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Remembering John Docherty

Fernando Soto

Writing about my friend John Docherty is both a simple yet at the same time a very complicated matter. The simple relates to how easy it is to say that he was truthful and enthusiastic in both his life and studies. He had a passion for living and learning, and he brought little artifice to either. He never cared about the politics of ideas, but only about the worth of the ideas themselves. If any one thing helped to advance his search into what he was studying, he quickly took it up and used it. If in his opinion the idea did not help, no matter its pedigree or who espoused it, he would leave it aside and move on to those that did advance the section of the scholarship on which he was working.

The more complicated aspect of writing about him has to do with his great generosity, openness, and deep appreciation for beauty and life. His generosity with his time, energy, and material possessions was huge. For instance, when we first met, he devoted a large amount of his time and energy to thoroughly convince me, and rightly so, that I ought to expand my studies of Lewis Carroll to include George MacDonald. I had read John's book on Carroll and MacDonald, but somehow I had not looked at this important source with much of any real interest. I remember his words "you must read *Phantastes* if you are to try to understand *Alice!*" As soon as I reached home I searched for a copy of this groundbreaking book and as I started my journey into MacDonald's fairyland I began to understand exactly what John had meant, and the generous spirit in which his words had been offered. John was one of the few academics I have met who did not see research as a zero sum game. He believed that a discovery could lead to others, and he tried to show this by the way he carried out his research in such an unselfish manner. For this example and for many other such gifts I remain indebted to him. My life and studies are much richer for having known this extraordinary man.

After we met in 1998, we continued to correspond for several years and we collaborated on a couple of projects. While our literary researches intersected, these were not the same. They seem to have run semi-parallel courses, but only intersected along certain points. Where we made the most progress in our understanding of Carroll, MacDonald, and a broad range of other matters was through our long conversations, usually at his house, or once when he and Amy Vail visited me in Toronto. These were among some of the best exchanges and incubators of ideas as I've ever had. John's creative mind would quicken at different points and it was very exciting to "see" his

mercurial imagination run with an idea, sometimes towards an important new insight, sometimes to an interesting dead-end, sometimes towards a point somewhere between these two vectors. This, to say the least, I found very contagious! One of the main things I took from him was the freedom of thought he always showed when in my presence. His creative mind knew very few bounds and no idea that managed to show itself was too lowly to be dismissed without consideration, in case it was important, interesting, or beautiful.

I miss and will continue to miss this exceptional man, and my heart goes out to his grieving wife who must miss him greatly. They made a beautiful couple and I am very proud to have been chosen as John's "best man" for his wedding. The wedding itself was an event I was not going to miss, but when he told me that I could serve them in this "formal" fashion in the ceremony I was very happy indeed. I could see that they loved each other very much and I was very happy that they had found each other, even if this took place very late in John's life.

Although he is dead, I know that his work will continue to guide and influence others who never will have the fortune to meet him, and also others like me who were lucky enough to have been influenced, and continue to be influenced by both his works and his life. If I were to describe John in a few words to those who did not know him, I would say that he reminded me of the best examples of the best characters penned by George MacDonald, with a bit of Carrollian logical whimsy thrown in for good measure.

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