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## George MacDonald: Founder of the Feast

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## Online Summer Seminar 2023

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### George MacDonald: Founder of the Feast

#### Abstract

Claims that modern fantasy is a continuous development dating from MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Traces his influence on the Inklings, particularly on Lewis.

#### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Influence of George MacDonald.; MacDonald, George—Influence on fantasy

George MacDonald: Founder of the Feast  
by R. H. Reis

In the mid-twentieth century, the creation of what C. S. Lewis called "mythopoeic fiction" has come into its own as a literary genre, most notably in the Ring-Cycle of J. R. R. Tolkien, and also in the works of Mervin Peake, C. S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. This genre may be roughly described as fiction which is fantastic in the sense that it does not attempt to create a world like ours (as the novel does), but does attempt to cast over its created world an aura of moral and psychological truth. Mythopoeic fiction differs from science fiction in not emphasizing science, and in not relying upon historical extrapolation to predict the future (the mythopoeic world is pictured as past or contemporary, and as parallel or even co-temporaneous with ours); it differs from pure Fantasy in its conscious expression of moral or psychological meaning or truth (i. e., Eddison's The Worm Ouroboros is fantasy, not mythopoeia, for it is quite amoral and pointless escape-literature).

Like other genres, mythopoeic fiction has literary ancestors, going back at least as far as Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene (late 1500's) and Phineas Fletcher's The Purple Island (early 1600's), but these works did not start a continuous tradition, since they produced no offspring after the Puritan Revolution (1642-1660). In the eighteenth century literature became excessively rationalistic and realistic, but in the early nineteenth century mythopoeia cropped up again in Germany, with the works of Goethe and, most typically, "Novalis" (pseudonym of the Freiherr von Hardenburgh). But it was not until late in the nineteenth century that the genre once again reappeared in English, this time permanently (it is to be hoped), in a few stories by the Scotch-born George MacDonald (1824-1905). He was popular in his time for his rather slack poetry and for his sentimental-religious realistic novels, but he is now remembered chiefly for his fairy stories for children and for his two remarkable mythopoeic masterpieces, Phantastes and Lilith. It is to these two little-known "visionary novels" that the twentieth-century renaissance of truly mythopoeic English fiction can be traced in a continuous line, culminating in Tolkien's splendid zenith.

The chain of circumstances, as far as I've been able to make it out, is a fascinating one. MacDonald's Christian "message" was sufficiently disguised in Phantastes and Lilith so as to be both effective and unobtrusive; most of his contemporaries didn't even recognize what was going on. But G. K. Chesterton did, and called MacDonald "one of the three or four greatest men of the nineteenth century." Then along came C. S. Lewis and William Blake. Blake, of course, wrote his mythopoeic works around 1800, but like MacDonald he was largely unread (MacDonald knew only a small part of his work) until the 1920's, when S. Foster Damon "decoded" Blake's symbolism for the first time (Rossetti, Swinburne, and Yeats all tried and failed). Therefore Blake's real appearance in English literature is a twentieth-century phenomenon. And, in the 1930's, C. S. Lewis began to be heard from.

Lewis's intellectual history was a complex one which has been described in his autobiographical Surprised by Joy. The essential points for our purposes are that he started as a modern skeptic but fell into the hands of Chesterton's orthodox Christianity when in his early twenties, and began to read MacDonald because Chesterton had praised the Scotchman so highly. According to Lewis, reading MacDonald's Phantastes began Lewis's conversion to Christianity, and for the rest of his life Lewis acknowledged MacDonald as his inspiration and even his Master. He made MacDonald the Virgil of Lewis's Dantean The Great Divorce, and piously edited a collection of MacDonald's sayings called George MacDonald: an anthology. Furthermore, Lewis's Narnia series of mythopoeic works is full of echoes of MacDonald's stories. One of his last works (Lewis died on November 22, 1963, so that his passing was rather overshadowed by another) was the editing of a MacDonald volume, with an introduction.

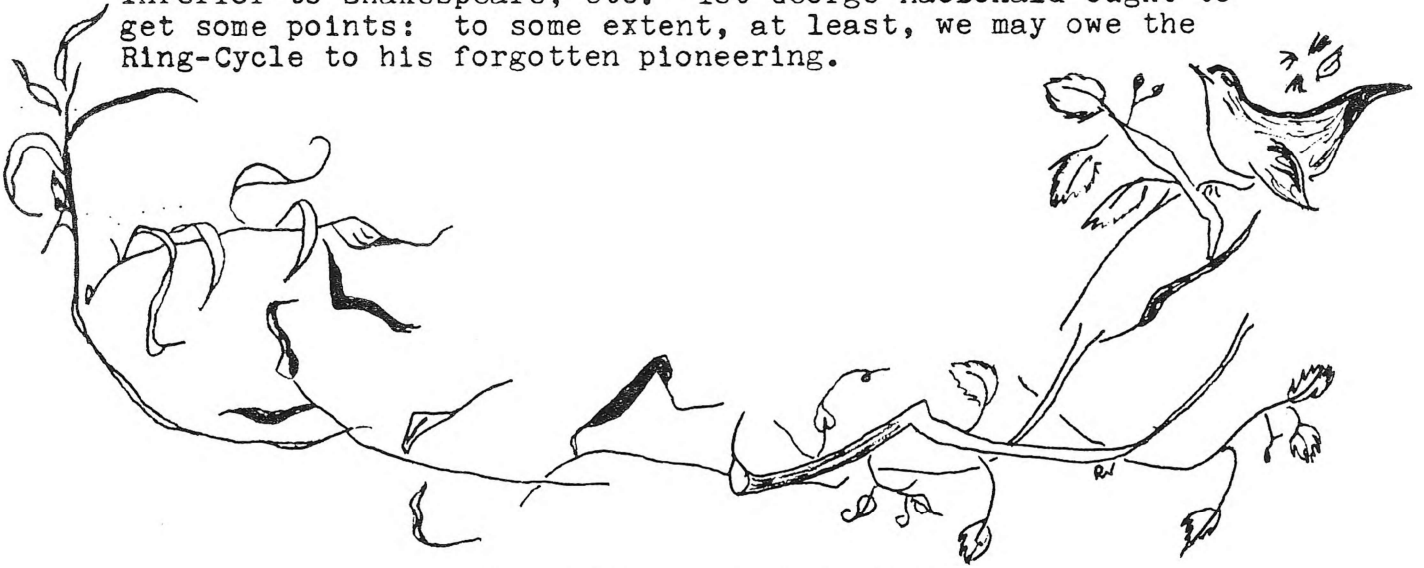
Enter, at this point, Charles Williams and (at last) J. R. R. Tolkien. These three men, Lewis, Williams, and Tolkien, became close friends back in the thirties, with Tolkien as the senior and mentor of the other two (he taught them Old English and philology, I believe). I do not know much about the cross-currents and influences among these three men, but I daresay that they were considerable. I also venture to say that George MacDonald must have had some influence, however indirect, upon Williams and Tolkien as well as upon Lewis. (Lewis once told me that MacDonald had not had any direct influence upon Williams, but I daresay that some indirect effect, through Lewis, had been registered. The same may well apply to Tolkien--I don't know.)

In any case, it seems clear that mythopoeic fiction has had a continuous heritage in English literature for over a hundred years now, ever since MacDonald produced Phantastes. Other English writers such as Spenser, Blake, and Shelley have provided tributaries, but those rivers have gone underground at times, while the tracing of the tradition to MacDonald is uninterrupted.

And what of George MacDonald himself? Well, there are signs that he is not yet forgotten: Lewis's self-proclaimed apostleship has had some effect. In 1954 an edition of The Visionary Novels of George MacDonald, edited by Anne Fremantle, made a small splash, chiefly because its introduction was by W. H. Auden, who is an admirer of MacDonald's but who has never written mythopoeic fiction himself. In 1961 a full-length study of MacDonald, entitled The Golden Key was written by Robert Lee Wolff, then chairman of the Harvard history department, but the latter work strikes me as an eccentric attempt to demonstrate that MacDonald was sick, sick, sick, by orthodox Freudian amateur psychoanalysis, which is easy to do to a patient who has been dead for half a century. One of these days I shall come out with a book on MacDonald, and then The True Clue will be available. Meanwhile, it must be admitted that MacDonald is not a Great Master; he is immeasurably the inferior of, for instance, Peake and Tolkien (though I think him the superior of Lewis, as Lewis himself did). But the originators and founders of the feast can scarcely be expected to be its masters: Aeschylus is the inferior of Sophocles; the authors



of Gorboduc (first English tragedy) and Ralph Roister Doister or Gammer Gurton's Needle (earliest English comedies) are inferior to Shakespeare; etc. Yet George MacDonald ought to get some points: to some extent, at least, we may owe the Ring-Cycle to his forgotten pioneering.



The Hobbit: The Real Story  
by Matthew Hoffman

As I was doing a term paper on Norse mythology, I came across several references to a dwarf, Durin, called "the second dwarf made", a great king, also, in his time. This whetted my curiosity and after a few more days of research, I came up with these findings:

Apparently memories of the Middle-Earth Ages still lingered in the makers and tellers of these legends for of the thirteen Dwarf-companions of Bilbo in The Hobbit, Fili, Kili, Dori, Nori, and Ori are among the famous dwarfs mentioned in the Norse Eddas, along with Dain, Thrór, and Fundin, kings of Erebor. Also mentioned are a few garblings, such as Oinn for Oin, Gloinn for Gloin, and Durinn for Durin. Most interesting is the mention of a Gandalf, who is supposedly part Elf, part Dwarf; this a misunderstanding of Gandalf's position as a helper to both the Elven and Dwarfish peoples.

