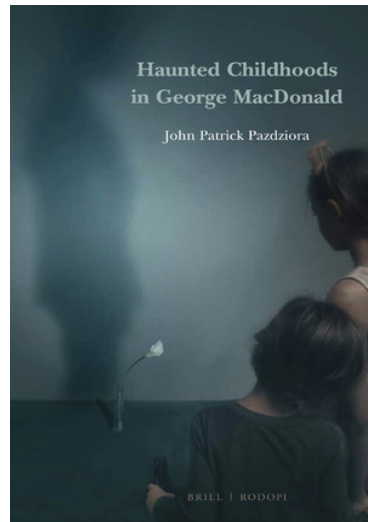


# Book Review Supplement

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**John Patrick Pazdziora, *Haunted Childhoods in George MacDonald*. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), \$119, (hardcover).**

John Pazdziora's *Haunted Childhoods in George MacDonald* is an impressive book, admirable for its stylistic lucidity, its academic precision, its felicitous exploration of its subject (death, mysticism and childhood in MacDonald's writings for children) and its revaluation of MacDonald as a Scottish writer. Indeed, it has been far too long since a monograph has, as one of its principal aims, positioned MacDonald solidly within the ambit of Scottish literature. The last book to do this was David Robb's 1987 critical classic *George MacDonald in the Scottish Writers Series*, and Pazdziora's book could be seen as a direct descendant of Robb's in more ways than one. Pazdziora goes so far as to say that Robb's book 'remains perhaps



the most important work on MacDonald', and Robb himself offers the longest and most praiseworthy recommendation just before the contents page (9). Like Robb's book, Pazdziora's is also in a series dedicated to Scottish literature. This is significant because an unspoken subtext of Pazdziora's argument seems to be that MacDonald has been overlooked in Scottish literary studies and that he is worthy of being admitted to the nineteenth-century Scottish literary pantheon (Hogg, Scott, Stevenson, etc.)—at least as a minor deity.

If, beyond MacDonald scholars, the main audience for the book is Scottish literary studies, there are two other audiences also in view: those interested in the intersection of literature and theology, and children's literature scholars. Pazdziora tries to hold these audiences together by focusing on a triad within MacDonald: death-mysticism, the child, and Scottishness. Thus, a further ambition of the book seems to be enlarging the circle of MacDonald studies to bring in new interlocuters and to stimulate dialogue between groups that are sometimes too inwardly focused. All of this is highly commendable, and Pazdziora generally accomplishes this academic admixture with dexterous facility, but there are occasional moments when one audience or another might be left wishing that Pazdziora was speaking solely to them.

The aesthetics of the physical book are excellent: inside, thick paper brilliantly white with standard margins for easy annotation, readily available

footnotes rather than bothersome endnotes, and three to four blank pages at the end for additional notes or doodles; outside, no annoying dust jacket over the sturdy boards but still a beautifully illustrated cover with a pleasant tactility in the hand while reading. Meanwhile, the cover image eerily evokes the title and main theme of the book ('haunted childhoods') through the contrast of dark tonalities, austere setting, and melancholy stillness with the white delicacy of the lily, the tender affection of the boy's head on the girl's shoulder, and the pink trappings of the girl.<sup>1</sup> This same balance of dark and light—a sort of sombre, fragile beauty—is the keynote of the book.

Pazdziora's first two chapters draw on MacDonald's rarely discussed relationship with his half-sister Bella during the period (1853-55) of her slow decline in health and ultimate death at the age of 14. Pazdziora identifies a letter from MacDonald to Bella in 1853 as his earliest writing to a child and through a persuasive close reading of this letter suggests that MacDonald privileges children as capable of receiving spiritual revelation that the adults in his troublesome congregation of Arundel seemed to find challenging. In this letter, Pazdziora also finds a sentimental longing for the Scottish landscape of MacDonald's childhood and subliminal anxieties about financial stability and the health of his loved ones. Upon receiving the news of Bella's rapidly declining health in 1855, MacDonald returned to Huntley and was with her when she died. In this event, Pazdziora notes a concatenation of his book's core themes: the death of a beloved child, MacDonald's deep connection with the Scottish landscape of his youth, and the childlikeness of God. Occurring as it did, at the very beginning of MacDonald's literary career, the death of Bella 'could not help but affect him profoundly' and thus 'helped nudge his imagination onto a particular trajectory, one that intertwined his ideas about childhood with an estranged view of the Scottish landscape' and related both 'irrevocably to his ideas of the divine love as manifested in childhood and childness' (52, 81).

Chapter three looks at MacDonald's early portrayals of death in *Phantastes* and *The Portent*, connecting these with a letter MacDonald sent to Ruskin on the death of Rose La Touche. In these writings, MacDonald transformed his specifically Christian religious beliefs about death into non-religious terms, creating powerful symbols of death and viewing bereavement as a 'catalyst for both prayer and poetry' because of how it causes 'awareness of God's silence' (88). With *The Portent*, Pazdziora also highlights how MacDonald portrays the Scottish landscape of his childhood in an ambiguous way: nostalgic longing and eerie haunting get mixed up in such a way that the Scottish landscape 'becomes representative of a tension inherent in MacDonald's portrayal of childhood' (102). Chapter four turns to *At the Back of the North Wind* and investigates the intertextuality with James Hogg's 'Kilmeny', arguing that MacDonald's invocation of Hogg points to the dark Scottish folklore tradition of fairy abduction as related to the death of chil-

dren. Pazdziora identifies North Wind as 'a conflation of Novalis's maiden-mother Night with the Scottish fairy queen' from Hogg's 'Kilmeny' and Scottish folklore (133). In this way North Wind inhabits 'the liminal threshold between the worlds of the living and the dead', and Diamond's 'abduction by the fairies becomes spiritual awakening' (134).

Chapter five considers *Ronald Bannerman's Boyhood* and the moments of existential dread that run through all of MacDonald's book-length fantasies for children, suggesting that terrors and griefs may haunt childhood but 'lead ultimately to consolation and a clearer perception of wonder'. This is a universal experience because childness 'is for MacDonald the heart of human experience', and by experiencing these griefs and terrors that are unique to children there is also 'a unique catharsis' that enables the child to 'teach the grown-up how to grieve and how to sing down fear' (163). Again, Scottish landscapes and folklore are highlighted as pivotal to MacDonald's concepts of childhood and its haunting. The final chapter contrasts MacDonald's use of Scottish folklore with Andrew Lang's to accentuate the distinctiveness of MacDonald's project. Through a close comparison of 'The Carasoy' (comprised of two shorter tales, 'The Fairy Fleet' and 'The Fairy Cobbler') and Lang's *The Gold of Fairnilee* and the ways in which both draw on 'Tam Lin' and 'Thomas Rymer', Pazdziora argues that Lang's aim in *The Gold of Fairnilee* is to suggest that the poetry and artistry of folklore 'is the seedbed of civilisation that will keep human-kind sane even as the modern world declines' whereas MacDonald's aim is 'a mystical awakening' to the divine love that is present even in death and loss (190, 192). Finally, a brief conclusion offers a reading of 'The Golden Key' as a fairy child-abduction narrative that unites most of the themes of Pazdziora's book: childhood, death, landscape, and mystical awakening.

Now for my quibbles. What I see as the main argument of the book—MacDonald's mystically infused understanding of the intersection of childhood and death—is compelling, sensitive, and irrefutable, but there are moments when I found the insertion of Scottishness into this narrative somewhat overstated or limiting. Most of the Scottish references are strikingly profound and overdue: the reading of Hogg's 'Kilmeny' and the fairy queen has transformed my understanding of North Wind, and the discussion of 'Tam Lin' and 'Thomas Rymer' in comparison with Andrew Lang has given me a new appreciation for 'The Carasoy'. But I was less convinced by claims such as 'both death and the Scottish landscape had featured before in his writing; now they intertwined, related irrevocably to his ideas of the divine love as manifested in childhood and childness' (81). In MacDonald's works, there are many examples of the Scottish landscape not having anything to do with childhood or death, just as there are examples of dying children not connected with Scottish landscapes. Moreover, it seems to me that to the extent the above claim is true it has more to do with MacDonald's *childhood* landscape (which happened to be Scottish, or rather Aberdonian or Hunt-

leyish) than with MacDonald's *Scottish* landscape (which happened to be part of his childhood)—the child (not the nation) is father of the man. This may seem like splitting hairs, but I think it points to an issue that sometimes affects nationalistic disciplines like Scottish or Irish Studies: namely, the equating of accident with essence and the questionable notion that the nation-state (often idealised) is the optimal level of resolution for understanding and categorising human experience and literary expression (neither lower—like Aberdeenshire or Huntley—nor higher—like Britain or Europe). Clearly, MacDonald was Scottish, and this is a vital level of analysis to keep in view, but he was also Aberdonian, British, and European (amongst many other things), and fixating on his Scottishness occasionally feels like special pleading.

I think there are also times when Pazdziora's desire to speak to the Scottish Studies audience slightly limits his main argument (and therefore what his other audiences might be more interested in). In his discussion of death and mysticism in *At the Back of the North Wind* in chapter four, for example, it seems a little strange that Dante is only mentioned in passing, particularly given that Pazdziora has co-authored an excellent article (in VII) on Dantean elements in *North Wind*.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that the main argument would have been enhanced by at least a short discussion of the interplay of Hogg and Dante (the two named sources of Diamond's experience at the back of the north wind) on the key themes of mysticism, death, and childhood. The choice to sideline the European source (Dante)—even if Hogg is ultimately more significant in this case—was perhaps to accentuate Scottishness, but at the loss of an opportunity to enrich the main argument.

These moments, however, are rare and probably inevitable for any work brave enough to be interdisciplinary in these tribal days. Pazdziora's endeavour to bring multiple disciplines together in one book is not only laudable academically, but it also seems to resonate with George MacDonald's own liminal life: a Scot who lived in England and Italy, a Victorian pastor who wrote fantasies, a literary critic who extemporised mystical sermons, a Christian who befriended atheists, and an adult who sought to be childlike.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The image is original to the book and is by Rich at Rich Photo Club, Tokyo.

<sup>2</sup> John Patrick Pazdziora and Joshua Richards, 'The Dantean Tradition in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*', VII: *An Anglo-American Literary Review* 29 (2012): 63-78.