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***Informing the Inklings: George Macdonald and the Victorian Roots of Modern Fantasy***, edited by Michael Partridge and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson

Tiffany Brooke Martin  
*Independent Scholar*

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

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as a Catholic storyteller rather than a Catholic philosopher. The interaction between these two panelists ranges widely, touching on such as Flannery O'Connor, *Doctor Zhivago*, Gilgamesh, Borges, and Marxism. Both participants are impressively well-versed in Tolkien's works as well as other literature, and they bring all these influences to bear on their conversation.

Christopher Garbowski writes on "Tolkien's Philosophy and Theology of Death," and in the process examines Tolkien's life, his essays and letters, and his fiction, in order to shed light on what his philosophy of *life* might have been, which would have bearing on his philosophy of *death*.

The final piece in this volume is not a conference program item, but was commissioned by the editors to present some documents connected to Tolkien's own early studies in the field. Giampaolo Canzonieri does so in "Tolkien at King Edward's School," providing transcripts of a curriculum description and of an evaluation by an Oxford examination board which mentions both Tolkien and his fellow TCBS member Rob Gilson. Canzonieri also gives a brief summary of Tolkien's time at King Edward's.

On the whole, this volume presents a diverse array of views on Tolkien and on various aspects of philosophy, from a variety of European and Anglo participants. The editors of this book, as well as the organizers of the conference, are to be congratulated on this effort, and Walking Tree has done Tolkien scholarship a service in publishing these proceedings.

—David Emerson



**INFORMING THE INKLINGS: GEORGE MACDONALD AND THE VICTORIAN ROOTS OF MODERN FANTASY.** Michael Partridge and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson, editors. Hamden: Winged Lion Press, 2018. 261 p. 9781935688204. approx.. \$25.00.

*INFORMING THE INKLINGS: GEORGE MACDONALD And the Victorian Roots of Modern Fantasy* presents 12 essays that explore George MacDonald's writing and influence on writers of fantasy after him. In the preface by Stephen Prickett, who helped co-select the essays, he indicates the goal that "these essays [will] assist in a wider appreciation of both MacDonald and his Oxford successors" (3). Those successors appear to be primarily C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, though there certainly must be more, with a less obvious Oxford successor as Susanna Clarke and her book *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* included at the end.

The essay collection does credit MacDonald well for his literary creativity and cultural insight in his day as well as influence over generations that followed, and there is likely at least one essay here for anyone interested in MacDonald, fantasy, and the Inklings.

MacDonald's influence on Lewis is particularly important; the first essay emphasizes Lewis's debt, with some discussion of MacDonald's *Phantastes*, the book that was transformative for young Lewis when he experienced the "sensation of 'holiness'" upon reading it (15). Similar to this experience was the Romantic tradition in literature that Malcolm Guite highlights in the second essay, concerning Samuel T. Coleridge's influence on both MacDonald's and Lewis's understanding of the imagination. The next two essays in *Informing the Inklings* focus respectively on MacDonald's life and writings as reassessed in relationship to the Inklings, and on his work *A Dish of Orts* and imagination.

Having studied and read MacDonald and the Inklings extensively, I was feeling somewhat disappointed with how familiar I found the content; though the material was solid, I was hoping for newer insights. My reading experience started to change more toward the middle to end of the book, so perhaps the essays were organized in a broader way near the beginning that would be helpful for readers newer to the topics. The fifth essay, "Organised Innocence: MacDonald, Lewis and Literature 'For the Childlike'" by Daniel Gabelman, stood out with its concentration on how "the childlike [was] emerging continually in their stories, not just in the characters, themes and images but in the very structure and style itself" (71). This topic offered some food for thought in reevaluating various stories by MacDonald and Lewis and what they achieved by emphasizing the childlike.

Though MacDonald is the book's focal point, fellow Victorians Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll logically appear with MacDonald in more than one essay as influences on modern fantasy. For example, an essay by Kirstin A. Mills examines dreams and hyperspace with their shaping of literary secondary worlds, seen in different ways in Carroll's *Wonderland* and MacDonald's *Fairyland*. Sharin Schroeder's essay diverges widely from MacDonald, as evident in its title: "Genre Problems: Andrew Lang and J.R.R. Tolkien on (Fairy) Stories and (Literary) Belief." While the literary criticism is informative, it is unclear what the true connection is with MacDonald, other than a few small references to him in passing and in footnotes.

Near the end of the book, the essay by Monika B. Hilder especially stood out for its engaging, insightful content. The shorter title is "Gender, Science, and Religious Faith in George MacDonald's *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* and C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* and *That Hideous Strength*." As cultural critics, MacDonald and Lewis challenged the issues of their day and the classical

view of heroism with literary characters who held values similar to those of a Biblical spiritual hero (see 183-84). The second to last essay in the collection, by Rebekah Ann Lamb, is another intriguing one with its attention to the “living house” metaphor seen in MacDonald and Lewis’s writings (199), for example, with “homes and houses as being architectural metaphors for growth and suffering in the pilgrimage of faith” (200).

People studying Victorian and modern fantasy will probably be interested in this collection of essays, which could potentially open new ways to consider less familiar topics. The collection provides good coverage of MacDonald’s key ideas and criticism of some texts, so it will hopefully prove a useful introduction to him for new readers. The cost also appears fairly affordable for individuals and library collections.

—Tiffany Brooke Martin



**“SOMETHING HAS GONE CRACK”: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON J.R.R. TOLKIEN IN THE GREAT WAR.** Janet Brennan Croft and Annika Röttinger, eds. Zurich: Walking Tree, 2019. 383 p. ISBN 978-3-905703-41-2. \$29.15.

THIS COLLECTION OF SIXTEEN ESSAYS is a fascinating read for those who want to deepen their understanding of how the Great War, aka the First World War, impacted the writing of Tolkien, who always took great pains to deny any characterization of his novels that might smack of allegory. Tolkien did not want his Middle-earth to be seen as a fictional window dressing for the war in Europe, nor for anything else in the real world. Still, writers write from what they know. And it is impossible that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* should not be influenced by Tolkien’s experiences on the front in the Somme.

Writers write what they know. Critics may claim that novelists like Hemingway were shamelessly autobiographical. But Hemingway merely made little effort to hide it. In spite of Tolkien’s well-documented dislike of allegory, the raw materials of the worlds he created were drawn from the world he actually inhabited. No matter how imaginative his inventions might be, the raw materials are and were the world he knew. And indeed, unlike many invented mythologies, which set their worlds far away from our own, Middle-earth is allegedly the pre-history of our present world. Tolkien has not set his mythical world on a Perelandra, or across the Wood Between the Worlds, perhaps parallel to Narnia or Westeros. Middle-earth in some ways is more like the Potterverse: it inhabits the geography we know in a different time or space. The wizarding world is only invisible to us Muggles because of the efforts of wizards. The Land