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The Cullen Collection by Michael Phillips is a collection of 37 novels published by George MacDonald (1824-1905). Eighteen of the volumes are updated versions that Phillips published with Bethany House in the 1980s, with the remaining 19 original to the collection. Phillips focuses on MacDonald's realistic and fantasy novels, though he acknowledges the importance of MacDonald's other writing: "[His] sermons, essays, poetry, and short stories wonderfully illuminate MacDonald's legacy as well" (i). But the real emphasis in the collection is on the realistic novels, where Phillips provides "redacted" (or edited) editions. The fantasy volumes—*Phantastes*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Wise Woman*, *The Princess and Curdie*, and *Lilith*—are not redacted or edited at all.

George MacDonald: A Writer's Life, volume 38 in the collection, is the focus of this review. In the Introduction, Phillips explains his reasoning for producing the Cullen Collection—to make MacDonald's work more accessible to the reading public. *A Writer's Life* is a collection of the introductions to the 37 volumes in the series. "These introductions," write Phillips, "have a twofold purpose—to give a continuous and sequential perspective of George MacDonald's life leading up to the writing of the individual books, and to acquaint readers with the background, themes, and uniqueness of each book and its publication." Phillips's ultimate goal is that MacDonald's work will be "read with greater insight" (iii). To achieve this end, Phillips frames these introductions to "introduce the individual novels" and to "tell a continuous life story" so that *A Writer's Life* captures MacDonald's development of a writer "in a single volume" (iii).

Phillips embraces what the New Critics would label the biographical and intentional fallacies—that is, the New Critics, who wanted to examine literature as an aesthetic well-wrought urn to determine literary quality,

believed that an author's intent was not valid since once a literary work was published it belonged to the public. In turn, these critics felt that an author's biography did not necessarily reflect the background and preoccupations of the literary work itself. That Phillips embraces intent and biography in *A Writer's Life* demonstrates a traditional—some might label, conservative—view of authorship and literary value. Phillips's approach makes sense to his enterprise, though, as the biography of himself at the beginning of the volume describes him as “a devotional writer and best-selling novelist” whose editorial endeavor in the Cullen Collection is to “reestablish MacDonald's stature in the twentieth century as a Christian visionary with singular insight into the nature of God and his eternal purposes.”

When Phillips published the redacted editions of MacDonald for Bethany House, MacDonald critics wondered about the value of such an enterprise. I wrote two articles—one in *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* (volume 6, 1987) and one in *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs* (2008). In the later article I wrote:

This narrowing of MacDonald to a conservative religious writer is exacerbated further by abridgements of his work that are edited precisely to highlight the religious focus of this work. Thus we have a two-fold contradiction: 1) MacDonald is redacted so his work can be seen in a fundamentalist light; and 2) these redactions are justified because MacDonald was not a strong literary artist, so he is in need of a strong editor. Such an editorial enterprise compounds the difficulty in rehabilitating MacDonald's reputation. Many abridgements are warranted, the editors claim, because MacDonald style gets in the way of the imaginative world. (250)

Robert Trexler has also remarked about such redactions of MacDonald's work. So with ambivalence I come to the Cullen Collection generally and *A Writer's Life* specifically.

Phillips has clearly provided a service to those who love MacDonald, particularly those devoted to MacDonald's Christian message in his work. Phillips finds that message more readily in the realistic novels, which explains why he has not edited the fantasy narratives of MacDonald. In fact, Phillips tends to spurn the fantasy works partly because they do not readily—or obviously—disperse MacDonald's spirituality. In the introductions to the fantasy novels, Phillips defers to Rolland Hein, and to a degree Richard Reis and William Raeper, three of the foundational critics of MacDonald. Hein, in particular, has read MacDonald's fantasy work using a profound literary

analysis of MacDonald's fantastic imagination, so it is unusual for Phillips to dismiss MacDonald's fantasies because they do not readily focus on a Christian message. For years critics have identified such spiritual messages in the fantasies. And these critics continue to do so. In *Doors In: The Fairy Tale World of George MacDonald* (2018), for example, Hein finds the "rainbow bright" and "gracious splendor" of MacDonald's Christian fantasies, for "to see the story itself as expendable is to overlook the basic fact that beauty imaginatively received is the most appropriate home for truth" (1). In other words, Hein makes a convincing case for the importance of MacDonald's fantasies as deep expressions of Christian and spiritual concerns. Even more recently, Colin Manlove in *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination* (2019) writes: "In these stories [the children's fantasies] MacDonald created a unique blend of fantasy and realism, and a peculiar depth of mystical vision, inviting us to see our world as continually penetrated by divine forces" (1).

That Phillips tends to dismiss MacDonald's fantasies—which are by far what distinguishes him as a vital Victorian writer—could be seen as an attempt unwittingly to undermine MacDonald's literary legacy by arguing for the superiority of his realistic novels, which Phillips admits are in need of serious editing. Phillips even writes in the introduction to *Salted with Fire* (in response to William Raeper's critique of the novel): "The mysticism of the fantasies blinds the eyes of analysis to the *deeper* gold of the realistic novels. In some very odd way, *Phantastes* and *Lilith* are the great eye-blinders of MacDonald's corpus, preventing its worshippers from seeing the true George MacDonald" (526). There is an odd gambit to Phillips's enterprise—to argue for the importance of the realistic novels that need editing and to critique MacDonald's fantasies, an ironic move since these works are seen by most critics as MacDonald's greatest achievements.

Recognizing that some readers might question why MacDonald's realistic novels are in need of redaction in the first place, especially if we are to view MacDonald as a significant writer, Phillips take pains to define MacDonald as a *great* writer: "What is 'good' writing? The craft of words, sentences, character development—the techniques of the *writing* itself—reveals how greatly MacDonald excelled in the art and craft. Critics evaluate MacDonald's novels according to their particular bias of style, but may not give sufficient weight to the *wordsmithing* itself" (131). Yet Phillips also apologizes for MacDonald as a writer. In his chapter on *Robert Falconer*, Phillips argues that it is a "moving portrayal of MacDonald's personal search

for a faith of his own” (109), though he also suggests that MacDonald’s penchant to insert poetry into his writing is problematic, as well as is his ““pulpit oratory”” (121): “It is both the weaknesses *and* the excellences in George MacDonald’s writing that are at the foundation of my forty-five-year attempt to produce new editions of his work. The goal is always to bring out the excellences of his craft and his wisdom, while remaining aware of weaknesses that can be removed or re-structured to enhance the whole” (121).

Another case in point can be seen in Phillips’s redactions to *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, considered one of MacDonald’s best novels that is important to Scots literature and the Kailyard school. On the one hand, Phillips praises the novel:

[It] was a resounding success. It was not merely a worthy second realistic novel, it was masterful and timeless work of fiction—a book with enormous depth of characterization, wide breadth of plot, unexpected humor, tear jerking pathos, and deft craftsmanship in the sheer “art” of storytelling. Throughout the more than 150 years that have passed since its publication, many have hailed *Alec Forbes* as the most skillfully designed and executed of all George MacDonald’s novels. (78)

Now that is unabashed sheer praise. On the other hand, there is a caveat: one concern regarding *Alec Forbes* that many critics have acknowledged is MacDonald’s use of intense Scot’s dialect, which makes for difficult reading for many. Phillips redacts the Scot’s dialect to make it more accessible. While this kind of redaction might be justified, other kinds of redactions contradict the claims about the greatness of the novel. Compare the original opening from *Alec Forbes of Howglen* to Phillip’s redaction:

MacDonald’s Opening

Chapter 1

The farm-yard was full of the light of a summer noontide. Nothing can be so desolately dreary as full strong sunlight can be. Not a living creature was to be seen in all the square inclosure, though cow-houses and stables formed the greater part of it, and one end was occupied by a dwelling-house. Away through the gate at the other end, far off in fenced fields, might be seen the dark forms of cattle; and on a road, at no great distance, a cart crawled along, drawn by one sleepy horse. An occasional weary low came from some imprisoned cow—or animal of the cow-kind; but not even a cat

crossed the yard. The door of the barn was open, showing a polished floor, as empty, bright, and clean as that of a ball-room. And through the opposite door shone the last year's ricks of corn, golden in the sun.

Phillips's Redaction (described in the Introduction as an "updated edition of a 19th century literary gem, first cut, polished, and set by George MacDonald . . . now presented in a fresh setting for a new generation"):

Chapter 1

The farmyard was full of the light of a summer noonday. Not a living creature was to be seen in all the square enclosure, though barns and stables formed the greater part of it, while one end was occupied by a house. Through the gate at the other end, far off in fenced fields might be seen the dark forms of cattle. And on a road nearer by, a cart crawled along, drawn by one sleepy horse. An occasional weary low came from some imprisoned cow, or animal of the cow-kind, but not even a cat crossed the yard. The door of the empty barn was open and through the opposite doorway shone the last year's ricks of corn, standing golden in the sun.

One would be hard pressed to argue that Phillips's edits improve MacDonald's original. In fact, MacDonald's description of the barn floor "as empty, bright, and clean as that of a ball-room" is a charming and significant detail.

Of course, Phillips is aware of the controversy over redacted versions. But he tends to fabricate a "straw" debate between him and the MacDonald critics other than Reis and Hein in particular. In the introduction to *The Princess and the Goblin* volume (which, remember, is not redacted at all), Phillips writes: "One of the discordant factors that has become perhaps more prevalent than helpful in MacDonald studies is the hyper-analytical lens through which many of his fantasies are read. From the faulty foundation, more nonsense per square inch has been written and published about this aspect of MacDonald's work than any other. MacDonald's primary vision was a *spiritual* one" (180). That dismissiveness of any critical inquiry not aligned with Phillips's emphasis on MacDonald's spiritual vision is unfortunate and makes *A Writer's Life* problematic for the myriad of scholars over time who have devoted their careers to interpreting MacDonald in order to demonstrate his importance as a writer.

Yet Phillips, it seems, wants to enter the critical debate, often creating tension. He writes in a note for *Thomas Wingfold Curate*: "Are some of

MacDonald's originals 'bad' literature? Are they improved by updating . . . or are the new editions tantamount to censorship? Let the discussion continue" (280). There is no easy answer to this question. One senses, however, that Phillips's enterprise in the Cullen Collection is to promote MacDonald as a conservative Christian whose message is needed to ward off a godless society. He writes in the introduction to *Sir Gibbie* of the declining popularity of MacDonald's realistic novels:

Bluntly put, MacDonald's novels quickly became "yesterday's news." His deeply spiritual themes were the greatest impediment of all. The twentieth was the great secular century, at just past the halfway point of which came the announcement: God is dead. In a secular world of communism, humanism, atomic bombs, the Beatles, Viet Nam, Woodstock, Watergate, and, as the century sped toward a new millennium, even more rampant drug use, the excesses of progressivism, the normalization of homosexuality, misogynist rap music, abortion, sex trafficking, gay marriage, and Islamic terrorism, for most modernists the spirituality of a Victorian like MacDonald seemed anachronistic in the extreme. (317)

Bluntly put: the editor of the Cullen Collection should never have allowed such a statement to be published.

The best feature of *A Writer's Life* is Phillips's detailed analysis of the various editions of MacDonald's novels. It is as if he provides an expanded narrative of the material found in James Malcolm Bulloch's 1925 essay published in the *Aberdeen University Library Bulletin*: "A Bibliography of George MacDonald." (Phillips even includes an excerpt from Bulloch's article in Appendix 2.) Phillips doggedly—in a good sense—tracks down the various editions of particular novels to determine what is the most reliable edition that is closest to MacDonald's vision. In a few cases Phillips points out the discrepancy between American and British editions, even arguing that MacDonald might have published editions first in America, especially after he made acquaintances with American publishers after his successful lecture tour of the United States. Yet here again I find myself somewhat ambivalent: why the obsession with determining the most reliable edition of a MacDonald novel if the intent is to redact it?

The Cullen Collection is a labor of love by Michael Phillips. *A Writer's Life* distills this passion for MacDonald into one volume. That he is dedicated to getting the works of George MacDonald out to even more readers is a gift itself. More precisely, it is the gifts of the child Christ. So let

us celebrate the intent of this enterprise, even as we question the motives and the approach that the Cullen Collection takes.

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