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What a great pleasure for readers of MacDonald that the current double-number of *The Chesterton Review* is devoted to George MacDonald and the Sacramental Imagination! It contains six substantial articles on MacDonald, four of which were read at the MacDonald Society’s 1999 MacDonald-Chesterton Symposium at Plater College, Oxford; six MacDonald-related pieces by Chesterton, including the admirable introduction to Greville MacDonald’s biography (rereading confirms just how admirable); a rich and extensive Reviews section which includes reviews of MacDonald-related books; and an equally rich and extensive “News and Comments” section with various stimulating MacDonald-related pieces plus items on a very wide range of other topics, from an important address on eugenics to a discussion of the exhibition *Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ* at the National Gallery, London—which, because of the emphasis upon Christ’s humanity in the masterpieces selected, was one of the few events created to celebrate the millennium that was truly popular. There is additionally a report of a Harry Potter symposium, but it is only 25 pages and we don’t have to read it.

Chesterton himself is a superb reviewer and critic: he not only preserves but uses the vision and energies of boyhood. So he is not infrequently linked to MacDonald and to those modern Romantics, the Inklings. The truth is that we never learn so much as in childhood. Moreover, we all work over our early experiences. The importance of the art of memory for inner development was well-known in earlier ages. Plato, greater than his critics as usual, knew that knowledge is recollection—and this was well before the advent of “general knowledge” quizzes and other modern trivia which devalue true knowledge. The *Vita Nuova*, by MacDonald’s beloved Dante, is a work of middle age based on early experiences. It is a great innovative treatise on how the poet releases and transforms the past for its spiritual/poetic content. Ultimately, we know, Beatrice is his way to God. Wordsworth’s ‘Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike
by beauty and by fear,” though still aware of Plato, may be less exalted than Dante, but both the fostering elements Wordsworth mentions here from his boyhood are recognised by the Romantics as necessary for vision. And vision is what the Romantics are all about. Comparable working over of autobiographical experience by MacDonald is pursued by David Robb in his paper “‘Imaginative but Intimately True’: The Novels of George MacDonald.” He shows how MacDonald’s novels draw “on the rural and city worlds of the Scottish North-East which formed him before 1845.”

The musician Ralph Vaughan Williams once wrote on “Bach the great bourgeois.” With characteristic dry humour he claimed that what interests us, the world audience, is Bach’s message to his town and country contemporaries—we overhear his communications to real people. Brilliant upstarts with a world-shattering message do not last. So it seems appropriate that MacDonald is seen in his Scottish environment. The volume even achieves a period flavour by including many black-and-white photos of Scottish scenes—the landscape caught in the freshness of morning, the buildings a little less eroded than they are today, and over all a kind of Sunday innocence. Nostalgia for a golden age? domestication of the spiritual vision? Well, we all know the camera does “interpret,” yet the visual side of the volume seems harmless enough with these hints at a timeless quality—such as is attempted in Ronald Knox’s translation aim of a “timeless English,”—which many would have us believe does not exist. There are also photographs of MacDonald himself. (But it should be noted that Lewis Carroll’s photograph on page 54 of his friend writing at his father-in-law’s table has been reversed—MacDonald was right-handed!) A composite photo of nine Victorian writers—MacDonald in one corner, Dickens in the other—is to be found on page 42. Imagine entering the room had they all really assembled in the flesh! But they can and of course do meet in our minds. And it is surely well that other writers and traditions are mentioned: for example Kathleen Raine’s work and that of the Temenos Academy she founded, mentioned in Noel Dermot O’Donoghue’s paper on MacDonald’s *Lilith*. Kathleen is a great admirer of MacDonald’s work, and Wendell Berry—a representative of all that is best in the American tradition, whose more recent books are discussed in several perceptive reviews in this volume and who features in an interview—is a tireless worker for the Temenos Academy.

The other main contributors, in various ways, all pursue the theme of “truth.” Heather Ward writes on MacDonald’s fantasy and sacramental
imagination, in an introduction that would be hard to match. I wonder whether a cozy domestication is entirely avoided here, but perhaps, with the theme of spiritual growth, we do not always need to feel acute challenge. In any case, the term “sacramental imagination” is entirely appropriate, and indeed future-oriented. For it is the principle that will eventually unite us all. Regardless of our own or the writer’s churchmanship (or lack of it), standards of scholarship and artistic appreciation cut right across petty, as well as apparently more significant, divisions. The world-wide shift in the “centre of gravity in the Christian world,” explored in a new study of Christianity reviewed on page 145—where the membership numbers cited are indicative but surely not the whole story—in turn provokes the rarely considered question of likely future trends in readership and studies on our nineteenth and twentieth century British Christian authors. [61] Ben Johnson recognised Shakespeare as not “of an age” or of one particular country. We can now see that his famous phrase can be applied to many of these authors.

David Jasper takes up Chesterton’s description of MacDonald as “a St Francis of Aberdeen.” His honest admission of being “a relative newcomer to George MacDonald’s work” does not hinder him from quoting significant critics and writers, commencing with Coleridge’s pertinent distinction between “symbol” and “allegory.” Jasper’s theme is paradox. He admits that “[t]heology cannot get inside and set up a reassuring system or schema for us to emerge from, as a redeemed people.” Quite right! The Gospel is paradox through and through! Is it then quite correct to suggest that “[l]ike Coleridge . . . and like his friend F. D. Maurice, [MacDonald] sits uncomfortably on tradition and its assurances”? Jasper himself seems perplexed, searching for “a theology we have not yet found or articulated.” One would hasten to suggest: that Coleridge is undoubtedly the best guide, with his commentators Muirhead, Richards, Barfield and Prickett; that the poet-critics T. S. Eliot, Walter de la Mare and Charles Williams contributed significantly; and that the work continues today.

Colin Manlove picks up the common interest of mythopoeic writers in romantic theology. Without oversimplifying, he shows how Chesterton and MacDonald are in a way polar opposites. “Where Chesterton moves us from ignorance to the light of knowledge, MacDonald chooses rather to move us into the dark of mystery.” He quotes from MacDonald’s essay “The Imagination,” but also from the Unspoken Sermons. As all polarities contain something of their opposites, “[b]oth writers, too, do that paradoxical thing, they write fantasy with a Christian vision, and against the current of
contemporary thought.” Precisely! The Romantic movement is a protest, whether in literature, music or theology. It is surprising, in this connection, that critics do not seem to have discovered Walter de la Mare’s 1919 lecture on the imagination in *Pleasures and Speculations* (1940).

Stephen Prickett, perceiving the centrality of the library in *Lilith*, looks at MacDonald in the perspective of the European literary tradition. Here, without losing sight of MacDonald’s Scottish origins, we approach him as part of the European achievement. Rather than “Nostalgia for Eden” (which is Father O’Donoghue’s view of *Lilith*), Prickett shows how *Lilith* qualifies for a new genre, the *Todsroman*. He recognises the truth of C. S. Lewis’s little-quoted exegesis of the plot of *Lilith* in a letter to Arthur Greeves (1 Sept. 1933)—in particular that it is “against the belief that you can effectively obey the second commandment about loving your neighbour without first trying to love God.” In other words, we are to wake up to spiritual realities behind material existence, not to become materialistic idealists and fall in love with the material semblance [62] of beauty and truth. Lilith’s own manuscript explicitly describes the negative process (although the crucial verses Prickett quotes have been transformed into gibberish by careless editing). In the terminology of *Lilith* we have to die to such idealism. Prickett wonderfully links this with “The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible” explored in his important book *Origins of Narrative* (1996—reviewed in *North Wind* 15). In this connection his quotation from Friedrich Schleiermacher is particularly relevant to MacDonald’s aims:

> What one commonly calls belief, accepting what another person has done, wanting to ponder and empathise with what someone else has thought and felt, is a hard and unworthy service, and instead of being the highest in religion, as one supposes, it is exactly what must be renounced by those who would penetrate into its sanctuary. To want to have and retain belief in this sense proves that one is incapable of religion; to require this kind of faith from others shows that one does not understand it.

Prickett stresses MacDonald’s implication that to live fully we need a “stereoscopic vision” which enables us continually to be aware of relationships of opposites. Then we can become aware that when Vane is “‘dreaming’ in the sleep of death in Mr Raven’s house, [he] is actually wider ‘awake’ than in his original state.”

Surveying MacDonald’s debt to German Romantic thought, Prickett
particularly singles out *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, by Goethe, with the image of Wilhelm being given a book in which his life is already recorded. Then, broadening the canvas, he relates this to the Christian “appropriation and revaluation of the Hebrew Bible . . . as a prelude to the revisionist New Testament”—the subject of his *Origins of Narrative*. The discovery that Christianity itself is “born in an act of literary criticism” itself justifies the claim for exegesis as the self-awareness of the Logos. Here is a timely reminder that Christian mythopoeia is far from being what A. N. Whitehead (referring to religion in general) once characterised as “what a man does with his solitariness.” The Bible has taught us to see ourselves living a story: as “part of some great all-embracing supernatural text.”

Prickett shows that MacDonald is making the crucial point that in the “other world, what is in our world the physical reality [inevitability] of death becomes the symbol for the greater reality of human dependence on God.” Lilith herself “masquerades behind the self-sufficiency of fallen human ideals. She is, for MacDonald, the greatest temptation of all, and the last to be relinquished,” the embodiment of death of the soul—a collapse into what Blake calls “single vision and Newton’s sleep.”

The present world-situation has woken us all to reconsider the concerns of MacDonald, Chesterton and kindred authors and critics: themes such as the true [63] nature of death, the dream, spiritual progress, the problem of evil and its eventual redemption. These questions are now staring humanity in the face. Humanity is in the abyss. Do literary people appear a little sheepish, with no help to offer? Fortunately, this volume is full of material that witnesses to the creative, sacramental imagination. In the coming years we shall play our part in the choice facing each and everyone: whether the Kingdom shall be not of this world, or only of this world. [64]