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John Pennington

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Letter to the Editor—The George MacDonald Industry: A “Wolff” in Sheep’s Clothing?

John Pennington

It’s not uncommon today for us to speak, somewhat cynically, of the Shakespeare Industry, the Eliot Industry, the Joyce Industry: those authors who have merited so much output from the critics’ assembly-line that they have become a criticism *industry*. Other authors such as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams are also part of this industry, but they are also very popular with the mass-reader. As a result their works are packaged and repackaged to entice yet more readers. More recently another author has joined the ranks of the Inklings, a precursor and influence on these men. I’m referring of course to George MacDonald.

And much of this renewed interest has created some very good MacDonald products. Eerdmans publishes handsome editions of *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and a four-book series of MacDonald’s fantasy stories. They also publish the mass-market but useful study on MacDonald, Rolland Hein’s *The Harmony Within* (1982). Puffin has editions of the Curdie books and *At the Back of the North Wind*. Schocken has *The Complete Fairy Tales of George MacDonald*. Signet Classics has just come out with an edition of *At the Back of the North Wind*, with a succinct yet insightful afterword by Michael Patrick Hearn. Under the editorship of Hein, Shaw Publishers have compiled Mac Donald’s sermons, Collier has seen fit to reprint Lewis’s anthology on MacDonald, and Augsburg publishes the *Diary of an Old Soul*. Better yet, there are two scholarly journals devoted mainly to MacDonald. It looks as if all’s right in the MacDonald Industry. Or is it? Is there lurking a “Wolff” in sheep’s clothing ready, unwittingly, to damage the MacDonald Industry?

Muriel Hutton, in her reply to Roderick McGillis’s article, “George MacDonald—the *Lilith* Manuscripts” (*SLJ* 4, 1977, 40-57), attacks—and the verb may not be strong enough—what she sees as a MacDonald exploitation:

Dr McGillis’s aim, to win readers for George MacDonald, is entirely laudable. MacDonald needs readers, instead of exploiters. Those **[end of page 40]** readers need definitive editions to replace ever rarer copies of out-of-print editions and the money-spinning reprints perpetuated by, among others,

Professor R. Lee Wolff.

The most profitable way for Ph.Ds and other critics to exploit MacDonald would be to learn from him how to write. Instead they patronise him as one who was not much good at it; or they come to him with axes to grind, doing battle and, therefore failing to read him. (*SLJ* 4, 1979, p. 10)

Hutton seems to have what MacDonald would call “second sight,” for her comments are more pertinent today than they were in 1979. My concern, ultimately, is whether this renewed interest in MacDonald—this industry—is detrimental to MacDonald’s reputation. Furthermore, I’m concerned about the potential danger that this industry may have on future MacDonald scholarship.

My concern is with the new editions of MacDonald’s novels that are being published by Bethany House and Victor Books. While perusing the MacDonald shelf in your local bookstore you’ll encounter such titles as *The Last Castle*, *The Shopkeeper’s Daughter*, *The Prodigal Apprentice*, *The Fisherman’s Lady*, and many others. The *what* you may ask? The lost books of George MacDonald, edited conscientiously by a descendant of MacDonald? Hardly. These books are edited versions of MacDonald’s novels, the editors deciding that a name change, presumably, would help sell the books. I would like to look at the implications of this mass editing of MacDonald’s novels.

Dan Hamilton, editor of the Victor editions, argues in his foreword to *The Prodigal Apprentice* (a.k.a. *Guild Court*) that there is a “distorted impression of [MacDonald’s] interests, talents and works,” and he stresses that the new editions “should help fill that gap, and [are] intended to make MacDonald’s ‘forgotten’ works available and affordable for a new generation” (p. 8). But isn’t an edited version—let alone a name-change—creating a distorted impression, undermining MacDonald’s artistic creation, distorting the very words he labored over? Michael Phillips, editor of the Bethany series, writes in his introduction to *The Lady’s Confession* (a.k.a. *Paul Faber, Surgeon*): “My own personal vision has always been to slowly work toward the release of all of MacDonald’s novels, working on them at a rate which enables me to diligently represent the original author, [41] to whom and to whose Lord I desire above all to be faithful in my editing. Sales and promotion have never been my primary concern, but a true representation of the originals, in a language understandable for today’s reader” (p. 11). Being a bit cynical myself I suspect that Phillips is aware that his audience—

especially scholars of MacDonald—will conclude that his is a money-making venture. Why else would such editions be brought out?

The Last Castle is based on MacDonald's *St George and St Michael* (1876), a three-volume historical novel of the English Puritan revolution. The new edition is a mere 286 pages, and I read the book in about 3 hours. *St George and St Michael* I find a pretty good historical novel, an oddity in the MacDonald canon. *The Last Castle*, unfortunately, is terrible, a bare-bones sketch, a mere shadow of the original. A reader coming to MacDonald for the first time via *The Last Castle* will most certainly not seek out any more MacDonald novels, especially at a \$6.95 price tag. *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), which I consider MacDonald's best novel, may be one of the finest Scottish novels written during the nineteenth century, reflecting MacDonald's talent for local color, his finely-tuned ear for Scottish dialect, his love for the Scottish countryside and Burns; and MacDonald's influence on the "Kailyard School" of fiction shouldn't be underestimated. *The Maiden's Bequest* is Bethany's version of *Alec Forbes*, and you might have guessed, the Scottish dialect is Anglicized, and much of the novel is eliminated. Need I say more?

I suspect that this editorial mentality towards MacDonald is what Hutton pinpoints as the patronizing attitude toward a second-rate novelist. My theory is that we can blame much of this, ironically, on C.S. Lewis, a man who has done more than anyone else to renew the interest in MacDonald. In his Introduction to *George MacDonald* Lewis writes:

If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank—perhaps not even in its second The texture of his writing as a whole is undistinguished, at times fumbling. Bad pulpit traditions cling to it; there is sometimes a nonconformist verbosity, sometimes an old Scotch weakness for florid ornament . . . sometimes an over-sweetness picked up from Novalis. (p. 18)

Lewis's theory is that MacDonald's writing is "mythopoetic," which means [42] that "the mere pattern of events is all that matters Any means of communication whatever which succeeds in lodging those events in our imagination has, as we say, done the trick. After that you can throw the means of communication away" (p. 19). It is not my concern here to agree or disagree with Lewis (for the record, I disagree), but rather to suggest that editors' have taken Lewis literally and begun an insidious—and I don't think the word too strong—editing job on MacDonald.

Notice how Hamilton's rationalization for his editing of *The Last*

Castle mirrors Lewis's sentiments:

As in the previous books, the aim has been to make MacDonald available, affordable, and readable. MacDonald has few equals as a storyteller, but his writing is overlong, often uneven, and does not always rise to the same level as his story. The book in its original version is lengthy and sometimes tedious; I have trimmed away the occasional outbreaks of irrelevancy, eliminated repetitive material, made consistent the choices of spelling and dialect, reshuffled out-of-sequence scenes, and tightened dragging narrative. However, I certainly do not represent my version as better than the original; it is only easier to read, and published now at a price within the grasp of many who cannot find or afford the unfortunately scarce originals. The original editions of any MacDonald novels (when and where they can be found) are well worth the reading, (p. 228)

Hamilton has the same condescending attitude as does Lewis, but Lewis was talking primarily of MacDonald's fantasy literature (which no editor would even consider altering from the original). Take away the words from a realistic novel, and you merely have an outline; change dialogue—anglicize it—and you have taken away the heart of the work. And essentially these new editions of MacDonald's novels are merely outlines of the originals, nothing close to the originals and, when analyzed as art, complete failures.

Hutton laments that "MacDonald studies, hardly yet begun, seem to me harmed by obliquity and the perpetuation of canards, such as the one that only a handful of his works—fairy stories, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*—are acceptable to what Dr McGillis exalts into a consensus of connoisseurs" (p. 17). And ironically these new editions of his novels may reinforce these canards. It is unfortunate that publishers haven't seen fit to reissue original reprints so MacDonald can speak for himself. If, as Hamilton claims, much of MacDonald is tedious and irrelevant, then why publish his novels at all?

[43]

I suspect that the underlying motivation for these editions is money, all at the expense of MacDonald's art. His fairy tales and fantasies have stood the test of time—they are classics in their own right. Such a claim cannot yet be made of his novels, and I'm afraid that these new editions just might turn off future MacDonald scholars. If the goal is to have MacDonald studied more thoroughly, to bring him to the attention of scholars and lay readers, then we certainly need original reprints with scholarly introductions. If his

novels don't merit such scrutiny then let them rest in the rare book rooms. But don't apologize for his writing, don't edit his writing and destroy what MacDonald wrote. When there's so many intelligent studies on MacDonald it's a shame that part of the MacDonald Industry has decided that price and "readability" are preferred over art. **[44]**