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Doors In: The Fairy Tale World of George MacDonald by Rolland Hein

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R E VIEWS

DOORS IN: THE FAIRY TALE WORLD OF GEORGE MACDONALD.
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“SOME SCHOLARS,” STATED ROLLAND HEIN in his 1993 biography of George MacDonald, “believe MacDonald’s fictions can be contemplated quite apart from Christian doctrinal considerations and appreciate their purely literary stature and Jungian patterns” (xxii) He may have overstated the point somewhat—in my Ph.D. I sought to examine how MacDonald’s Christianity led him to Romanticism and thus to secondary-world fantasy, which required engagement with, rather than disregard for, his faith. What Hein meant, I believe, is that there are scholars who read MacDonald for non-devotional purposes, of which I am one. Hein clearly brings different objectives to his study of the Scotsman than I do. I do not disagree with his objectives in the slightest, but the single-mindedness with which he pursues them in this particular book leaves little room for anything else.

Hein covers his chosen remit with elegant, pointed efficiency. He presents a reading of MacDonald’s fantasies—*Phantastes*, *Lilith*, the *Princess* books, *At the Back of the North Wind* and a credible sampling of his short fairytales. He takes his readers through the plots of the books, chapter by chapter where applicable, pausing occasionally to offer his opinion on the Christian import of points of plot, characterisation, and statements by MacDonald’s characterful and often powerful heterodiegetic voice. These are brief, crisp and to the point, coming across as textual commentaries might. After each comment Hein ploughs on to MacDonald’s next plot point. When he reaches the conclusion of each of MacDonald’s stories, Hein closes the chapter and moves on to the next book. At 121 pages, his volume is a short, sharp, heartfelt promotion of the subject texts as devotional reading.

This is not an objective with which I would take exception. Ample evidence exists to demonstrate that this is the precise context in which MacDonald intended his fairytales to be read, and a discussion of these works in that context from someone steeped in biblical and other Christian literatures would be a valuable contribution to scholarship on the matter. What is

disappointing about this book is the extraordinary short wind of such discussion, particularly compared to the space Hein devotes to explaining the manifest content of MacDonald's work. Something in excess of 80% of this volume comprises plot summaries. Hein's discussion of *The Princess and Curdie* runs to ten pages, the large majority of it being a walk-through of MacDonald's plot. Discussion of the story as a whole runs, *in toto*, as follows:

The abrupt conclusion, which goes counter to the happy ending conclusion of fairy tales, may strike a reader as puzzling. Both it and the disappearance of Lina need to be understood in terms of the entire gist of MacDonald's theology. With Gwintystorm's demise he is making a powerful statement concerning human responsibility in regards to the nature and enduring threat of evil. Constant vigilance, together with a steady pursuance of good, must never be relaxed. (53-54)

A valid reading, and one counteracting the supposition—which a straightforward reading of MacDonald's calls for faith and hope might produce—that the faithful may draw a line under the assumption that God will mend all and go about their temporal business in spiritual security. But a Christian scholar with an entire book at their disposal could surely write more than 75 words on this point. Hein does not do so; what appears above is his last words on the *Curdie* books. He then races through a five-page plot summary of "The Wise Woman" before turning to *At the Back of the North Wind*. There is an introduction, in which Hein's enthusiasm for his subject is palpable, but no concluding remarks. The bibliography is one page long and contains only five secondary sources. He does, when discussing *Lilith*, quote from MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination," but never refers to the essay by name. For the most part this book demonstrates little so much as the trainspotter's urge evident in the YouTube videos in which *Game of Thrones* fans catalogue the political factions in that fictional world. Carried away with the depth he sees in much of MacDonald's work, Hein never really engages his readers in any serious discussion of what that depth is in aid of or how it functions. It is also an oddly careless book, misspelling the name of the protagonist of *Phantastes* at least once and celebrating MacDonald as a major influence on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the Ring*.

MacDonald himself had his reservations about the extremity to which scholarly argument was valuable. "The Light Princess" includes the majestically silly philosophers Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, who generate several hundred words of withering parody of empirical argument while completely neglecting "what was to be done" about the magical situation. Hein knows exactly what is to be done about the magic of George MacDonald; his fairy tales are to be read, repeatedly, with great enthusiasm. Again, this is a manifesto I can absolutely get

behind. But it is one of which I was already well aware, and Hein offers no particularly noteworthy elaboration on it here. Little sense of MacDonald's religion comes through in this book. His Romantic philosophies, his resolute perception of death as a transformative benediction, his reverence for the childlike imagination as a link with the numinous and his deep-seated, personal, emotional relationship with his God are only dealt with very briefly. These are exactly the sorts of things that I, an agnostic reader of MacDonald, would have welcomed discussion of from a commentator such as Hein, who edited the 1997 variorum edition of *Lilith* and whose previous work on MacDonald I have referred to frequently in the past. But no real picture of MacDonald as a Christian or Christian thinker emerges here.

To those who are looking for a devotional guide to MacDonald, however, the book can be unhesitatingly recommended. As shot through with the numinous as MacDonald's fantasy fiction is, it takes the form of small, idiosyncratic fairy tales written in Victorian diction that the modern reader may need some help navigating. A MacDonald devotee—in the strict sense of the word—who is approaching his stories for the first time or the tenth may very well find in this book some new door into the work of this challenging, daring, fascinating contributor to both fantasy and Christian literature. In that sense this book probably deserves a better review than this; it does what its author set out to do with a minimum of fuss and clutter.

It is amid such fuss and clutter, however, that secular readers of MacDonald often find useful material, and its absence here sorely limits the book's value to the unconverted. One of the more remarkable omissions, in fact, is any real discussion of the sense of Romantic longing in MacDonald's works. Both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* end with the protagonists settling in to await a great good, having learned that the great central component of a Christian mindset is the desire for what is coming to them. In neither case does Hein spend more than a page discussing this point. Nor does he ever inspire any such faith himself. When, discussing *The Princess and the Goblin*, he asserts that to read the novel's finest passages "is to feel as though one is breathing oxygenized air" (43), this reader for one had to take his word for it. But then, I am not the target audience of this book. This is a book for devotees, not scholars; the former group may well find it useful, but the latter are unlikely to find anything more than an assertion—not an explanation or discussion—of MacDonald as an interesting writer.

—Joe Young

WORKS CITED

Hein, Rolland. *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*. Nashville: Star Song, 1993.