

1-1-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Gaarden, Bonnie (2013) "Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries. Ed. Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdziora, and Ginger Stelle. Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2013. Occasional Papers: Number 17, Association for Scottish Literary Studies. Print.," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 32 , Article 6. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol32/iss1/6>

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## Book Reviews

***Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries.* Ed. Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdziora, and Ginger Stelle. Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2013. Occasional Papers: Number 17, Association for Scottish Literary Studies. Print.**

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**T**he purpose of the sixteen essays in this anthology is to place MacDonald in his own time and explore the relation of his ideas and work to those of his contemporaries. The essays consider MacDonald, not primarily as a fantasist or a religious teacher, but as a Victorian.

### **In Section I, “Belief and Skepticism”:**

**Stephen Prickett** observes that the formerly obsolete word “tradition” was being revived during the Victorian period and subject to at least four competing definitions. He examines MacDonald’s concept of tradition as expressed in *Lilith*, demonstrating that the novel itself is deeply traditional in evoking the Judeo-Christian idea of life itself as a “supernatural text,” and concluding that, for MacDonald, tradition is invaluable as the *internalized* wisdom of the past, but should not be enshrined as an ultimate value. Its proper function is analogous to Virgil’s in the *Divine Comedy*: to lead us to the “divine vision,” then vanish.

**David Gabelman** presents MacDonald’s view of miracles (as expressed in *The Miracles of Our Lord*) as similar to that of Coleridge and F. D. Maurice: neither, as Paley’s *Evidences* claimed, a set of “rational proofs” upon which Christianity should be accepted, nor as myths, as the “higher” critics believed, but as demonstrations that *all* natural phenomena resulted, not from the workings of a machine, but from a personal Will.

**Jocelyne Slepian** reads in *Thomas Wingfold* MacDonald addressing the religious doubts of his friend John Ruskin, who had based his early evangelical faith upon nature, Scripture, and the church as revelations of

God. MacDonald in *Wingfold* proposes, alternatively, an experiential basis for faith, founded both on one's internal responses to the gospel's portrayal of Jesus, and also on the external results of one's own attempts to obey the Christ there portrayed.

**Ginger Stelle** shows MacDonald responding to the claims of Francis Galton, founder of the eugenics movement, that improving the health and intelligence of the species was a goal so important as to demand individual sacrifice. In *Thomas Wingfold*, MacDonald challenges Galton's definition of species "improvement" by contrasting the negative social and personal influences of a bright and muscular atheist with the healing wisdom of a dwarf who has been enlightened and purified through the suffering caused by his deformity.

## In Section II, "Social Reform and Gender":

**Jeffrey W. Smith** sees in *The Vicar's Daughter* MacDonald's endorsement of the social reform agenda of Octavia Hill. One major character, a "perfected" version of Hill, maintains that meeting the poor's physical needs with gifts of money was far less helpful than meeting their spiritual needs through "personal and sympathetic intercourse," engendering self-respect by providing work, and cultivating the imagination through exposure to nature, music, and art.

**Jenny Neophytou** observes MacDonald contributing to Victorian re-considerations of masculinity in "The Broken Swords," in which he locates true masculinity as existing between the physically powerful animal (who lacks morality) and the spiritually sensitive effeminate (who lacks strength). The context of the story as an interpolated tale in the domestic drama *Adela Cathcart* allows another "overlay" of meaning, suggesting that an analog to the physical work made possible by a well-developed masculine body is "ideological labour to aid the spiritual development of the poor."

**Philip Hickok** demonstrates that, in *Robert Falconer*, MacDonald departs from the misogynist Calvinism of his upbringing by emphasizing the feminine characteristics of God, as God is revealed to Robert through a (feminine) natural world and the feminine tenderness of Mary St. John.

**Christine Chettle** explores the use of fairy-tale elements in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and MacDonald's *Princess* novels to emphasize the power of education in social reform. Rossetti's text alludes to the need for self-education and renewed perception to help unsupported women survive and to create community, and MacDonald's novels illustrate that the education of women and working-class men can renew morality, allow men and women to share common virtues, promote individual change, and create

bonds between social classes.

**Ally Crockford** characterizes MacDonald's belief in the divinity of beauty as a variant of the aesthetic belief that art is valuable for its own sake. In *Lilith* and *North Wind*, MacDonald links this belief with his conviction that childhood, too, is divine. In these texts, he creates fantasy-worlds which defy conceptual description and can be comprehended only by the child-mind, which exists "outside of rational adult discourse" and is related to dreams and madness. The child attuned to the aesthetic fantasy-world thus represents a union of humanity and divinity that adults have lost irrevocably, and may only recover after death.

### **In Section III, "Ideals and Nightmares":**

**Elizabeth Andrews** shows MacDonald in *David Elginbrod* employing well-known tropes of Victorian sensation-fiction and religious fiction to call for "activism and social change." She points out MacDonald's use of supernatural/irrational plot elements, domestic drama, identity crisis, the helpful detective, the punishment of evil, and implied criticism of class and gender roles, all to encourage Christian service in the form of "practical assistance toward others."

**David Melville Wingrove** observes that MacDonald's Lilith shares many of the qualities of the Romantic/Victorian female vampire. Her story follows the basic plotline of *She* and *Dracula*; she defies God even as she shares the wounds of Christ in hands or side; her body is degenerating, she is associated with moonlight and the color white, and she preys upon children. What makes MacDonald's Lilith different is that she neither escapes unpunished, nor does she suffer a terrible destruction; instead, she is painfully redeemed.

**Jennifer Koopman** interprets MacDonald's *Donal Grant* as portraying (in narrative guise) the decay, and pointing toward a possible redemption, of English Romanticism. MacDonald dramatizes the moral and spiritual failings of Coleridge (addiction), Byron (perversion), and Shelly (atheism) in the characters of the villainous Lord Morven and his predatory son. But finally Donal, who combines "Shelly's good characteristics with MacDonald's," inherits the estate of the frail Arctura (the English Romantic tradition) and upon it founds a school to "produce virtuous Christian young men."

**Helen Sutherland** demonstrates that the practices of certain visual artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century evoke MacDonald's habit of inserting universal character "types" into his realistic fiction in order to portray truths "realer" than our common experience and his belief that God created nature as a mirror for the human mind. Holeman Hunt fused symbolism with naturalistic landscapes,

Edward Byrne-Jones used natural figures to represent his own mental states, while Arthur Hughes, MacDonald's illustrator, explicitly gives visual form to MacDonald's ideas. All of these artists, like MacDonald, "intertwine" art, nature, and religion.

#### **In Section IV, "Scotland":**

**Kirsten Jeffrey Johnson** explains how MacDonald's family history is reflected in his fictions. She pays particular attention to the career and concerns of MacDonald's maternal uncle Mackintosh MacKay, a Gaelic speaker, Church of Scotland minister, and community activist who worked to preserve and promote Scottish literature and culture.

**John Patriack Pazdziora** compares Thackeray's "The Rose and the Ring," Lang's "Prince Priglio," and MacDonald's "The Light Princess" as literary fairy tales which employ similar themes and burlesque the fairy tale tradition. But while Thackeray treats the literary fairy tale as an "elaborate joke" and Lang sees it as a valuable cultural heritage, only MacDonald writes with "a serious purpose" and continues both "the spiritual and mystical tradition of symbolic fantasy" and "his confrontation with death through children's literature."

**David S. Robb** reviews the sharply-divided perceptions of Scottish religion in Victorian England, where some (such as Ruskin) admired its piety while others (such as Eliot) excoriated it as primitive. In 1861, historian Thomas Buckle published a devastating account of Scotland's subservience to its "priests," both Roman Catholic and Reformed. Robb suggests that in the title character of his *David Elginbrod*, which appeared two years after Buckle's work, MacDonald may have attempted to refute Buckle by demonstrating that "Scotland's characteristic spiritual world is capable of embodying the saving essence of Christianity."

This volume is particularly valuable for suggesting new directions for MacDonald criticism, emphasizing MacDonald's firm connections to his age and to other practicing artists, writers, and thinkers who grappled with its pressing concerns. The essays are without exception well and clearly written, with copious notes and bibliography. Not all of them present new observations about or new readings of MacDonald's work, but they all solidly ground MacDonald in the particulars of Victorian British culture in ways that have not been noted before.