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## Colin Manlove and Stephen Prickett and George MacDonald Studies

Roderick McGillis

**W**e keep hearing that 2020 has been a year to forget, so many unpleasant things have happened, most obviously the COVID-19 pandemic, but also a myriad of other things, both environmental and social. Yes, this has been a year we look to put behind us. What I say here is, perhaps, not precisely accurate. It is quite possible that those of us who take an interest in the works of George MacDonald will see 2020 as a year of sadness, because we lost two of our most compelling critics, Colin Manlove and Stephen Prickett. However, the loss of these two writers, colleagues, and friends is not something we shall soon forget, and rightly so. Colin and Stephen will remain with us through their ground-breaking writing. Both of these writers are crucial to our current understanding and valuation of George MacDonald and his works, and without them, MacDonald studies would not be as vigorous as it is. They are the two founding fathers of modern MacDonald studies. Without one of these scholars, I would not be writing this remembrance. I refer to Colin Manlove who, in 1973, served as the examiner of my Ph.D. thesis. I begin with him.

Back in 1975, Colin Manlove had not yet published his first book, *Modern Fantasy* (1975), but he had published the essay, "George MacDonald's Fairy Tales: Their Roots in MacDonald's Thought" (*Studies in Scottish Literature*, 8, 1970, 97-108). I referred to this essay in my Ph.D. thesis, noting that "Manlove points out that MacDonald's thought is inconsistent" (73). I make a few other references to this article in my thesis. In any case, when I came to defend my thesis in 1973, Colin Manlove was asked to serve as External Examiner and take part in my viva. During the oral examination, Mr. Manlove was thorough and searching. Then, near the end of the proceedings, he abruptly pointed out that I had misquoted him, or at least quoted him out of context. Needless to say, I was nonplussed. However, he was gracious and after some anxiety, I passed. I begin with this anecdote for two reasons: 1) to indicate just how generous Colin Manlove was, something I found was a trait of people who were readers and scholars of MacDonald, and 2) to acknowledge his first impression of MacDonald's work, repeated in *Modern Fantasy*. The impression that MacDonald and other fantasy writers

did not sustain their visions is clear in this early work, but it is an impression that alters over the years and Manlove's last book on MacDonald, *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination* (2019—see review in *North Wind*, vol. 38, 148-154) gives us a writer whose vision is deep, coherent, and consistent.

*Modern Fantasy* is an important book in both studies of fantasy and studies of MacDonald. Here Colin (if I may use first names in this essay) sets out to define a genre: “A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms” (1). This definition is, perhaps, incomplete, but when Colin created it, it was an essential starting point for our understanding of a long-neglected genre. “Evoking wonder” remains true and certainly fits MacDonald's work. The supernatural is also probably still relevant, although certain forms of fantasy, post-apocalyptic fantasy, for example, need not contain, strictly speaking, the supernatural. In MacDonald's case, his fairy tales certainly give the feeling of the supernatural. The final turn to Colin's definition allows for either the characters or the readers to feel the supernatural in the events of the fiction. This acknowledgement of fantasy's effect on readers in sharing the sensitivities of the text is nice. All fiction has its effect on readers in ways unique to specific genres, and fantasy's effect is no doubt, as Colin postulates, to bring the reader into contact with things not (normally?) available to us in the natural world. This is certainly the case with MacDonald's fantasies.

More to the point here is the chapter on MacDonald in *Modern Fantasy*. Colin had very little to work from, mostly just Greville's biography of his parents and the critical study by Robert Lee Wolff that had appeared in 1961, and a few other shorter pieces, such as the famous Preface by C. S. Lewis. Consequently, *Modern Fantasy* is pioneering. In one chapter of 43 pages, Colin gives a review of MacDonald's life and a careful and thorough reading of MacDonald's works of fantasy, both short and long, both for children and for adults. His method is to examine MacDonald's ideas and locate instances of his thought in the various longer and shorter works. In other words, he does not provide separate readings for each work, but rather explores MacDonald's thought in relation to his fantasy writing. In one long paragraph dealing with “the role of the human will,” Colin examines mostly *Lilith*, but he includes *Phantastes*, the book of sermons, *The Hope of the Gospel*, and in a note, *Unspoken Sermons 3*. He comes to the conclusion that the human will cannot avoid God's will, and therefore evil is not something

permanent; it is bound to end, to change into good. "With a position like this the orthodox notion of God's justice disappears" (61-62).

In another long paragraph in which Colin explores MacDonald's notion of the unconscious imagination, he moves through a range of MacDonald's texts: "The Golden Key," *At the Back of the North Wind*, *Lilith*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and in a note *The Princess and Curdie*. As he examines this aspect of imagination, Colin comes to the conclusion that "perception in MacDonald's fairy tales thus appears to border on the solipsistic" (74). He does not shy away from making provocative assertions regarding MacDonald's works, and this somewhat audacious maneuver works to rouse the reader's faculties to act. I echo Blake here to indicate that both MacDonald and Colin share Blake's desire to activate the reader's thought. I might add that Colin discusses both the adult and the children's works without making a distinction between them; in other words, he accepts the complexity and sophistication of the works for children on an equal basis with *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, two works of considerable complexity.

Finally, I note Colin's understanding of MacDonald's tendency to give us "mysterious symbols and events" that "hit us at a level beyond the powers of rationalization" (90). This is an insight that stays with him through his many comments on MacDonald over the years. The title of his book, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (1983), suggests that fantasy, including MacDonald's, has a sudden force that hits us like an electrical charge. There is something convincing in this idea. I might add, as the commentary on MacDonald in this book demonstrates, that Colin brings to this acceptance of the works' appeal to feelings a critic's eye to structure and meaning. In this instance, he explores the circular structure of MacDonald's works, especially *Phantastes* and *Lilith*.

Between Colin's first book and his last, he published fourteen books, nearly all dealing with fantasy. Not only did he champion MacDonald's work at a time when MacDonald was little known, considered a minor figure in Victorian literature, but he also argued for the value of literature long shunted to the sidelines of literary study. He worked tirelessly to explore fantasy in its many wonders and expressions, notably discerning national traits in the fantasy of Scottish and English writers. He brought a sharp critical eye and a clinical prose style to his work on MacDonald and others. His writing is clear; he avoided the obfuscation often found in critical writing that depends upon the literary theory that became ascendant after the 1970s. His writing on MacDonald is essential for any serious reader of MacDonald's work. The

same can be said of Stephen Prickett's work.

Stephen Prickett and I met in 1995 at a conference on *Lilith* in Cologne, Germany. Thereafter, I carried on an intermittent correspondence with him, and much later John Pennington and I asked Stephen to write the Preface to our edition of *At the Back of the North Wind* (2011). By then, Stephen was a distinguished scholar and teacher who had accumulated many awards and much recognition for his work over the years. He certainly did not need the task we asked of him, but he graciously accepted. Once again, I note the generosity and kindness that people in the MacDonald community exhibit. In just four pages, Stephen offers a brilliant reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*, enlightening us most importantly about its status as a children's book that challenges "the entire social order" (12).

In terms of his scholarship, I first came across Stephen's work in his book, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (1976), which contains a chapter on Matthew Arnold and George MacDonald. It nicely offers a comparison between Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" and MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*. This chapter, like Colin's early essay in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, is a portent of things to come. In 1979, Stephen published *Victorian Fantasy* (revised and extended in 2005), a work of excavation, beginning with a chapter on "The Evolution of a Word," the word "fantasy."

As I wrote at the time: Prickett "chronicles the change in meaning of the word 'fantasy' in the one hundred and fifty years from 1750 to 1900" (Review 86). He notes that in 1825 "something very extraordinary happened," and the word altered its association with madmen and children and took on a "new status" as, along with "imagination," "hurrah words" (6). Horace Walpole takes up much of the discussion (also William Beckford), and this location of the beginning of our modern sense of fantasy in the eighteenth century is most helpful. Stephen's interest is historical rather than theoretical, as he notes in the Preface to the second edition (xvii). Accordingly, he traces the shifts in meaning of the word in the nineteenth century. He goes on to discuss literary manifestations of fantasy throughout the Victorian period, including the works of MacDonald. In the second edition, he adds an extended discussion of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, and he delves into the influence of the German Romantic writers on MacDonald. I think Stephen is the first, and perhaps only, writer to examine MacDonald's use of the *Bildungsroman*. Once again, Stephen's interest is historical, and the turning of historical information into critical insight. Here the insight has to

do with irony, a “pervasive sense of irony” derived from the German writers, an irony that separates MacDonald’s narrators from the events they describe. How many times do Anodos and Vane mistake what they experience? Finally, Stephen argues for the huge importance of MacDonald’s adaptation of the *Bildungsroman*.

If there is, as I believe, a sense in which *Phantastes* is the most satisfactory English adaptation of the *Bildungsroman*—much more so than, say, Dickens’s *Great Expectations* or George Meredith’s *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, which have been commonly advanced as examples of the genre—it is not so much because it is the most faithful replica of its outward characteristics, but because (to use a very German argument) it is the truest expression of its spirit . . . To find through Goethe’s irony an appropriate literary and aesthetic form for such an abstraction is an extraordinary achievement—perhaps in its own way one of the greatest achievements of Victorian fiction (191-192).

I ought to point out that the “abstraction” Stephen mentions here is the “contradiction between moral idealism and worldly accommodation.”

Like Colin, Stephen delivers a clear and forceful prose. Both writers scrutinize the books they read. By this, I mean to invoke *Scrutiny*: *A Quarterly Review* founded in 1932. When Stephen notes that “no work of criticism . . . is devoid of theoretical underpinning” (Preface xvii), he does not stipulate what theory or theories underpin his work. I suggest both Colin and Stephen trace their critical assumptions back to the *Scrutiny* group. I suggest this in the best sense of criticism that takes into account Literature’s social and spiritual significance. This is a criticism that speaks to both professional and non-professional readers. This is a criticism that takes into account the relationship between reader and text. This is a criticism that does not shy away from value judgements. And finally, this is a criticism that sets out to underline the importance of literature and its social and spiritual implications. If they differ at all in their theoretical assumptions, then Stephen’s work is akin to that of the New Historicists and Colin’s work is akin to the work of critics such as William Empson or the American New Critics. In other words, what is important to these two critics is literature itself, and its place in a continuing tradition of connected works. Both were prolific, and I have given only scant attention to most of their work. Stephen’s tireless effort to explore the connection between theological and literary expression came to culmination in his last great project, the projected

five-volume study of *The Bible and Literature*. I might say that Colin too was tireless in his explorations of fantasy across time and across national boundaries.

I met Colin and Stephen only twice. I have mentioned my first meetings with them, Colin as my Ph.D. examiner and Stephen at a conference in Cologne. My second meeting with both was at the same conference, this time a conference on MacDonald's work and legacy held at Baylor University in 2005. Stephen organized this meeting and Colin was a featured speaker. I had occasion to speak with each of them, but only briefly. As always, they were unfailingly kind and generous. I am indebted to them both not only for their work, but also their friendship from a distance over the years. Readers of MacDonald are indebted to both of them for their insights into MacDonald's work and for providing the impetus for a re-evaluation of a Victorian writer who, for much of the twentieth century, had been relegated to a footnote in studies of Victorian literature.

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