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## A Personal Reflection on Colin Manlove and Stephen Prickett

John Pennington

**A**t the end of George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, the narrator enters Diamond's bedroom and sees the young boy seemingly asleep on his bed. The narrator states: "I saw at once how it was . . . I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind" (298). With utter certitude, I'm sure that Colin and Stephen are also at the back of the north wind.

My career as an academic in literature is indebted to Colin and Stephen, for they paved the way for serious academic study of George MacDonald, hardly a household name outside of the devoted readers of fantasy, fairy tales, and theology when I started my PhD program in the mid-1980's. My introduction to MacDonald came a bit earlier: I met MacDonald in 1977, five years before the publication of *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, a journal I have been editing since 2006. Let me tell you my story about how Colin and Stephen are central to my academic career.

I began my undergraduate education at St. Norbert College, a small Catholic liberal arts college in De Pere, Wisconsin, in 1976. While I was an undeclared major, I knew that I wanted to take literature classes. And that's how I met Professors Robert Boyer and Kenneth Zahorski—and George MacDonald. Boyer and Zahorski were early proponents of teaching college-level fantasy and science fiction classes, mirroring what Eric Rabkin was doing at the University of Michigan. Boyer and Zahorski quickly discovered that there was scant material (outside novels) available for a class devoted to science fiction and, in particular, fantasy—that is, there were no anthologies of short works of fantasy. In my second year in college, I became the English department assistant, which primarily meant that I would type up book orders to send over to the library . . . and to photocopy lots of stories that Boyer and Zahorski were considering for their anthologies. I was asked to copyedit—multiple times, I might add—their manuscript that became *The Fantastic Imagination: An Anthology of High Fantasy* (1977), and here is where I first encountered George MacDonald and "The Light Princess." I then helped with *The Fantastic Imagination II* (1978), where MacDonald's "The Golden

Key” appeared. Then came *Visions of Wonder: An Anthology of Christian Fantasy* (1981) that contained “The Castle: A Parable.” I also assisted in *Fantasy Literature: An Historical Survey and Critical Guide to the Best of Fantasy*, a reference work edited by Boyer, Zahorski and Marshall B. Tymn. In this reference work MacDonald has 6 entries: *Phantastes*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, *Lilith*, and *The Gifts of the Child Christ* (a collection of MacDonald’s shorter fairy tales). As an undergraduate, then, I was on at least familiar terms with MacDonald.

When I went to graduate school at Purdue University, I eventually focused my study on Victorian literature, taking the expected classes that focused on the great novelists, such as the Brontë’s, Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, Gissing, Hardy and the poets Tennyson, Browning (both Robert and Elizabeth Barrett), Arnold, the “Fleshly School” poets, and others. There comes a time in graduate school when you need to declare a topic for a dissertation. Dickens seemed an obvious choice, though Hardy was also high on my list. But I got disillusioned when I realized how much had been written on these two writers. What could a first-generation college student, now in graduate school, contribute to the illustrious history of scholarship on Dickens or Hardy?

So, I rethought my plans. And suddenly I remembered George MacDonald from my undergraduate days. Doing a dissertation on MacDonald in 1985 seemed like a plan.

Here is where Colin and Stephen come in. My dissertation committee was not excited about MacDonald; in fact, only one member had read MacDonald and didn’t find him that impressive. Ironically, I discovered that Rolland Hein had done a dissertation on MacDonald at Purdue in 1970 entitled “Faith and Fiction: A Study of the Effects of Religious Convictions in the Adult Fantasies and Novels of George MacDonald,” the dissertation becoming the basis of *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald* (1982). Of course, no one on my committee had heard of Hein’s dissertation and professed that times had changed: dissertations needed to be on canonical writers, not on overtly minor writers. It also didn’t help that one member liked C. S. Lewis and reminded me that Lewis, who admired MacDonald, also called him a second-rate novelist!

I was charged to write a proposal to the committee to justify the ways of MacDonald to them. Yes, it seemed somewhat of a Miltonic task. And here is where I first encountered Colin’s and Stephen’s work; in fact, it was these

two critics who convinced my dissertation committee that it's permissible to view MacDonald as an important writer. Robert Lee Wolff in *The Golden Key* (1961) was one of the first critics to examine MacDonald; his focus, a Freudian one, continues to be important to MacDonald scholarship, though psychoanalytical approaches to literature wax and wane with the critical moon. Yes, that's a nod to a MacDonald fairy tale too.

Stephen's *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (1976) had an entire chapter comparing and contrasting Matthew Arnold and MacDonald. In the chapter "Demythologising and Myth-Making: Arnold versus MacDonald," Stephen argued for the importance of MacDonald in the literary and theological debates of the Victorian age. In a footnote Stephen writes:

What makes George MacDonald such an interesting comparison for our purposes is that he is hailed not merely by the twentieth century but also by his own contemporaries as the prime creator of the very genre which Matthew Arnold felt could not longer be seriously entertained by an educated man, fairy stories; in particular, fairy stories of a specifically religious bias. (213-14)

This claim, in fact, helped cement MacDonald as a central figure of the Victorian age—if Arnold is considered such an important poet and critic, then we need to view MacDonald in a similar light since he provides the contrary to Arnold's argument for the demythologizing of literature. Then came *Victorian Fantasy* (1979; revised second edition 2005) which further heightened MacDonald's reputation by arguing for the importance of the fantasy genre in the nineteenth century. As Stephen writes in the Introduction:

Against the mainstream of realistic fiction there developed a much stranger undercurrent that included works by Thomas Hood, Charles Dickens, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, Nesbit, and Kipling. In place of limitation and exclusion, each in his or her own way was in search of a wider vision, seeking the complexity and ambiguity that reflected their own experiences, even at the expense of form. (3)

It certainly helped that in the same year as *Victorian Fantasy*, Harry Stone published *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel Making*.

Colin played an equally important role. In *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (1975) Colin set out to define the genre of modern fantasy; he states in the Preface to the paperback edition that he was "glad to note that this

[the lack of scholarship on fantasy] is no longer the only critical book on modern fantasy, and two studies, by E. S. Rabkin and W. R. Irwin, appeared in America during 1976” (viii). Colin provides an early scholarly definition of fantasy, one that continues to be central today: “*A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms*” (1). The five writers included in the work are Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Mervyn Peake. In chapter two, on MacDonald, Colin focuses on MacDonald’s Christian, mystic bent and carefully analyzes the importance of the Novalis epigraph that begins *Phantastes* that suggests fantasy is where “chaos, imagination and mystical meanings reign supreme” (66). Colin then examines MacDonald’s “The Fantastic Imagination” to argue that MacDonald was torn between Novalis’ argument of freedom and chaos and the belief that there needs to be clear meaning: “To sum up: the nearer MacDonald gets to his mystic and unconscious ideal the more strongly he is pulled back by his conscious mind” (71). The rest of the chapter explores this tension in MacDonald, often at the expense of MacDonald’s abilities as a writer. Colin sums up, again, his view of MacDonald: “To sum up: MacDonald is what one might call a would-be ‘exclusive’ modern fantasist: he wants to have to do with the world only as a house full of mystic symbols, and with only the unconscious and imaginative side of the mind. But though he tries to shut out the conscious selves of science and the law, intellect and will, they keep coming back to interrupt the proceedings” (98). Colin’s skepticism over fantasy in general and MacDonald specifically balanced Stephen’s more forceful embracing of the genre and the author.

In *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (1983) Colin seems to have a change of heart on MacDonald—whereas in *Modern Fantasy* he is skeptical of MacDonald as a successful fantasist, in *Impulse* his reservations seem gone, not only on MacDonald as writer but on fantasy as a genre. In the Preface he seems joyous of the project: “Again, what is delighted in in fantasy is often not only the worlds themselves and what they contain, but the creation, the making of them . . . . But overall, under whatever dispensation, and in whatever direction, the essence of fantasy is delight in the independent life of created things” (xii). That enthusiasm for fantasy follows Colin in his analysis on MacDonald in chapter 5, “Circularity in Fantasy; George MacDonald,” where Colin does a magisterial close reading of circularity in *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. In this chapter Colin finds a unity between the

MacDonald's desire for freedom and chaos and his determination to create a moral, spiritual world: "Seen in this light *Phantastes* and *Lilith* themselves together form a larger dialectic: the one concerning itself with the First Things, and with true birth, self-realisation and movement into the world; the other treating the Last Things, and true death and the merging of the self with the greater consciousness which is its root" (92).

Colin continued to write on MacDonald, his last work being *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination* (2019). He also oversaw an update for the 2020 version of *Modern Fantasy*. In the Author's Note on the final page of the book after the index, Colin returns to his more skeptical side. He admits that he is often conflicted about the popularity of a genre or author and the question of aesthetics—is an author or work good? Or just popular? In a curious ending to the note Colin writes: "I had to cho[o]se whether to side with the 'truth' about a book's worth, or simply to drop the whole issue and assume value without investigating it. That I chose the latter course is my shame. *Modern Fantasy* remains the only book of mine in which I really opened fantasy to real investigation" (309). That comments suggests to me that maybe Colin was not such a convert to fantasy and to George MacDonald as his later studies seem to indicate!

I hope that you can see that my academic career owes quite a bit to the scholarly work of Colin and Stephen, who made George MacDonald into a serious object of study. So, it was with great pleasure when I finally got to meet them—and I would say that we became long-distance friends. I first met Colin in 1989 at the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts conference in Ft. Lauderdale, Fl. Colin was the guest scholar and delivered the keynote address. Ironically, I can't remember the gist of his talk, though I do remember vividly the discussion we had about MacDonald at a pool-side party after his talk. I met Colin for the last time in September 2005 at Baylor University, which hosted a conference on MacDonald at the Armstrong Browning Library, where Stephen was then the curator at the library as he worked toward securing MacDonald materials. Colin and I had spirited conversations on email over Harry Potter—Colin had just published *The Order of Harry Potter: Literary Skill in the Hogwarts Epic* (Winged Lion 2010), and he knew that I was not a big fan of the Potter universe, my article in *The Lion and the Unicorn* boldly calling the series "failed fantasy." In his Potter work, Colin writes: "I cannot say I was instantly transformed by the first book but I came to have a little more respect for the author, and since then this respect has done little but grow. It has now grown to the point where

when I recommend the Harry Potter books to academic colleagues, I am seen as just the sort of misguided enthusiast I previously despised.” Maybe Colin listened a bit to my arguments!

I first met Stephen in July of 2005 at a small MacDonald gathering at Temple Lodge in Hammersmith, a site not too far from MacDonald’s Retreat, now Morris’s Kelmscott House. I remember vividly Stephen taking my wife Karlyn and me to this extremely small pub in Hammersmith, The Dove (dated to the 18th century), where Stephen purchased the first pints and told us how MacDonald probably watched from his home the boat races on the Thames, which we were staring at as he spoke. Later that year I met Stephen again at the Baylor Conference. In 2018, I was able to connect with him at a conference at Taylor University in Indiana, which is known as the Lewis and Friends Colloquium. At that meeting I was finally able to give him a copy of Roderick McGillis and my edited version of *At the Back of the North Wind*, where Stephen was generous enough to write a preface to the edition. I still think that Broadview Press accepted our manuscript partly because Stephen was involved.

Rest in peace Colin and Stephen. See you at the back of the north wind!

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