perhaps the primary problem in publishing these manuscripts was to present them in readily readable form while at the same time conveying accurately the various revisions. To make a complete transcript of each of the 1250 pages not only would have been an undertaking so daunting it would have taken years to finish, but also would have created a task of deciphering that few readers would care to take on. And so we decided to let each succeeding manuscript reveal the excisions and additions of the prior one, confident that the respective typists (MacDonald’s daughters?) rendered accurately all his intentions. To see the alterations to MS. B, therefore, one consults the published MS. C, and so on. The alterations made on MS. E, together with the minor adjustments of the printer’s copies, are in the version published in 1895, with which all readers are familiar.

What rendered our task difficult, then, was to achieve a pure text of each manuscript—to discover what the manuscript was like before MacDonald took up the pen of revision and, with appar- **[16]** ently dogged determination, relentlessly pursued a text that contained as accurately as words could the uppermost reaches of his thought. The fascination for the process of composition itself, together with all that it reveals about MacDonald the man, keeps one reading these various versions. He was a perfectionist indeed. And he created a plethora of images and episodes—which to the reader may seem quite satisfactory in themselves—only subsequently to alter them radically or eliminate them entirely. Anyone who supposes that his artistry came to him easily will be instructed by noting the painstaking steps he took to produce this finished story.

Further, these intervening versions shed appreciable light on many of the enigmas of the final text. Images, as they initially occurred to MacDonald, tend to be more elaborate and detailed, and episodes more extensively described. He was wise in condensing the text as he did, for the final version benefits from being more compact and swiftly paced, but his condensations make his philosophical and theological intentions (deliberately?) less readily apparent.

Carefully thinking through these manuscripts allows one a much clearer understanding of MacDonald's purposes in composing this, his crowning fantasy, perhaps his masterpiece. They make exciting reading. [17]