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## Dating the George MacDonald Revival: An Anecdotal Memoir

Richard Reis

I note in *Orts*, May 1991 item 6, Bill Raeper's expression of regret that Raphael Shaberman's MacDonald biography ends in 1974, since "critical interest [in George MacDonald] began to increase only after 1975." But in the issue of August 1991, item 6, Shaberman is cited as dating "the current world-wide interest in GMD" to the 1950s. I'm with Shaberman, since I claim to have had something to do with it all. Here is a story about that.

I should consider the 1954 publication of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* in one volume as *Visionary Novels of George MacDonald*, edited by Anne Freemantle and with an Introduction by W. H. Auden, as *The Beginning*. It got lots of reviews, presumably because of Auden taking MacDonald seriously: Auden was then at the height of his reputation.

Now here's where R. H. Reis comes in. I entered graduate school at Brown University in the fall of 1954, and wanted to take a course from Professor S. Foster Damon, perhaps the World's Greatest Authority on William Blake (and stupendously learned about lots of other writers too), so I signed up for his course entitled "Symbolism and Allegory." He offered a list of topics we could write papers on, and it included George MacDonald's fantasies. I had never heard of MacDonald and had missed the reviews of the *Visionary Novels* volume, but Foster so impressed me that I decided to work on MacDonald sight-unseen, just because of who suggested it.

I was immensely intrigued by *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, and Damon was intrigued (less immensely, no doubt) by my essay. He suggested its expansion into a "Master's Thesis." **[end of page 19]** So I wrote *Dreams in George MacDonald's Imaginative Fiction* (June, 1957) in 114 double-spaced typewritten pages. Although I have not seen Raphael Shaberman's new bibliography, it probably indicates that my 1957 study is among the earliest *extended* "scholarly" or "academic" treatments of MacDonald's work. Professor George K. Anderson, a medievalist but interested in everything, was my adviser on this project

Soon I had to think about doing my doctoral dissertation, always a crucial decision for an American graduate student. Why write the ten

thousandth dissertation on Shakespeare or Milton? I asked myself. Besides, insofar as I had to specialise in *some* genre and period (I'm in fact really a generalist in literature), I figured to aim at the Victorian period, under the influence of Professor Charles H. Philbrick, Brown's "Victorianist," whom I greatly admired.

So I launched on the tremendous task of reading *everything* by George MacDonald and taking extensive notes. It took me a couple of years, what with the "distractions" of teaching and study in other subjects. By 1959 or so I was ready to start writing, with a 1961 target date. It struck me, however, that there might be a few other MacDonald freaks around who could help, so I sent an "author's query" to the *New York Times Book Review*. Blunder!

Unknown to me, a Harvard professor named Robert Lee Wolff, specialising in Eastern European History, was at this time preparing a series of lectures to be delivered in 1961 at Yale University, on minor nineteenth-century British novelists, including Charles and Henry Kingsley, and also George MacDonald. When Wolff saw my "author's query" he wrote to me, saying only that he was interested in MacDonald too, and asking what my own plans were. I wrote back to the effect that I aimed for a complete job. Now Wolff apparently decided to beat me to the punch. Or so I infer from a few remarks in the Preface to Wolff's *The Golden Key* (1961). [20]

According to Wolff's Preface, he at first planned to publish his lectures at Yale as a book, but found that "the MacDonald lecture had already become a book by itself (viii). Wolff goes on as follows: The authorities at Harvard, *dead game as always*, gave me leave to go to England and Scotland during the month of May 1960" (my emphasis). [NB Harvard did not run a poulterer's shop! Wolff is fusing two popular idioms: "dead easy" and "easy game." Ed.]

Here's what I think happened. Professor Wolff, though a historian by trade, collected first editions of Victorian novels as a hobby, and his planned lecture series was based on his splendid collection, now at Harvard's Houghton Library. The lecture on MacDonald would be only a quarter of the project. But when he learned of my own plans, he decided to do a book of his own before I could get my dissertation done. He probably went to "the authorities at Harvard" with a request for an *urgent* leave not otherwise scheduled, so he could beat out this character at Brown; otherwise, why would he call their accession to that request "dead game"? And why did he finish *The Golden Key* even before delivering his 1961 lectures at Yale?

Well, in retrospect all this probably doesn't matter much. Wolff *did* publish before I could finish my dissertation, with the result that I had to write much of it over to incorporate acknowledgements of and comments on his work. So I didn't get my doctorate until 1962, not in 1961 as scheduled. I'm still grouchy about it.

Or maybe it *does* matter. *The Golden Key* is in some respects a brilliant scholarly accomplishment, especially in tracing the probable influence of German Romantics such as Novalis and Hoffmann on MacDonald's work. But in other respects Wolff's tome is, in my opinion, as fatuous and pernicious a work as has ever been published by a doctrinaire fanatic. I don't even know of a Marxist critical work, or a [21] Biblical Fundamentalist disquisition on Biology, as silly in its reverent application of a Received Text as Wolff's Freudian interpretation of MacDonald's works. *The Golden Key* probably set the MacDonald revival back by a decade or so, because of Wolff's argument that MacDonald was a pathetic neurotic and usually a bad writer. As my friend Charles Philbrick remarked at the time, why write about somebody whose personality and works you dislike, rather than leave him safely forgotten?

In particular, Wolff took issue with C. S. Lewis's suggestion, in his *George MacDonald, An Anthology* (1946), that MacDonald's admiration of, and cordial relations with, his father are decidedly unFreudian and indeed reflect the ideal fatherhood of God. Wolff sneeringly comments: "I leave to students of Lewis the job of explaining his triumphal assertion of MacDonald's freedom from Freud" (389n). This remark tells us more about Wolff than about MacDonald. The implication seems to be that everyone is subject to Freudian neuroses, and particularly the Oedipus complex, as they are to such universal afflictions as the common cold or mortality. Wolff seems to regard Freud's ideas as natural laws comparable to Newton's of motion. Freud himself made no such pretensions. (I wrote to Lewis, calling his attention to Wolff's sneer and suggesting that Lewis somehow defend himself in print. But he wisely replied that he'd ignore it, remarking that learned fools must write.)

But *The Golden Key* is even sillier in apparently presenting MacDonald's works as *nothing but* symptoms of neurosis, as if MacDonald were a helpless automaton in the grip of circumstances, rather than an autonomous artist *using* the circumstances of his life and times in his works, and at least partly transcending such limitations in the process.

Enough of Wolff; I'll move on to further events in the chronology

of MacDonald studies before 1975. In [22] my opinion, the most important such event was the remarkable wave of enthusiasm for J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and for fantasy literature in general, that arrived in the 1960s (some years after the trilogy's appearance) and is still going strong. Along with C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, Tolkien had been a member of the punningly named "Inklings" at Oxford during the thirties and early forties, long before *The Lord of the Rings* saw print. With the remarkable surge of Tolkien's popularity, a great many readers got interested in the Inklings generally, and in Lewis and Williams in particular. Now all of these authors, along with Auden and Freemantle, were earnest Christians, often (like MacDonald) subliminally and symbolically proselytizing in their works—which is presumably why the recent MacDonald revival has such a religious dimension. And, of course, George MacDonald's acknowledged influence on Lewis got people interested in him, too. It was these circumstances that enabled me to get a slightly revised version of my doctoral dissertation published, under the title of *George MacDonald*, in 1972.

Unfortunately, my study was brought out simply as another in a series of books on British and American authors produced by Twayne Publishers Inc., which company had almost no advertising budget and sold mostly to American libraries that automatically ordered each volume in the series as it came out. Only about two thousand copies were printed, very few of which were bought by private individuals interested in fantasy literature. I dare say that most such individuals, especially in Great Britain, didn't even learn at the time of my work's existence in print. By the time they did, it had gone out of print and could be found only in large libraries, chiefly in the U.S. A second edition, only slightly revised, is now available under the more accurate title *George MacDonald's Fiction* (1988). [23]

Damon, Anderson, Philbrick, Wolff, Auden, Freemantle, Lewis, and Tolkien have all died since I first got interested in George MacDonald back in 1955. I suppose that I'm now the Senior Living MacDonald Scholar, for whatever such veteran status is worth. I'm certainly glad to have been succeeded by so many. [24]