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Book Reviews

George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs. Ed. Roderick McGillis. Wayne, PA: Zossima, 2008.

Bonnie Gaarden

This essay collection is based on papers delivered at the Baylor University conference in Waco, Texas, celebrating the centennial of MacDonald's death in 2005. Their variety of approach and subject matter offer something to all MacDonald aficionados. The first five papers deal with influences on MacDonald's writing, the second six examine the works themselves, the next two compare MacDonald's work with that of some subsequent authors, and the final paper looks at how MacDonald is perceived by different audiences today. To more fully inform *North Wind* readers about the contents of this provocative and interesting volume, I've attempted to summarize the major line of thought of each essay below. While some, to my thinking, could have benefitted from a more assertive editorial shaping and/or copy editing, without exception the essays are original and well-argued. The reader's own critical predilections and interests will determine the ones he or she finds most convincing and significant.

Part I: Precursors and Sources
David Robb: "'Perhaps He Will Need to Love Scotland Too': The Importance of MacDonald's Scottish Sources"
Robb puts MacDonald's work in the context of Scottish literature and culture. Scottish sources and influences on MacDonald's works include Sir Thomas Lauder, author of a famous account of the 1829 flood in the Highlands, and Huge Miller, a journalist, both of whom share MacDonald's dual interest in science and in folk wisdom. *St. George and St. Michael* resembles Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* novels, and *Castle Warlock* echoes *Treasure Island*. The supernatural fiction of James Hogg shares MacDonald's vision of the otherwordly as a dimension of the commonplace. MacDonald shares with the Kailyard School the theme of "rural cottage poverty as the home of virtue." And, in his fantasies, MacDonald made liberal use of both Highland and Lowland fairy-lore.

Gisela Kreglinger: "Poets, Dreamers and Mediators: The Metaphors of
>   Dreams, Night and Death in Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* and George
>   MacDonald's *Lilith*"

Kreglinger points out themes that *Lilith* shares with Novalis' *Hymns to the
Night*, which MacDonald translated very early in his writing career. Novalis
believed that dreams could be messages of God, and in their highest form
were synthesized with waking to bring the individual into the spiritual world
of the imagination. The fairy tale, for Novalis, was a dream-form showing the
union of the spiritual and non-rational with the everyday empirical world, as
does the dreamlike *Lilith*. Novalis celebrates the night as the place where the
mysteries of the Christian faith may be comprehended: In sorrow and loss, we
are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. This association is made
in *Lilith* most obviously when Mr. Vane partakes of bread and wine before
lying down to sleep in the Chamber of Death.

Robert Trexler: "Mr. Vane's Pilgrimage into the Land of Promise:
>   MacDonald's 'Historical Imagination' in *Lilith*"

Trexler explores the possibility that Mr. Vane, protagonist of *Lilith*, was
named after Sir Henry Vane, a pioneer of religious toleration in both America
and in England during the Puritan era, a writer of mystical theology, and
a martyr under Charles II. Fascinating links between Sir Henry Vane and
MacDonald's Vane include the unlikely coincidence that**,** as MacDonald
changed his protagonist's name from Fane to Vane between drafts of his book,
so the first ancestor of Sir Henry (a commoner knighted during the battle of
Poitiers) was also named Fane. MacDonald was familiar with Puritan history
and may well have felt kinship with Sir Henry, for both men used symbolic
language to discuss religious experience, and both were criticized for putting
too much emphasis on individual consciences and not enough on Scripture
and doctrine.

Fernando Soto: "Kore Motifs in the Princess Books: Mythic Threads between
>   Irenes and Eirinys"

Soto builds on Nancy Lou Patterson's earlier work as he traces the links
between ancient Greek religion, especially the myth of Demeter and
Persephone, and MacDonald's *Princess* books, paying special attention to
The Princess and Curdie. He compares the grandmother to Demeter, Hecate,
and Athena; Lina to the Gorgons; and both the grandmother and the Uglies

to the Eirinys (goddesses of vengence.) He also finds more general themes of Greek myth in the *Princess* books: the triple goddess (mother, maiden, crone) vengeance by way of inflicted madness, Hades, the protective string or thread, the placation of blood-guilt, and the achievement of purity or immortality through sacrificial burning.

David L. Neuhouser: "George MacDonald and Universalism"
Neuhouser discovers MacDonald's universalist belief (that all souls will eventually repent and be saved) in MacDonald's colleagues and friends such as Thomas Erskine, Alexander John Scott, F. D. Maurice, and Charles Dodgson; in authors contemporary with MacDonald such as Tennyson, Novalis and Whittier; in early church divines and in the Bible. He cites clear expressions of this belief in MacDonald's novels and sermons, and compares it to C. S. Lewis' idea, dramatized in *The Great Divorce*, that damned souls do not suffer so much as deteriorate toward insensibility. He observes that MacDonald's universalism coexisted with a vigorous belief in hell as a place of purification ("the consuming fire") and in free will.

Part II: His Master's Voice
Jan Susina "'More is Meant than Meets the Ear': Narrative Framing in the
         Three Versions of George MacDonald's *The Light Princess"*
Susina examines the three different contexts in which MacDonald cast *The Light Princess*: interpolated in his adult novel *Adela Cathcart*, included in a book of fairy stories for children, and written out on a scroll used as a prop for a dramatic performance of the tale. He looks at how the text is differently framed in each context and how that framing tailors the text to different audiences. The text written on the scroll emphasizes the auditory element of story and heightens the breezy comedy appropriate to a children's play. In the children's book, the tale is framed by pre-Raphaelite style illustrations which appeal to the eye. In the novel, the adult text surrounding the fairy tale provides the most complex and intellectual frame, as different characters comment on the story's meaning. This fine-tuning of the story for various audiences illustrates MacDonald's dedication to revision.

John Docherty: "An Ambivalent Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Some Aspects
         of Irony in *Lilith*"
Docherty provides a commentary on *Lilith*, theorizing that all the characters "live within" Vane and that the essential content of the book is "covert."

The most novel aspect of this reading is the author's view of Adam, not as MacDonald's spokesman, but as a foil representing an authoritarian style of Christianity that MacDonald rejected, and whose positions are ironically undermined by the text. The author demonstrates that the text of *Lilith* contains echoes of Blake's illustrations of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, of the sequence of initiation stages in the pre-Christian cult of Mithra, and of MacDonald's first adult fantasy, *Phantastes*.

Ginger Stelle: "Phantastic Parallels in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* and
     St. George and St. Michael"
Stelle presents *St. George and St. Michael* as a more realistic version of *Phantastes*, in which the character Rowland learns "the same lessons" as does Anodos in his journey in fairyland. She compares Anodos' Alder Maiden to Rowland's Mistress Amanda, Rowland's "complete self-centeredness" with Anodos' shadow, Rowland's unrequited passion for the virtuous Dorothy (whom he eventually relinquishes to a "better man") with Anodos' devotion to and relinquishment of his White Lady, and Rowland's combat at the Battle of Noseby and subsequent wallowing in self-pity in his sickroom to Anodos' combat with giants and subsequent confinement in the Tower of Pride. Both texts illustrate the protagonists' escape from selfishness.

Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson: "Curdie's Intertextual Dialogue: Engaging Maurice,
     Arnold, and Isaiah"
Johnson reads *The Princess and Curdie* as heavily influenced by a debate between F. D. Maurice and Matthew Arnold about how to read the biblical book of *Isaiah*, a text of great significance in British literary history, which received much cultural attention during the Victorian period. She directs the reader to a website listing over one hundred correlations between *Curdie* and *Isaiah*, including direct quotations. But she sees the fairy tale as influenced, not only by the text of *Isaiah* itself, but by Maurice's published sermons on the prophetic book. Also, she says that MacDonald embeds his own position on the Maurice/Arnold debate in the text of *Curdie.* Arnold's approach to *Isaiah* was to "demythologize" it, to "separate abstract truth from poetic husk." Maurice and MacDonald, however, saw poetry as essential for conveying truth, and in *Curdie* MacDonald "remythologises" *Isaiah* by re-presenting the truths conveyed by the Biblical text in his own fairy tale.

Susan Ang: "George MacDonald and 'Ethicized' Gothic"
Ang notes MacDonald's affinities with and departures from the Gothic as a sensationalist genre. MacDonald, like the authors of Gothic tales, invokes the terrible and the fearful. However, unlike more typical Gothic authors, MacDonald does so in a context that gives the terrible and the fearful an ethical dimension, thus rescuing the Gothic from its "perceived depravity." In MacDonald, terror works to "return one to a true self or proper state." In "The Cruel Painter," for instance, the terrorizing of the protagonist works to redeem him. Gothic tropes such as the werewolf and the vampire represent a "compromised humanity" which, in MacDonald, may be returned to a true humanity. And, particularly in *At the Back of the North Wind, The Princess and Curdie,* and *Lilith*, MacDonald employs the Gothic theme of the "homely" becoming "unhomely": The protagonists' homes become strange to them as part of the narrative process by which they lose their accustomed selves on the way to discovering their true selves and true homes. Thus Gothic elements in MacDonald contribute to the theme of a "recuperative return," in which the "bed of death" becomes a "cradle of life."

Roderick McGillis: "Fantasy as Miracle: Tentative Beginning Without
       Conclusion"
McGillis applies ideas from postmodern theorists such as Foucault, Lacan, and Zizek in finding common themes between MacDonald's *The Miracles of Our Lord* and his theory and practice of fantasy-writing. MacDonald saw fantasy like nature in evoking (not forcing) meanings and allowing readers to perceive harmony, waking a reader from his or her habitual "sleep" to see "through to the heart of things." Like miracles, fantasy deals with the passing of power into love and desire coming under law, giving glimpses of coherence in life's incoherence and a sense of "the blessedness of being." Fantasy and miracle both begin as individual experiences which are only fulfilled in community. Fantasy lets the reader perceive what MacDonald saw as the essence of the miraculous—the desirable and fearful nature of creation itself.

Part III: Some Children
Geoffrey Reitter: "Traveling Beastward: George MacDonald's Princess Books
       and Late Victorian Supernatural Degeneration Fiction"
Reitter claims that MacDonald's use of degeneration as a literary device in the *Princess* books puts him in the forefront of a late Victorian literary movement that "explores this theme by use of supernatural hyperbole." As a correlative

to the theory of evolution, late Victorians feared that the working masses were descending into physical and moral brutishness, while some among the upper classes were devolving into decadence. Stoker's *Dracula*, Well's *The Time Machine*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* all deal with these kinds of degeneration. In contrast to the writers who followed him, whose employment of the theme was socially or morally focused and generally pessimistic, MacDonald's degeneration is a metaphor for a declining spiritual condition that is reversible and that will in fact, in MacDonald's worldview, be reversed.

Colin Manlove: "Parent or Associate? George MacDonald and the Inklings" Manlove observes that MacDonald is frequently grouped with "successors" Tolkien, Williams, and Lewis as Christian Romantics who wrote fantasy. But in this detailed comparison, Manlove finds more significant differences between these writers than similarities. Even beliefs/literary themes that they do share, such as divine immanence, differ markedly in degree. The most extensive literary connections among the group are not, as many would expect, between MacDonald and Lewis, despite Lewis' claiming MacDonald as his "master." Instead the greatest literary affinities are between MacDonald and Tolkien, who share a fascination with the fairy-tale genre and with the theme of death. Tolkien also explicitly borrowed from MacDonald more than the other writers, as, for instance, in basing his orcs on MacDonald's goblins. Broadly speaking, Manlove finds MacDonald's fantasy essentially subversive of traditional worldviews, while the fantasy of the Inklings is essentially conservative of the same.

Part IV: MacDonald's Reputation
John Pennington: "A 'Wolff' in Sheep's Clothing: The George MacDonald
        Industry and the Difficult Rehabilitation of a Reputation"
Pennington laments the appropriation of MacDonald's work by evangelical or fundamentalist Christians who wrench the iconoclastic, liberal MacDonald into the mold of their own narrow, exclusivist theology by focusing on the "moralism" in his texts.[1] He traces this tendency to C. S. Lewis' famous preface to his *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, which deprecates MacDonald as a literary artist while lauding him as a "mythmaker" and a religious teacher. Evangelicals make Lewis' judgment a warrant for abridging and "modernizing" MacDonald's texts, crippling their literary value and, ironically, often cutting out of his novels the very religious teaching that

they claim to value. Secular writers use Lewis' judgment as justification for "improving" MacDonald's style and for seeing religious didacticism even in stories such as "The Light Princess," from which it is conspicuously absent. Thus MacDonald's most famous champion, and one large branch of MacDonald's modern "fan base," have raised significant barriers to the restoration of MacDonald's *literary* reputation.

Endnote

1. A personal yelp of unholy merriment: Pennington reports that an abridgement of *Sir Gibbie* was put out by a press dedicated to publishing works "that promote biblical understanding and godly living as summarized in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms." This is irony most marvelous! One of MacDonald's milder evaluations of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is that, if it had never been written, "many a man would have enjoyed God sooner" (*Alec Forbes* 61).