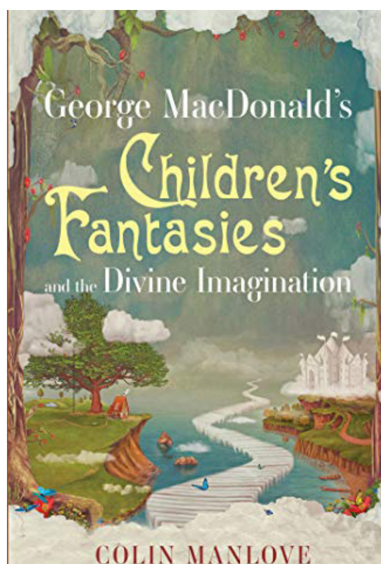
Colin Manlove, *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination*. (Eugene, Oregon: Darton, Cascade Books, 2019).

I first encountered the stories of George MacDonald at the age of eight, when my father, who rarely read fiction, decided to read aloud *The Princess and the Goblin* to me and my sister.



I remember watching the ceiling of our living room darken as evening wore on and our imaginations were stirred by claustrophobic tunnels, nasty goblins, and a mysterious great-great-grandmother whose identity seemed as elusive as her whereabouts in the castle.

Those childhood reading sessions left me baffled and unsettled. In *George MacDonald's Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination*, Colin Manlove suggests that he understands that bafflement. At the beginning of his chapter on *The Princess and the Goblin*, Manlove notes that this story is generally considered "the happiest of MacDonald's fairy tales for children" (61). By the end of the same chapter, however, we are in different territory. The ending of *The Princess and the Goblin*, Manlove suggests, leaves us feeling "a sense not of unity but of dissolution," leading readers into the darker sequel, *The Princess and Curdie*, set in a "more fragmented and lonely world of free will and choice" (78).

Manlove is expressing the very tension and theme of much of MacDonald's whole body of work. As his title suggests, Manlove's focus is largely on the ways MacDonald uses and explores the imagination in his fantasy stories for children, but he also discusses the interplay between the imagination, childlikeness, and the psychological discoveries of MacDonald's time, all filtered through the lens of MacDonald's Christian faith.

According to Manlove, MacDonald was fascinated by the new attention to the psyche in the 1840s. He was prone to the Romantic era's idealism of the unconscious as "working in harmony with nature to perfect the individual" (63). But as the Romantic period ebbed, a darker view of the unconscious—as a "blind irrational force founded on the primal instinct of sex"—took shape. MacDonald was forced to come to terms with this new perception of the unconscious, and his exploration of this tension between the Romantic and Freudian views of the mind often took shape in the ways he used the imagination in his body of work.

Each chapter heading in Manlove's book is a characterization of MacDonald's various approaches to and uses of the imagination. In *The Princess and the Goblin* and some of his shorter fairy tales, the "*functions* of the imagination" are explored, "portraying its workings in the world and the minds of more or less innocent child characters" (80). In stories like *The Wise Woman*, MacDonald is concerned more with the "*culture* of the imagination," with "learnt behavior" and how the imagination grows in concert with the practice of becoming a better person (80). Manlove notes that MacDonald uses the imagination both to "picture evil" and, in its divine form, to act as the thing on which "the good life" is founded (80). Like many of his mystical female figures, the lady North Wind from *At The Back of the North Wind* is an "embodiment of the divine imagination" (39). Manlove is at his best here, delving deeply into MacDonald's ideas about the divine imagination and into characters who embody childlikeness, which Manlove claims usually means "children and some mothers" (41).

This claim made me chuckle. Manlove may be right that Macdonald meant to imply that "some" mothers and children tend to be the ones who have "eyes to see" (41). However, as a mother of four, I am skeptical that mothers have cornered the market on divine sight purely because we are mothers. It's true that mothers (and parents in general if we are more egalitarian than even MacDonald was) often have particular access to childlikeness because they are likely to spend more of their time around children. But we can assume by his portrayal of naughty children like the "wickedly selfish girls" of *The Wise Woman* that even MacDonald would say that time with children doesn't equate to childlikeness (80). Mothers are not immune to what Manlove suggests as one reason for the somewhat harsher tone of *The Wise Woman*: MacDonald's frustration with his "eleven progeny, ranging from under ten to teenage" (80). Perhaps it was MacDonald's own periodic irritations as a father that made him feel softer toward mothers.

What MacDonald *has* always gotten right, and what Manlove speaks to in this book, is the complex influence of the imagination on the young, the old, and those in between. When I recently read some of MacDonald's fairy tales to my children, I wondered if they would get bogged down in the same aspects of the story that I did as a child. Instead, their imaginations were captured. And though they didn't always understand what was happening in the narrative, they were comfortable with the mystery and didn't mind the stranger parts of the story. They wanted to find out what happened to Tangle and Mossy, or if the Light Princess would ever find gravity.

This is part of MacDonald's appeal, both to his readers and clearly to Manlove: the brilliance and grace of MacDonald is that these interactions between childhood, adulthood, and the imagination are naturally happening, as they did with me and my children, as we read MacDonald's books across time and space. I am at once witnessing the responses of my

children to MacDonald's stories and, at the same time, wondering if my childhood memories are colored by my adult psychologies and imaginings and articulations of meanings; and perhaps my role as a parent and my long, meandering path back to childlikeness color those memories, too.

Manlove spent much of his career not only opening up studies of MacDonald and other fantasy authors in this way, but also making space for those who entered into the same field of study. As Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson quoted scholar Dr. Franziska Kohlt in this journal in a memorial to Manlove: "'Colin was not the gatekeeper, nor the gate that demanded you speak "friend"—he was the gate that spoke "friend" for you to enter'" (qtd. in "Colin Manlove and Stephen Prickett" 6).

In that spirit, Colin Manlove's final published work is a gift to his readers. I can't say that reading it made me less mystified by MacDonald's complex use of the imagination, but it did make me want to explore his stories more. This is a book to be appreciated and enjoyed by anyone who finds MacDonald's numerous children's fantasies at once baffling, and, at the same time, enthralling and strange. This book is especially helpful for those who are ready to go deeper into the imagination of George MacDonald.

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Work Cited

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Mo Moulton, *The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women.* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Dorothy L. Sayers relished her years at Oxford University (1912-1915), matriculating at Somerville College with a prestigious scholarship in 1912 and culminating her formal education with highest honors in 1915, the same year that J.R.R. Tolkien achieved honors at Oxford. The main difference is that Tolkien failed at his first attempt to earn a "First," as it is called, whereas Sayers passed with flying colors. Nevertheless, despite having attended the same lectures and completed the same requirements as male students, Sayers was not granted a diploma, since such a distinction was considered inap-