

## Book Reviews

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**Smith, Lesley Willis, *The Downstretched Hand: Individual Development in George MacDonald's Major Fantasies for Children* (Winged Lion, 2018). \$19.50 (paperback), 378 pp.**

As epigraph for this study of individuation in George MacDonald's major fantasies for children, Lesley Willis Smith draws from MacDonald's well-known essay, "A Sketch of Individual Development" (1880). In this essay, published in the same period as the major fantasies (1871–1883), MacDonald outlines his theory of maturation, which is only possible as a man or woman reaches up toward God and receives help from the divine "downstretched hand." As she explores this process, Smith aims to illuminate MacDonald's understanding of "the relationship between the self and God," a relationship which is "at the heart of the mystery of life" (2). She examines this "mystery of life" as it informs three of MacDonald's most beloved works: *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883). As she explicates biblical and archetypal patterns in these works, Smith argues that in MacDonald's vision, true individuation means the integration of the unconscious and conscious self, but that such integration is only possible within the divine economy of God's love.

Smith draws extensively from the works of Jung to explicate the processes she sees at work in MacDonald's characters, including the archetypal roles they play, emblems of their conscious and unconscious selves, and the symbolic functions of the settings, objects, and other fictional elements supporting these characters. For readers who are skeptical of such a purely Jungian approach, Smith acknowledges (in her conclusion) that Jung post-dates MacDonald, and cannot therefore be a historical or textual "source" for MacDonald's fantastic patterns of individuation. Nevertheless, she makes a strong case for the usefulness of Jung's systematic language for describing these patterns. She also reminds readers that both MacDonald and Jung draw from deep wells of literary myth and tradition in their writings, and that they are each responding—with quite similar concerns—to a universal human experience. Nevertheless, readers only superficially familiar with Jung may find that in Smith's analysis, MacDonald illuminates Jung more than the other way around.

Throughout *The Downstretched Hand*, Smith engages deftly with her source materials. Particularly remarkable is her exegesis of MacDonald's patterns of growth and development in light of biblical prophecy. Her nuanced readings rebut claims that MacDonald's writing is at times careless or (worse)

muddled, showing instead that he crafts his fantasies in such a way that he draws readers into the “mystery of life” that is his chief concern. Smith is clearly a scholar who knows intimately both the Bible and MacDonald, and her analysis goes far beyond mere identification of biblical language or allusion. She reveals how MacDonald uses his fantasies as a form of exegesis, interpreting the eschatological mysteries of Job, Daniel, and Revelation through the adventures of Diamond, Irene, and Curdie. Within this study of larger biblical patterns and narratives, Smith identifies many references to Scripture (and, in at least one instance, the Prayer Book) which even an attentive reader might have missed.

It is difficult to write about any of MacDonald’s fiction or fantasy without exploring his views on growth and development, Smith nevertheless offers fresh insights to enrich future studies of the major fantasies. Along the way, she deepens her readers’ awareness of MacDonald’s literary engagement with the Bible and offers fresh arguments on some of the most enigmatic elements of MacDonald’s writings, including the nature of the “great-great grandmother” and the ending of *The Princess and Curdie*.

When relevant to her study of *North Wind* and the *Princess* books, Smith traces numerous threads of connection to MacDonald’s other works, particularly the novels he composed during the same period. These references, which she explores mostly in her copious endnotes, provide many opportunities for further study. These notes also contain expanded references to Jung’s primary works, as well as appropriate references to the foundational scholarship on MacDonald (Manlove, Raeper, Prickett, and others) and more recent critical insights. Thoughtful chapter divisions and illustrations complement her lucid prose, strengthening an analysis that is both well-grounded and original.

Drawing on years of experience as a scholar of children’s literature and the 19th-century novel, Smith offers this monograph to head the valuable work she has done on MacDonald in the past, including pieces that have appeared in *North Wind*, *The Scottish Literary Journal*, and several of the major collections on MacDonald’s work. Readers familiar with the fantasies will find much exciting new material for their contemplation, while those coming to MacDonald for the first time will benefit from this illuminating guide to one of MacDonald’s perennial themes: the maturation of the God-seeking soul.

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