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A few years’ ago, I was asked to write for *The Bottle Imp*—as the editor of *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*—a short profile about my research on Scottish literature since I often focus my scholarship on George MacDonald. It was assumed, I think, that MacDonald would claim Scotland as his home, certainly not England. Here is an excerpt from that piece I wrote:

Scotland has a rich tradition of faery, yet MacDonald still appears a marginal figure. While doing research in Scotland last year, I looked for MacDonald everywhere we went but could hardly find him. I needed, it seemed, to enlist Scotland Yard to track down the elusive writer. In Edinburgh I spotted an antique bookshop and found an 1890 edition of *At the Back of the North Wind*; the bookseller told me that not many people inquire about MacDonald, and that he knew about him but had never read him, though he was always meaning to. At the Writer’s Museum on the Royal Mile, dedicated to Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson, there is copious material on other important Scottish writers. MacDonald is not mentioned, not once. The City of Edinburgh Council on Museums publishes a variety of histories on its website: in Chapter 1, “Scotland’s Contribution to World Literature,” no mention is made of MacDonald, not even in its section on children’s writers that includes, of course, J. K. Rowling and others—Michael Ballantyne, Stevenson, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame. www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2010/05/scottish-studies-profile-professor-john-pennington/

I have not returned to the Writer’s Museum, so I cannot speak with assurance that things have remained as they were. But if the new book by Colin Manlove is any indication, it appears that the Scottish song remains the same.

*Scotland’s Forgotten Treasure: The Visionary Romances of George MacDonald* is, in part, an attempt at placing MacDonald in the center of
the Scottish canon. The first two lines and the last two lines of the book boldly state as much. From the Preface: “Ideally George MacDonald (1824-1905) and his fantasy works should need no introduction, but time and fashion in Britain have not been kind to a Scottish writer well-known and often celebrated in his day. This is particularly sad given that MacDonald is actually one of the finest and most profound of Scottish writers, equal at least with his now far more popular contemporary Robert Louis Stevenson” (ix). And from the Conclusion: “In these days, when the religious outlook is returning to favour, and science is even rediscovering the Christian universe of paradox under another name, it may be that MacDonald’s work will find the recognition it deserves. But certainly there should be a long-overdue acknowledgement by Scotland of the importance of this great writer in its literary tradition” (164). Manlove’s study makes a compelling case that MacDonald should stand tall alongside Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

For MacDonald scholars, Manlove is one of the essential critics. So it comes as a surprise to be reminded that Scotland’s Forgotten Treasure is his first full-length study on MacDonald. But MacDonald has been central to Manlove’s major works on fantasy: Modern Fantasy: Five Studies (1978), The Impulse of Fantasy Literature (1983), and Christian Fantasy (1992). In many ways, this recent work is a distillation of the key concepts that Manlove developed in these earlier works. In Modern Fantasy, Manlove has a tepid response to MacDonald, particularly Phantastes and Lilith, but his analysis of these two novels in Impulse was highly laudatory, and, in a sense, mirrors C. S. Lewis’s crossing the great frontier upon encountering MacDonald’s Phantastes—like Lewis, Manlove is now clearly in MacDonald’s camp.

Manlove’s study is narrowly focused on what he labels “pilgrimage narratives” or “journey stories” that “are involved rather with progress towards God and life beyond death, and with supernatural rather than realistic fiction” (xiii). Those stories are Phantastes, “The Golden Key,” and Lilith. Before Manlove takes us on the critical journey of analysis, he begins the book with two chapters that introduce MacDonald to the non-specialist. The first chapter is a succinct overview of MacDonald’s life and temperament, the second chapter devoted to MacDonald’s beliefs, particularly his theological leanings. The third chapter—“Before MacDonald”—highlights literary influences (Dante, Spenser, Milton, and the English and German Romantics [the usual suspects]) but also places MacDonald within the scientific community (Chambers, Lyell, Darwin, and Huxley), as well as
within the developing canon of American literature (Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Twain). While Manlove does not break new ground in these introductory chapters, they do highlight the three-fold purpose of the study: first, to introduce MacDonald to new readers; second, to engage established MacDonald scholars; and third, to justify MacDonald’s literary ways about God to readers and critics. He succeeds on all these levels.

His reading of Phantastes (1858) in Chapter 4 brings clarity to a perplexing work: “No other of MacDonald’s fantasies is quite like it; none is so continually inventive and original” (40). As a pilgrimage story, Phantastes uses the landscape of the dream to mirror the power of the imagination to contemplate “the ultimate Reality of the universe: for inside his imagination Anodos is within that part of his mind that has God in its depths” (43). Manlove meticulously guides the reader through the seemingly random encounters of Anodos’s journey to argue that there are patterns that unify the fantasy—images of mirrors and doors, as well as allusions to electrical circuitry (anode). To Manlove, Anodos’ journey is one of desire and longing: “Phantastes can be seen as imaging God’s simultaneous presence in and absence from the image of desire: we are not allowed to settle on any one position without moving to another” (68). As Anodos must continually travel in Fairy Land, the reader must travel likewise to experience the power of the imagination to capture the spiritual.

Chapter 5 moves to a reading of “The Golden Key,” which was first published in Dealings with the Fairies in 1867. This shorter tale is often considered one of MacDonald’s finest. Manlove contends that the fairy tale is much too complex for a younger reader while being too simplistic for an older reader, a tension that is consciously created by MacDonald to force readers into “that perceptive innocence he calls ‘the childlike’” (79). The protagonist Mossy and Tangle represent two methods of journey to God—the via positive and the via negative, the one going by way of the world as divine creation, the other continually going beyond phenomena to find God” (84). The “golden key,” the fairy tale convinces the reader, is “not just like the key that opens heaven, but is that key, partaking in its nature” (97).

Manlove tends to read “The Golden Key” as an assuring pilgrimage toward God; in fact, he calls Mossy’s and Tangle’s journeys “joyous and beautiful” (97), unlike that of the characters in Lilith (1895), MacDonald’s last fantasy novel, who encounter a world in which “we deal with God’s creativity in terms of the hospital or the sanatorium” (99). In this chapter
Manlove focuses on *Lilith* while often contrasting it with *Phantastes*, for the novels are a kind of bookend to MacDonald’s writing career. In fact, this chapter continues the discussion that Manlove began in *Modern Fantasy* and *The Impulse of Fantasy Fiction*, and in his recent article “The Logic of Fantasy and the Crisis of Closure in *Lilith,*” which appeared in the collection *Lilith in a New Light: Essays of the George MacDonald Fantasy Novel* (2008). The gist of Manlove’s argument is that *Lilith* is about endings, not beginnings (like *Phantastes*), and these endings are concerned with rectifying the “self-separation from God as an often painful educator that would drive us inexorably back to Him” (108). To Manlove, Vane, a materialist, is as separated from God as is his nemesis, Lilith, and the book requires the reader to read “with a seven—rather than a three-dimensional vision” (139) in order to recognize the need for harmony between the physical/material and the spiritual: “However in the universe of *Lilith* MacDonald sees all things as reconciled in God” (155).

In the Conclusion Manlove reminds the reader of the inherent contradiction that appears in MacDonald’s fantasies as journeys of Christian conversion. In his realistic novels, poetry, and unspoken sermons, MacDonald is “nothing if not explicitly didactic concerning the Christian faith.” In his fantasies and fairy tales, however, MacDonald loses this didacticism without sacrificing his religious determination. How can MacDonald do this? The answer to Manlove is simultaneously simple and complex: “Because of his belief that God has his home in the human imagination and is at root the creator of his fantasy works, MacDonald feels it entirely inappropriate for him as a mere man to try to limit what God is saying to any single human interpretation” (158). In other words, God is imagination, best captured by the fantastic (not the realistic) imagination, and reflects the often chaotic physical journey one must take to participate in the spiritual. *Scotland’s Forgotten Treasure* is a major contribution to MacDonald scholarship. One can only hope that Manlove will take another pilgrimage with MacDonald in a future full-length study.