

North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 13

Article 8

1-1-1994

George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker. by
Rolland Hein. Nashville: Star Song, 1993. pp 453.
h/b.

Hugh P. O'Connor

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Hugh P. (1994) "George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker. by Rolland Hein. Nashville: Star Song, 1993. pp 453. h/b,"
North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies: Vol. 13 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol13/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

***George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker.* by Rolland Hein.
Nashville: Star Song, 1993. pp 453. h/b.**

Hugh P. O'Connor

Frederick Buechner, in his forward to this new biography of MacDonald, emphasises how:

we can be deeply grateful to Dr. Hein . . . for his particular sensitivity to the profound role that religious faith played in MacDonald's life and for the erudition and insightfulness with which he has examined MacDonald's work in light of it. (xix)

This encapsulates the importance of Hein's study. But what Buechner does not bring out is that Hein has achieved such sensitivity by attempting to follow MacDonald's primary Christian percept: that no one who has not died to his or her self can hope to make any real progress in the spirit. Because Hein has done this he is able to take us into MacDonald's soul in a way which is quite astonishing at the present time, when most tours of exploration are undertaken in closed vehicles—whether Leibnizian monads or their physical equivalent, the motor car.

MacDonald always emphasised how his concept of God the Father grew out of his love for his own father, and Hein explores this in detail and with great sensitivity. MacDonald's understanding of a God of Love, Hein suggests, grew from his obsessive need for love: "he was almost desperately dependent upon his wife for love and support." Hein shows how these aspects of MacDonald's religion were balanced by his continual quest to enhance the spirit—the "deeper self" as he usually called it. Here again, Hein's analyses are exceptionally lucid (eg. 146), although he does not throw any new light upon how this desire for the spirit arose in MacDonald.

Hein undertakes to tell "how the circumstances that befell [MacDonald] shaped his convictions, what nature these convictions assumed, and how he presented them in his writings" (xxv). This approach results in a much more integrated and readable text than we find in the biographies which rely heavily upon Greville MacDonald's account, because the ups and downs in MacDonald's life become meaningful and important. An example where the greater depth of Hein's approach is particularly clear is the description of MacDonald's friendship with the Mount-Temples. And Hein is able to explode some long-cherished myths, such as that of MacDonald working for a time in a library in a nobleman's mansion in the far north (410).

Short discussions of each of MacDonald's novels are integrated into the biography, so we see how these are an organic growth out of his situation at **[end of page 46]** the time they were written. This cannot but greatly enrich anyone's reading of the novels. Some of MacDonald's letters are similarly integrated into the biography, and Hein wonderfully brings out how MacDonald enters completely into his correspondents' hearts, seeking with infinite loving tact to engage their will and their intellect to help them overcome the difficulties which they see as besetting them.

It should not be thought, however, that the book is unrelievedly serious in tone. Many topographical descriptions enliven the text, and their quaintness has a particular charm for the British reader. The ancient town of Arundel, for example, is described as being "a quiet little village" (63) and Hein describes how the Arun "runs lazily through the graceful arches of an ancient stone bridge"—although, in fact, the tide rips fast through the arches of this bridge of 1935. Then, reverting to describing the town in MacDonald's time, he writes that "immediately atop the hill, was an ornate cathedral"—this is the Catholic church, begun in 1870. Later we find Leamington likewise described as a "village" (68) and begin to suspect that Hein may have Texan ancestry; but then Hastings is described as a "city" (130)!

Hein realises that MacDonald's writings "appealed to what many laity felt were their true religious instincts. Their deep longings after the ideal were satisfied" (xxiv). This, as he observes, is true "consolation"; but not so much from the fears engendered by crassly materialistic and superficial scientific theories as from "the rigors of contemporary religious doctrines" (xxiii). It is thus surprising to find that Hein sometimes seems to feel obliged to conform to present-day religious "political correctness." For example, a gift for satire is not felt appropriate in someone with the Christian humility which MacDonald undoubtedly possessed, so his very considerable powers of satire have to be denied (xxii). And despite MacDonald's immeasurable debt to the occult Christianity of writers like Jakob Böehme, Hein has to assert that his "attitude toward . . . *all* aspects of the occult" [my emphasis] was that "he suspected it was evil" (277). But Hein's approach now is very different from what it was in *The Harmony Within* of 1982. That study, despite its many excellencies, frequently employs a type of selective quotation which misrepresents MacDonald's complex imagery in order to provide an unambiguously inspiring picture for the Christian reader. The development indicated by the contrast between these two books demonstrates the spiritual progress that can be achieved by sustained and humble study of MacDonald's writings. **[47]**

This biography is essential reading for everyone interested in

MacDonald. It is to be hoped that a paperback edition will soon appear, with the many irritating repetitions and small errors corrected, to fill the gap left now that Bill Raeper's biography is no longer in print. **[48]**