

## BOOK REVIEW

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Michael Partridge & Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson (eds.)

*Informing the Inklings. George MacDonald and the Victorian Roots of Modern Fantasy*

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Fantasy is presumably one of the fastest evolving and multifarious cultural phenomena of late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century and takes forms that could not have been anticipated 50 years ago: it moves temperamentally from (already) „old-fashioned” print format volumes in tens of millions of copies and dozens of languages (if we speak only about fantasy works translated from English, such as the much criticised and yet highly popular *Eragon* series, and do not move into the more exotic area of, say, Argentinian narratives such as *La Saga de los Confines / Saga of the Borderlands*), to cinematic renditions of existing titles or newly imagined epics, to derivative forms such as board games, computer games, computer-supported systems for collaborative fantasy-writing and even more spectacular and gripping activities such as reenactments of established fantasy episodes, such as the Battle of the Five Armies in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* which, according to the organizers of the event, annually engage more than 1,000 participants in full costume and makeup in a forest near a Czech town, 80 kilometres north of Prague! Much of this fascination can be traced back to some of the original fantasy writers of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, whose work stood as model for much literature in the same line, though seldom of the same order of magnitude. It is then quite as natural to take this one step further and attempt at tracing the sources of *their* work and identify their lineage, the well whence their myth making potency springs. This is what a group of MacDonald scholars meeting in Oxford in 2014 set to do, and the resulting papers have been collected in the volume edited by Michael Partridge and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson and published under the title *Informing the Inklings. George MacDonald and the Victorian Roots of Modern Fantasy*. The twelve articles, with Professor Prickett’s prefatory note, bionotes of contributors and editors, a brief yet informative and welcome note on the

George MacDonald Society and associated journal, both established in 1981 in recognition of the Scottish author's significant work, an Index of names and a list of Other Books of Interest thoughtfully put together by the editors, explores the various angles and layers that connect the group of Oxford-related writers to their immediate declared sources, as well as to other, equally relevant, yet less apparent predecessors of the Victorian age.

The best documented relation is probably that between the mysterious Scottish minister and C.S. Lewis, who refers to him as his "master", declares himself to be in his debt and details his early encounter with MacDonald's prose through the latter's novel *Phantastes*. Stephen Prickett's article, *Informing the Inklings: C.S. Lewis's Debt to George MacDonald* traces this relation and establishes as its most poignant element the manner in which Lewis feels Victorian prose was being diverted in the latter's novel to a much more significant—and disturbing—plane of "otherworldliness" of which this world is barely and indefinitely indicative. The Fairyland—or "Fairyland"—that the young Lewis is directed towards, the author claims, is not a dream land disconnected from reality but rather one reevaluated in terms of its potential to point towards another, higher degree of reality—"latent, but not explicit in the old familiar" one (p14), "more real" (p 13), which is the tenuous connection between MacDonald's powerful fiction and solid sturdy Victorian realism. And it falls to art—to fantasy, as it happened to Lewis on his contact with MacDonald's book—to be the vehicle to transport us to this realm. An *Interpretation of Faerie: A Reading of Susanna Clarke's Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, as Informed by George MacDonald*, by Istvan Szabadi, brings to the fore MacDonald's work as an influence on a much more recent fantasy writer, Susanna Clarke, whose novel was published in 2007. She duly acknowledges the Scottish author's impact and the article centres round the topic of magic, seen as necessary instrument to understand reality on the one hand, and the possibility of multiple interpretations of fictional texts as ways of reaching further into reality. Playing with textuality, the possibility or transgressing or transmuting fictional genres is discussed in *Genre Problems: Andrew Lang and J.R.R. Tolkien on (Fairy) Stories and (Literary) Belief*, by Sharin Schroeder, who investigates the relation between Tolkien's text *On Fairy-stories* (1939) and Lang's (Coloured) Fairy Books—collections of folk stories of the "fairy" type: while his activity as a collector, critic and theorist was criticized, among other reasons, for the misrepresentation of the fairy story as a children's genre, it was nevertheless a catalyst (p 156), at least by making them available and widely-read. Tolkien is partly critical, especially in relation to Lang's position towards the magic and the miraculous in the fairy story, however, the two also partly concur in their joy in and appreciation of it. The former's problem, as discussed in the article, resides in the relation between the primary world and the secondary world of imagination, in the readers' response in

terms of their credibility, between his own personal religious beliefs and the manner and degree in which they can (or cannot) be integrated in literary works of this type; beyond these, unlike Lang, he never ceased to believe in the “transcendent and transformative power” of the Faërie (p172).

In a more confessional key, Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson recounts in *Rooted Deep: Relational Inklings of the Mythopoeic Maker* her personal post teenage re-connection to the MacDonald’s fairy tale *The Golden Key*, later conducive to other works; this encounter offered renewed insight into both the tradition that he himself relied on, based on a solid education and good knowledge of several foreign languages, and extensive reading ranging from Celtic folklore and the Arabian Nights, to Coleridge and Wordsworth, through Bunyan, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and others whose names would overflow the size of this review. Thus the long thread of fantasy is shared by his contemporaries such as Ruskin or taken over by writers and scholars in Lewis’s own generation—Tolkien, Barfield—and continued to a surprisingly robust set of current fantasy writers—and readers—of this continuing tradition, as diverse as Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman, Jennifer Trafton, Jeffrey Overstreet, Andrew Peterson. One thing that sets MacDonald apart is his awareness of this continuity: “MacDonald is engaging with Ruskin’s engagement’s with Blake’s engagement with Sidney’s engagement with Paul’s engagement’s with the Greek myth of *Psyche*” (p 49), creating a network of themes and ideas in what Johnson terms “relational reading” (p 47), which concurs in his mythmaking gift. More on the unmediated influence of Romantic predecessors on both MacDonald and Lewis is presented in “*Needles of Eternal Light*” *How Coleridge Roused MacDonald and Lewis*, by Malcolm Guite. While Coleridge is invoked in several other articles in this volume, Guite’s text focuses mainly on the Romantic poet’s major impression on the two fantasy writers, starting soundly from his appeal to both, based on his understanding of imagination and inspiration. After an in-depth exploration of the issues with the aid of an extensive bibliographical apparatus, and with relevant examples from the work of both MacDonald and Lewis, the author of the article concludes that what they received from Coleridge and shared with him and expanded, each in turn, cascading, as it were, is the idea of a necessary creative faculty that will bring about a holistic vision, conjoining imagination and the intellect; man will thus be able to fully respond to “*endless forms of beauty informed by truth,*” a quote from MacDonald’s book *A Dish of Orts*. The same volume is further discussed in Trevor Hart’s article *Materiality, Metaphor and Mystery: Imagination and Humanity in George MacDonald’s A Dish of Orts* (1893), with the aim of providing an outline of the Scottish writer’s understanding of the role of imagination in three areas: in identifying man as the result of God’s imaginative and creative power, in viewing imagination as the organ of meaning, which assists in the use of language as a meaning and symbol making instrument, and finally, imagination as crucial in creativity and

discovery—poetic mainly, but scientific not excluded—which allows for man to delight in creation, to know the Creator through its mediation and even join in “God’s own continuing creative engagement with the world” (p 65). Hart concludes by pointing that MacDonald’s view of imagination, its nature and role indicates a surprising intimation of current developments in various cutting edge areas of science, while making it one of the crucial elements of being human.

In her article ‘*The Leaven Hid in the Meal*’: *George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, and the practice of Literary Criticism*, Bethany Bear Hebbard uses the same idea of a “hidden tradition” that any poet is only a part of, in order to revisit and evaluate Lewis’s rather obscure early essay *The Personal Heresy* (1939), in which he programatically discards reading as an access point into the author’s biography and psychology, and literary criticism as an author-oriented study which should not replace an exploration into the object of poetic interest itself. This partially contrasts with the Master’s own position, sketchily presented in one of his few critical exercises, *England’s Antiphon* (1868). Hebbard’s analysis points out to nuances in both writers’ critical practice—Spenser’s inner spiritual life beyond immediate historic events in MacDonald’s view, and Spenser’s influences that most subtly inform his poetry and imagery in Lewis’s view, both threads described as doing their work “quietly, unperceived—the leaven hid in the meal” (p 121), to use the metaphor created by MacDonald and referred to in the title by the article’s author. The two threads seem to converge in the same approach to reading and criticism as forms of human encounter, sympathy and ultimately of friendship—if possible—established between the participants in any form of literary creation.

The relation between the members of the Inklings group and other Victorian writers is also explored in several articles. Lewis Carroll’s type of prose, as well as that of other Victorian writers who reputedly wrote literature “for children” such as Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water-Babies*, is related to the Scottish writer’s deep conviction, along with that of his most prominent admirers’ Lewis and Tolkien, that fantasy is far from being literature for children as much as for “the childlike”, in the sense that it departs—as it ought to—from the intended moralistic input of the former and rather taps into and encourages the child’s responsiveness and ability to “receive the ‘revelation of the true through the beautiful’ ” (p 85). This standpoint makes “the beating heart, the entire ‘cast of mind’ that gives shape and structure to every character, symbol and sentence.” (p 80) in MacDonald’s own prose and is further reflected in Lewis’s creations and in his more theoretical approaches, such as his essay *On Three Ways of Writing for Children*, as Daniel Gabelman states in *Organised Innocence: MacDonald, Lewis and Literature ‘For the Childlike’*. The prose by the same group of authors is further investigated in Jean Webb’s *Fantasy, Fear and Reality: Tracing Pathways between Kingsley, Carroll, and MacDonald Leading to the Inklings*, in relation to the environment, to nature in its bucolic state as

opposed to a harmonious continuation of encroaching industrialization, to society and the young hero's / heroine's position within, or outside it, or in between, and ultimately to the child's identity and the manner in which it is constructed and envisioned in each writer's work.

Myth making and world making run in parallel, and much of the actual narrative form depends on the manner in which fictional space is seen and used in imaginary worlds such as those created by two Victorian kindred spirits, MacDonald and Lewis Carroll. In *Dreaming into Hyperspace: The Victorian Spatial Imagination and the Origins of Modern Fantasy in MacDonald and Carroll*, Kirstin Mills makes the point that the concept of space is central to fantasy (p 130), as proved by the utmost care writers took—figuratively or quite literally—in mapping their fictional realms, outlining landscapes, or devising entry points or portals into these territories. Whether entirely supernatural or dreamlike, a mixture of the familiar and the supernatural, or surprisingly abstract like that of Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland*, they seem to “destabilize fundamental notions of reality” (p 141) and even to fall into step with theories of non-Euclidian space and of multidimensionality. While the modernity in “modern” is not quite clearly defined so as to accommodate all the writers discussed, the essay interestingly points out that in each case their work is indicative of a *beyond* or *above*, necessarily distanced from and yet related to the universe of common perception, which the reader is invited to access. On the other hand, Rebekah Ann Lamb's article '*A Living House*': *Everyday Life and Living and Sacramental Poetics in George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis* considers a perspective which the author refers to as “the Christian conception of sacramental vision”, defined as the ability of the real world, of its humble forms and materials, to point towards the strangeness and the miraculous of transcendence. Quoting Chesterton, who describes MacDonald in terms of the “*homely* [emphasis added] quality of his imagination”, Lamb identifies, in the metaphor of the house, of the familiar, a locus where the divine will dwell, if allowed and accepted. Both writers make extensive use of the house/home imagery as a meeting ground of the physical and the metaphysical.

An interesting and challenging reading of the thorny issue of gender in the deeply gender biased patriarchal Victorian mindset is proposed by Monika B. Hilder in *St George and Jack the Giant-Killer: As 'Wise as Women Are'?* *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*. Starting from two pertinent revisions to support her argumentation, namely that of the concept of heroism as active pursuit and self reliance, and the question whether courage is necessarily related to the masculine type of classical heroism or rather to the mystical courage of self denial and accepted dependency, Hilder suggests a new interpretation of what has long been considered as the apparent male chauvinism of the two writers. A paradoxical

reinterpretation emerges from the author's analysis of the texts present in the title of the article, that of a path to heroism that moves from predominantly masculine attributes through "'feminine' weakness to spiritual strength" (p 189), from sharp scientific reasoning, always in danger, at some point, of losing the moral compass, to a sense of enlightened community that stimulates charity, humility, obedience, and unity within the human being and between the human and the divine—all feminine features in the classical Western paradigm. The solution provided by the two writers is thus proved to be quite far from the chauvinism they have been sometimes blamed for, revealing them rather surprisingly as "countercultural prophets" (p 195).

The collection of articles carefully put together by the two editors and MacDonald enthusiastic scholars, Michael Partridge and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson, bring not just new particulars about the Scottish writer, the members of the Inklings group and their informing influences and like-minded contemporaries, but also novel perspectives, connections and a remarkable cross-wiring of ideas. The articles prove, therefore, to be as many gateways into a universe that is both insightful and inspiring, an invitation to reflection and, of course, to further, more intimate, exposure and proximity to their and their contemporaries' works, and to their informing influences. A brief comment, perhaps, is due to the delightful choice of cover matter, with fonts created by William Morris, illustrations adapted from MacDonald's books *The Princes and Curdie* and *At the Back of the North Wind*, and the background colour called Oxford blue to honour the English alma mater. *Informing the Inklings* is, if not a passport, then a compelling travel guide into the fascinating world of fantasy, a book worth reading about a journey worth taking.

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