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Book Reviews

McInnis, Jeff. *Shadows and Chivalry: C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald on Suffering, Evil and Goodness*, 2006; reissued in 2012 by Winged Lion Press.

Fernando Soto

This book will be appreciated by many people, particularly by Christian readers and scholars interested in C. S. Lewis and his connections to George MacDonald. McInnis argues persuasively that MacDonald's influence on Lewis supports Lewis's contentions in numerous statements that everything he wrote was influenced by MacDonald. While this study will be embraced by many, I tend to think, however, that it leaves several unanswered questions for those interested in MacDonald, particularly for those interested in the nature of his fantasy works.

As implied earlier, this book will very likely prove a boon for those readers and students interested in C. S. Lewis' works—and where and how many of his ideas (particularly his theological ones) therein emerged or had their genesis. McInnis provides hundreds of connections between Lewis' works and those of his adopted “master,” MacDonald, while he also shows how Lewis at times changes or comments positively upon many of MacDonald's original and extremely creative conceptions. The book begins by providing several instances of biographical similarities between both men, such as the fact that both MacDonald and Lewis lost their mothers at a young age, that both as young men had similar aspirations to become poets, and that their first publications were poetical in nature (although different in the world-view expressed by each).

McInnis then sets out to show how over the next decade after Lewis's first publication, he came to hold very similar theological opinions as those found in MacDonald's earliest works, and how these can be gleaned from Lewis' books of this period. McInnis explains this decade-long lagging in terms of Lewis' “training in logic” and to his supposed dedication to “human

reasoning,” which apparently “gives an intellectual sharpness to much of Lewis’ fiction that MacDonald’s lack” (54-5). Later, some of this supposed lack of rationality or intellectual sharpness in MacDonald’s works seems to be recast (although in a semi-circular and somewhat anachronistic manner): the reader is told that if one looks “closely enough” at his stories “we find that MacDonald’s reasons for believing in a good God closely resemble Lewis’s” (81).

Concentrating on the themes of “suffering” and “evil and goodness,” through the lens of both authors’ uses of “Chivalry” and “Shadows,” McInnis analyzes numerous examples of Lewis’s use of, and at times heavy reliance upon, what he took to be MacDonald’s ideas. McInnis highlights many of Lewis’s concepts, characters, and plots which either are directly borrowed from or are, to varying degrees, connected to MacDonald’s original creations. Meanwhile, McInnis continues to chronicle instances of similar life experiences, particularly painful ones for both writers, which he then posits as additional reasons for their books sharing so many close similarities.

It is obvious from even a superficial reading of this book that McInnis has studied and compared many, if not all, of the works both authors wrote and published. This allows him, with authority, to present numerous intersections between both authors, or, to put it more plainly, the numerous instances in which Lewis used MacDonald’s ideas. By concentrating on the themes of “suffering,” “evil,” and “goodness,” through the lenses of Chivalry and Shadows, McInnis is able to find a great many parallels between MacDonald’s and Lewis’ works, pointing to the great debt the latter owed the former, and also to how Lewis understood and used much of the material MacDonald left. Thus, students of Lewis will appreciate this study—MacDonald’s influence on Lewis is systematically made visible.

One issue that may concern MacDonald scholars, however, is that McInnis does not seem to perceive any difference between MacDonald’s fantasy works and his more realistic novels, his poetry, and his self-proclaimed *Unspoken Sermons*. While it is tempting to find holistic themes in all of MacDonald’s works, there is also a danger in the attempt, particularly when a scholar relies too heavily upon MacDonald’s fantasies and fairy tales to conclude something about MacDonald’s theology. In my opinion, there is an important, if not crucial, difference between MacDonald’s fantastic works and this other output. *Phantastes* is a case in point: the work lacks the explicit Christian themes, characters, and motifs that McInnis ascribes to it. Readers of *Phantastes* (and his other fantasy works), interestingly, may find

motifs that appear antithetical to a direct Christian reading—MacDonald’s fantasies and fairy tales are chock-full of witches, magic, goddesses, reincarnation, not to mention allusions and themes borrowed from Greco-Roman mythology and Faery. To give a “taste” of where I think McInnis may push his theological reading of MacDonald too far, I will provide two instances.

McInnis analyses what he considers MacDonald’s concept of (Christian) Chivalry, especially where it is found in its explicit form (i.e., stories with knights, squires, dragons, damsels in distress), and he finds numerous examples in *Phantastes*. A problem soon emerges, however, as these examples are not easily grafted upon a Christian framework such as the one McInnis assumes is there. When he concludes that the knight Anodos follows an ideal God/Jesus figure (252-3, 281), he seems to ignore many important parts of MacDonald’s book. For instance, there are numerous examples that point to the knight as fallible: he foolishly drags the dragon to the home of the little girl, instead of either swiftly delivering the almost dead child to her parents or hurrying quickly back to tell them where they can find and succor her. Thus, this knight does not show his “feminine” aspect (276) when “he learns from his host that there is a severely injured child under the same roof” (252), because he (and Anodos) can see the girl’s mother bring in this same child, the one he carelessly left with a hermit while he occupied his time bringing her frantic parents a “present,” the dead dragon. In case readers missed the point of the knight’s frequent lapses of true empathy towards the injured, if not almost dead, child and her worried parents, MacDonald includes a few other instances of the knight’s bizarre understanding of what had just occurred, which seems to suggest a lack of concern towards this severely injured child after he kills the dragon. In other words, this knight seems much more concerned with the dead dragon’s carcass than with either helping the badly injured child or assisting her distraught parents to do so. The knight is not an ideal, chivalrous, Christian hero—he is a flawed human being.

The other instance involves the knights’ foolish awe and misunderstanding of the religious ceremonies upon which he and Anodos stumbled upon while winding their way through the forest. While the naïve knight watches the religious proceedings, he seems to concentrate wholly upon the “appearances of solemnity,” and “grand accompaniments” presented to him, while he fails to perceive the forced human sacrifices that are taking place almost under his nose. It is only his squire, a much more perceptive

(intelligent?) Anodos, who “saves” the knight’s honour by first identifying and then taking action against these barbaric practices. Thus, in my opinion, this knight cannot possibly be a very good ideal for Anodos (or anyone) to follow, and surely he should not be compared to Lewis’ Aslan, much less to MacDonald’s conception of God or Jesus, as suggested by McInnis.

I tend to think that readers and students interested in Lewis (particularly those looking into the nature of his theology) will both enjoy and learn much from this book. In addition, most of the arguments in McInnis book—not touching upon MacDonald complex fantasies and fairy tales—stand upon much more solid scholarly ground and will be welcomed by those searching for commonalities between these two writers. On the other hand, the book may provide diminishing returns for readers and scholars of MacDonald’s fantasy works, or for those who study the complex, often contradictory, connection between MacDonald as fantasist and Lewis, who may not have fully grasped MacDonald’s more complicated messages found in Faery.