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A Profile: Rolland N. Hein

Christopher W. Mitchell

Life and religion are one, or neither is anything . . . Religion is no way of life, no show of life, no observance of any sort . . . It is life essential. (7)

The revival of interest in the person and work of George MacDonald, which was sparked by tributes to his genius by G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and W. H. Auden, has gained considerable momentum since the 1970s with the republication of many of his works that had long been out of print. One of the individuals in the vanguard of this publication enterprise is Rolland Hein, professor of English Literature at Wheaton College. For more than thirty years Rolland has been making MacDonald's work available, understood, and appreciated. His recent book, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*, the culmination of nearly forty years of reflecting on MacDonald, places him among the foremost authorities in MacDonald studies. This year marking Rolland's retirement from thirty-three years of teaching, it seems particularly fitting to look more closely at the man who has done so much to raise our awareness of MacDonald's uniqueness and power.

Born on 12 September 1932, Rolland grew up on a farm in eastern Iowa not far from Cedar Rapids.¹ Life in the Hein household revolved around the farm, and from the age of nine Rolland recalls spending much of his time in the seat of a tractor. He loved the farm and the hard work that went along with it. He especially enjoyed gardening and was given his own little plot to cultivate (over the years Rolland has developed gardening into an art form as anyone who has seen his garden can attest). When he was not working on the farm, he was either attending the one-room school where he was educated through the eighth grade or else reading, a practice fostered by his grandparents who read to him from an early age. Sunday was church. The church he attended as a young boy had, generally speaking, little influence on him, but Rolland remembers being spiritually awakened one Sunday by the hymn "Where He Leads I Will Follow." By the end of high school he had decided to go into the ministry and enrolled at Bob Jones University to begin a course of study designed for aspiring ministers. By his second year, however, he became increasingly disillusioned and confused. Feeling he could no longer remain at Bob [end of page 19] Jones, he transferred to

Wheaton College for his Junior year.

His move to Wheaton in 1952 was a turning point for him, both spiritually and intellectually. In his first semester he took Professor Clyde Kilby's Shakespeare class and in the following semester, his class on the Romantics. By the end of his first year at Wheaton College his spiritual and intellectual fog had begun to clear. Here, he recalls thinking, was "a Christianity that met the texture of experience." Like all Kilby's students, Rolland read C. S. Lewis and was particularly impressed by Lewis's anthology of George MacDonald. Lewis's frequent allusions to MacDonald elsewhere, set Rolland to wondering why it was that Lewis called MacDonald his master. It was a question that would significantly shape his academic career.

After graduating from Wheaton College in 1954 with a B. A. in English Literature, Rolland went on to receive a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1957 from Grace Theological Seminary in Indiana, still intending to pursue the ministry. In the summer following his graduation from Wheaton College he married his childhood sweetheart Dorothy Netolicky, who had grown up across the street from the Hein farm. A year after they moved to Indiana, their son, Stephen, was born.

Upon finishing the program at Grace in 1957, Rolland accepted an invitation to teach English at the Seminary's sister institution, Grace College. The pull to ministry, which Dorothy shared, remained strong, however, and after two years of teaching, they left Grace College to accept a call to the Grace Brethren church in Flora, Indiana. In 1959, Flora was a town of 1600 people with eight churches, four of which were known for their separatist stance. Although his church was one of the four, Rolland confronted the prevailing position and took the unprecedented step of joining the local ministerial association, shocking both his congregation and the other churches. The irony of the situation deepened when not long after joining the association Rolland was made its president. The congregation, however, appreciated Rolland's ministry and eventually came to accept his non-separatist posture though they continued in their separatist ways.

During his days at Grace, Rolland had little time to pursue his interest in MacDonald. His teaching duties occupied his days and a second job dominated his nights. But he had some time to garden, and the garden he and Dorothy kept was literally the talk of the town. His pursuit of MacDonald, while not as spectacular, was characterized by the same passion. At the time, much of MacDonald's work was out of print and used copies

were diffi- [20] cult to obtain. Consequently, he bought most of his books by mail or borrowed them through inter-library loan. He remembers with particular delight a purchase from a bookseller in Edinburgh, James Thin, which included a matched set of five of MacDonald's early novels. But he found greater delight in reading the books themselves. The most important and influential purchase in those early days was a copy of the *Diary of an Old Soul*, which confirmed for Rolland the compelling nature of MacDonald's conception of life. Rolland observed early in his critical work that the deepest conviction of MacDonald's life and writings was "that life without true religion is no real life at all, and growth in virtue is growth into life itself (7).

Whether his reading of MacDonald helped intensify Rolland's struggle with the separatist mentality of much of Flora's religious community (MacDonald had struggled against it in his own time), Rolland found the sectarian and elitist attitude and the isolation that it brought increasingly difficult to bear. Although he thoroughly enjoyed the pulpit and the pastoral dimension of his ministry, the situation grew more untenable for him as time went on, and he began entertaining ideas of returning to teaching. Wanting to test the waters, he received permission from his church in the fall of 1960 to enroll in a Masters program in English Literature at nearby Purdue University. As he neared the end of the degree, which he managed to complete in two years, two things became clear to him: first, he could not continue his work in Flora; and second, he wanted to teach English Literature at the college level. Knowing that the latter would require doctoral studies, he resigned his position at the church in the summer of 1962 and moved his family of four (daughter Christine was born the previous year) to Minneapolis to begin his studies at the University of Minnesota. In place of the teaching assistantship the University had offered, Rolland accepted a teaching position in English Literature at Bethel College that became a full-time position the following year. He pursued his course work at the University over the next several years during summers and at such times as his teaching schedule allowed. [21] Upon completing his course work he informed his advisor that he intended to write his dissertation on a particular aspect of MacDonald's fiction. The department, however, rejected the proposal and instead encouraged him to pursue a topic more in keeping with Philosophy. In the end, at the advice of his previous advisor at Purdue, Rolland transferred his program to Purdue University. He took a sabbatical from Bethel College during the academic year 1967-68 and moved his family back to Indiana where he prepared, wrote, and passed his doctoral exams. In

the course of preparing for his exams, he sat in on Dr. Harold Watts's seminar on theology and literature, a course that dealt with the influence of theology on literature during the various periods of literary history. The class proved invaluable, for it provided the necessary framework for the approach to MacDonald Rolland would use in crafting his dissertation.

Rolland successfully passed his exams and returned to Bethel to resume his teaching duties and to begin work on his dissertation. Early in 1970, he received an unexpected letter from Paul Bechtel, then head of the department of English at Wheaton College, inviting him to join the English faculty. He had not intended to move and the thought of leaving Bethel was not easy. In the end, however, he and Dorothy accepted Wheaton's offer to develop courses in Modern British Literature and Contemporary American Literature. One of the benefits of Wheaton was the opportunity to teach in the same department as his early mentor, Clive Kilby. In spite of the demands of teaching during his first year, he managed to finish his dissertation "Faith and Fiction: A Study of the Effects of Religious Convictions in the Adult Fantasies and Novels of George MacDonald," which he successfully defended in 1971.

The dissertation complete, Rolland set about to remedy the paucity of MacDonald material available to the reading public. Earlier, he had tried without success to interest a publisher in reprinting MacDonald's work, but in Wheaton he met Harold and Luci Shaw of Shaw Publishing Company. At first reluctant, they agreed to a trial run, and Rolland chose the 1892 edition of *Life Essential: The Hope of the Gospel*, twelve sermons that offer a compact, comprehensive introduction to MacDonald's thought. By the judicious editing of MacDonald's rambling style, Rolland was able to condense the volume to almost half its original length. It was issued in 1974 and proved successful enough to convince Shaw to offer in 1976 another selection: *Creation in Christ*, thirty-two of MacDonald's unspoken sermons.

Its success paved the [22] way for two more volumes in 1978 and 1980 respectively: *The World of George MacDonald: Selections from His Works of Fiction* and *The Miracles of Our Lord*. Rolland's careful editing and helpful introductions for each of the four volumes clearly contributed to their success.

In 1982 Rolland published *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*, a thoroughly revised version of his doctoral dissertation.² And soon after, an editor at Harper and Row approached him about writing a biography on MacDonald. Rolland welcomed the opportunity

and began immediately. In 1984 he spent his sabbatical at the Beinecke Rare Collection library at Yale University, which houses some of the MacDonald family papers, diaries, photographs, and letters. All of this material was brought out to him, uncatalogued, in shoe boxes. It took him an entire year to work through the letters and other materials. About the time he was finishing his book, he learned that the editor who had commissioned him to write the biography had left Harper and Row and his replacement had no interest in the project. Fortunately, Star Song expressed an interest and published the completed work in 1993. A year later, Shaw published a one-volume collection of MacDonald's fiction, essays, sermons, drama, poetry, and letters entitled *The Heart of George MacDonald*; this, Rolland had managed to put together in the process of writing the biography. Currently, he is bringing to completion years of work on the various manuscript versions of MacDonald's *Lilith* and hopes to see them published in 1998 by Johannesen Publishers. It is worth noting in this context that in 1994 Wheaton College honoured Rolland with the Clyde S. Kilby Chair of English Literature.

As Rolland Hein brings to a close twenty-seven years of teaching at Wheaton College, we salute his monumental contribution to MacDonald studies. While he has no plans to cease his work on MacDonald, he does plan to slow down a bit in order to give more attention to his garden out of which he has created another grand display.

Notes

1. The material included in this profile was gathered during an interview with Rolland Hein on 11 March 1997.
2. Published by the Christian University Press in 1982 and reissued in 1989 by Sunrise Books. **[23]**