

Book Reviews

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Rolland Hein, *Doors In: The Fairy Tale World of George MacDonald*. Foreword by Olga Lukmanova (Wipf and Stock, 2018). \$19.99 (paperback) i–xvii, 121 pp.

Distinguished George MacDonald scholar, Dr. Rolland Hein, again invites readers on a significant journey to explore the wealth of the famous Scotsman's spiritual vision in his latest book *Doors In*. Even for enthusiasts, MacDonald is no easy writer to grasp. Everyone who has read his novels comes away wondering what they might have missed. And yet, the wondrous qualities of MacDonald's stories are what make the experience of reading him so attractive. There is always more that begs to be discovered; more that returns to us with the force of mystery so vital to our lives; more that will not and cannot speak until we, presumably, are ready to listen. The "fascinated befuddlement" that confronts MacDonald readers is further supported by the Scotsman's own wise instructions on how to read well (5). His instructions, however, might possibly become excuses to remain puzzled. For example, MacDonald emphasizes the multiplicity of meaning in fairy story, and warns against the sort of "intellectual greed" that would seek to consume and master knowledge and thereby inevitably fail. Perhaps, though, we need not remain nearly as puzzled as we may often be.

Therefore, many will welcome Hein's latest gem. In this book for general readership, Hein, with characteristic care, humility, and acumen, explores eight fairy stories that span MacDonald's career: *Phantastes*, *The Light Princess*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, "The Wise Woman," *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Golden Key*, and *Lilith*. What new insights might we glean from the beloved fairy tale *The Princess and the Goblin*, that G. K. Chesterton described as "the most real, the most realistic . . . the most like life" (34–35)? What was MacDonald up to in his unusual story *The Golden Key*, and, perhaps, in the most puzzling of books, his finale, *Lilith*? Moreover, how might these and other stories in MacDonald's fairy-tale world shape and reshape us? How might they guide us into the higher truths that make us human—humans on the journey to becoming our truest selves for all of eternity?

Drawing our attention to the beginning of *Lilith*, Hein explains that *Doors In* is about leaving "the physical world intellectually perceived[,] and like Vane, finding one's self "'in' . . . the world spiritually perceived by the heart" (4). Through the doors "in," provided by MacDonald's art, readers may gain access to treasures of spiritual truth. These treasures cannot be gained

without the wise imagination that MacDonald is so adept at inspiring. That this can happen is outlined for us in the personal stories of the impact that MacDonald had both on Hein—as he notes in his Preface—and on Olga Lukmanova—as she recounts in her Forward. For example, Hein describes how his “strict fundamentalist” background—to which he “owe[s] an immense debt” and in which tradition he once served as a pastor—also “stifl[ed]” his emotions, his imagination, and therefore “starv[ed]” his spirit (xv). It was through reading MacDonald that Hein experienced and discovered how imagination could play a role in “shaping [his] personal relationship to God[,]” resulting in “soul-delighting adventures” (xvi). Similarly, Lukmanova describes her own experience as “a relatively new Christian in post-Soviet Russia”; how upon her first discovery of the “great teacher,” the “cobwebs” were “swept from [her] brain and . . . heart” (ix).

Each chapter in *Doors In* is devoted to one of the eight MacDonald stories. Discussion of the novels, then, is further divided by chapters and identified thematically for easy reference. *Doors In* is rich with biblical references foundational to MacDonald’s vision as well as references to the cultural history that were part of his nineteenth-century education; both of which, as Lukmanova notes, modern readers may not necessarily have a sufficient grasp (xi). This background knowledge of references and MacDonald’s worldview better equips readers. For example, Hein clarifies that MacDonald’s idea that basically good people see a basically good world and basically evil people see an evil world is comparable to what is stated in Psalm 18:24–26 (6). In the same way, it is useful to know that the name Anodos in *Phantastes* from the Greek “may mean either ‘having no way’ or ‘rising’” (13), and that his shadow “is a spirit of analytical cynicism” (16). Likewise, learning that the city of Bulika in *Lilith* is a “pun on ‘bulk’” underscores its signification as “the crass and inhuman values of materialism” (97, 101).

Hein’s discussion, however, is not limited to MacDonald’s fantasies. Indeed, *Doors In* is a treasure trove of apt citations from MacDonald’s other novels and writings as well as from many other authors, including Emily Dickinson, Bruno Bettelheim, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton, Dostoevsky, Wordsworth, Blake, and Rilke. What is especially memorable is the abundance of theological pearls that characterize this text. Reminiscent of Pascal’s *Pensées*, Hein’s summative statements—liberally seeded throughout this volume—will satisfy those who desire an intellectual grasp of MacDonald without limiting or dulling their imaginative capacity for venturing yet deeper into his fairy tale world. Here are a few of Hein’s pithy observations:

- “People see according to their natures, and one’s perception of the nature of God is quite dependent upon one’s attitude and relationship to him” (47).

- “To achieve any virtue requires courageously doing it” (67).
- “To see the world in the light of the eternal is to shape the nature of how one faces it” (73).
- “In every aspect of life, attitudes of love and concern are channels of grace” (75).
- “The point is that the world of spiritual reality is persistently trying to summon people’s attention, their determination to ignore or deny it notwithstanding” (90).
- “Preferring one’s own judgment over obedience to the demands of moral and spiritual reality is the essence of human depravity” (100).

To read MacDonald is an education in itself: to read MacDonald with Hein as your guide will undoubtedly enrich this education. In *Doors In*, Hein yet again amazes readers with his deep insights and inviting prose. The pitfall of such an illuminating book, though, is that readers might be tempted to read Hein’s excellent commentary prior to reading MacDonald’s stories, and so to regard his explanation as the final one—a problem that Hein acknowledges and wrestles with (85–86). Hein warns readers of this pitfall and, instead, encourages ongoing learning as MacDonald envisioned.

Doors In is one book that neither seasoned nor new readers of MacDonald will want to miss. Hein’s “hope is that readers will be helped to experience mythic moments and to receive ‘undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond’” (8). In this, he has succeeded. The “doors in” are multiple; as for the unfolding riches, who can measure them?

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