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Book Review

Richard Sturch, *Four Christian Fantasists: A Study of the Fantastic Writings of George MacDonald, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien*

John Docherty

This book is almost exactly the same length as Rolland Hein's *Christian Mythmakers*, published three years earlier, which deals with the Christian fantasy writing of the same four authors and similarly considers a few others in a short final chapter. Hein, however, additionally includes a chapter each on Bunyan and Chesterton. Sturch omits Chesterton because "his fantastic writings are so unlike those of" his chosen four (9), and the same would, of course, apply to his omission of Bunyan. He is an Anglican priest and a former lecturer in Philosophy, whereas Hein is a professor emeritus in English Literature, so their books differ greatly in style—Sturch's is as archetypally English as Hein's is American. But both contain much important comment upon the works they explore.

Sturch defines the four writers as "a group. . .who had more in common than the simple facts that all were Christians and all wrote fantasies" (3). His book explores elements common to their fantasies. It is intended to deal "with the ways in which these men's fantastic writings, whether good or bad" "were used to express the Christian faith" (6); but it does not attempt to explore the theological positions of the four. More space is devoted to the fantasy of Williams and Tolkien, where Sturch is an acknowledged authority, than to MacDonald and Lewis. And, despite Sturch's claim, a high percentage of his references to MacDonald are to the *Unspoken Sermons*. His inclusion of MacDonald, who belonged to an earlier group of Christian fantasists, is surprising, particularly as references to MacDonald in the biographies of the Inklings by Humphrey Carpenter and Gareth Knight are few and brief, despite the well-known influence of his fantasies on Tolkien and Lewis.

Sturch's first chapter is a popular "Introduction." His chapter 2, "Other Worlds and Other Beings," is also largely introductory and is over-simplified at times. For example, *Phantastes* is the description, by the protagonist, of an exploration of different realms of his own soul: but that does not seem to be what Sturch has in mind in suggesting that "technically, indeed, *Phantastes* is

set in Fairyland” (11). He is, of course, wholly correct in stating that “McDonald’s concern is with spiritual causes and effects. . . Even more is this true in *Lilith*. The links there between spiritual cause and effect are more direct. In *Phantastes* MacDonald had simply made the links very close. . . but in *Lilith* the links become visible, even incarnate.”

Sturch’s chapter 3 is titled “The Charge of Escapism.” Its content is summed up in an epigraph taken from Ursula Le Guin: “The pursuit of art. . . is the pursuit of liberty. If you accept that you see at once why truly serious people reject and mistrust the arts, labelling them as ‘escapism.’” A few quotations from this particular chapter are probably the best way of illustrating Sturch’s power of analysis and his gift for selecting MacDonald’s most telling phrases:

Anyone who spent their entire time day-dreaming, however un-self-centredly, would be no use to God or man. Not even if their day-dreaming consisted in reading the works of MacDonald, Tolkien, Williams and Lewis. But have many such people existed? . . . Actually, it can be argued, and is (by MacDonald), that as some fantasy enters into everyone’s life, we should not discourage but cultivate it. “Seek not that your sons and daughters should not seek visions, should not dream dreams; seek that they should see true visions, that they should dream noble dreams”. . . MacDonald points out that [facts] alone will not get you very far. . . “[T]he imagination,” MacDonald quotes from Novalis. . . “is the stuff of the intellect.” (28-29)

As well as the story-teller’s task of what Tolkien calls sub-creation, he famously also lists Recovery, Escape and Consolation. Sturch suggests that MacDonald’s “The Day Boy and the Night Girl” “is a sustained piece of pure Recovery to an extent which I have not met anywhere else; the actual story could really be said to be unimportant compared with the intensity with which the Recovered reality of night and day are pressed upon us. It is less about the two characters of its title than it is about day-ness and night-ness. And in. . . *Phantastes* the most horrible thing about the Shadow which haunts the narrator is in the way it destroys Recovery wherever it falls. An “aureole of emanating rays” around a child’s head becomes a straw hat with the sun shining through it;. . . And we are left in no doubt that it is the first impression which is the true one. . . In “The Shadows” . . . it is a sign that Rinkleman’s was a true one that “instead of making common things look commonplace, as a false vision would have done, it had made common things disclose the

wonderful that was in them.” (31)

Conversely, under

Tolkien’s second heading *Escape*. . .he seeks to turn the critics’ own weapons against them. . .Why, for goodness sake should we not seek to escape from the ‘real’ world if it is bad? “Is the world so poor?” asked MacDonald. “The less reason, then, to be satisfied with it; the more reason to rise above it, into the region of the true, the eternal, of things as God thinks them.

Sturch’s chapter 4, “Varieties of Symbolism,” includes his longest MacDonald passage on pages 37-40. He begins by considering allegory, noting that all four of his authors did write some allegory “and this itself is the clearest indication that the rest of their writings were not allegorical: for the differences stand out a mile” (35). This is true for MacDonald’s “The Castle,” but not for Sturch’s other MacDonald example “The Golden Key.” Later, on page 37, however, he concedes that this story is better classified as “Personification,” and on page 38 goes further and states that “there is a third stage in the process, of considerable importance in the understanding of Williams and MacDonald, which may be called that of the Image. This seems to equate with what MacDonald would call the [Coleridgean] Imagination, and is certainly a much better term to use for his fantasies. Sturch is certainly correct in suggesting that MacDonald, in referring to mysticism in his sermon “The New Name,” is really referring to “the Image” (Coleridgean “Imagination”).

Like most critics of “The Golden Key,” Sturch refers to “the journey of the hero and heroine through life and death towards heaven” (37-38), although MacDonald never uses this term. The object of their quest, “the country from which the shadows fall”—to judge from these shadows—certainly does not resemble any of the depictions of heaven in Christian mythology. Of the three elemental “Old Men” successively encountered by Tangle, Sturch comments that “I do not think that MacDonald really intended separate meanings for each of these figures; they seem rather to represent different stages in Tangle’s understanding or spiritual growth” (38). But it seems likely that both of these interpretations are valid. Given MacDonald’s disbelief in an eternal Hell, it is to be expected that Tangle, leaving the Earth by Dante’s route, would encounter the tutelary beings of the four elements of the Earth. But as the three whom she perceives appear progressively younger (while actually the reverse is true) she could not be expected to be able to perceive the Old Man of the Air. Sturch approvingly repeats the often-quoted

comment from Greville MacDonald's biography of his father, that for him "a symbol was far more for him than an arbitrary outward and visible sign of an abstract conception: its high virtue lay in a common substance with the idea presented."

The longest chapter in Sturch's book is 5, "Themes." It is a revised and expanded version of an essay in *Charles Williams: A Celebration*. That essay, "Common Themes Among Inklings," he describes as including "perhaps a few shy allusions to George MacDonald as a kind of 19th Century proto-Inkling" (153). These allusions, however, are actually frequent. And they are considerably increased and extended in the later book.

Sturch's initial theme, because of its prominence in the four writers he is studying, is Moralism, But not "'moralism' imply[ing] a doctrine of 'justification by works' [although] MacDonald came close to this at times" (54). Theirs was not the sort of moralism that opposes sensual delight: "As a matter of fact, all four were rather good at stressing the sheer goodness of the senses" (53). Sturch, however, suggests that "sex, is not prominent at all" and that "MacDonald's concern is only with the sin involved" (54). But this certainly does not take into account "The Light Princess" and "The Cruel Painter" in *Adela Cathcart*, where positive eroticism is a crucial therapeutic element in the stories and is described with great sensitivity and humour. Sturch has a perceptive analysis of the stages of Rosamund's conversion in "The Lost Princess" (55-56). And he greatly expands his comments in his essay upon MacDonald's habitual elevation of obedience above all other Christian virtues (57-58), quoting as much from MacDonald's sermons as from his fantasies, and stressing how MacDonald usually depicts *Choice* as "opportunity for obedient trust" (63; 65).

Sturch does not see MacDonald as being particularly concerned with the themes of (mortal) *Power* and *Hierarchy* that he considers next. He amplifies his comments in his essay on MacDonald's concept of *Providence*, recognising it as close to Predestination (80); although he does not associate this with ideas of karma, despite various hints of this in MacDonald's novels, most notably in the sermon that forms the centrepiece of the *Wingfold* trilogy and is usually assumed to be a sermon that was delivered by MacDonald. He quotes the famous sentence from the end of *Phantastes*: "What we call evil is the only and best shape, which, for the person and the condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good" and shows MacDonald expanding this concept in the conversion of *Lilith* (82-83). But Sturch feels that "it is not just a matter of realising at last that what seemed bad luck was necessary to a

greater good, as in MacDonald; it is (ideally) a glad acceptance here and now of what to others, and to our own fallen vision, seems bad” (84). In his essay he quotes from a letter MacDonald wrote to his uncle that shows him struggling towards this outlook: “The conviction is, I think, growing upon me that the smallest events are ordered for us, while yet in perfect consistency with the ordinary course of cause and effect in the world” (168).

Sturch’s chapter 6, “Apologetics,” is very interesting, but all his extended examples are taken from his other three authors (plus J.G. Ballard) with only a few very brief isolated references to MacDonald’s writings.

Numerous works written on Tolkien and on Lewis have been described as “having a refreshingly new approach” where all that was meant was that their authors display intense materialistic cynicism. Sturch’s book has a genuinely refreshing approach and—as will have been deduced from the above review—is free of cynicism. However, potential readers may find they need persistence to obtain a copy of this book as Walking Tree is a specialist Tolkien publishing house based in Switzerland.

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