

'Fantasy, Art and Life: Essays on George MacDonald, Robert Louis Stevenson and Other Fantasy Writers' by William Gray

Review by Douglas Gifford

William Gray is Professor of Literary history at the University of Chichester, and Director of its Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy. His previous distinguished publications include *Heath and Fantasy* (2008), studies of writers such as George Macdonald, C. S. Lewis and JR Tolkien, a study of C. W. Lewis in 1998, a literary life of Stevenson in 2004, and much impressive work on the tradition of serious fantasy of the last century and a half.

In describing his volume as essays on MacDonald, Stevenson and others, Gray here and elsewhere acknowledges that the chapters, rather than contributing to a coherent overall argument, are either versions of essays previously published in journals or based on conference papers. This is not necessarily a criticism, and each of the essays shows a highly intelligent and lucid scholar working easily with literature, theology and theory generally, and often clarifying complex and important differences between writers – for example, in his Introduction's perceptive recognition that, while MacDonald's work can be placed in Romantic tradition, there is a fundamental difference between high Romanticism's insistence on the God-like faculty *within* the individual, and MacDonald's paradoxical insistence that, while he deplores the Calvinist martinet God, God's supremacy must overrule human aspiration to anything approaching the divine. Throughout Gray emphasizes how Macdonald is simultaneously a Romantic Platonist and a residual Calvinist – significantly suggesting that this in fact underlies the best of his work.

Thus the title suggests a broad focus on the relationship among fantasy, life and art. The discrete chapters limit this enquiry to specialist topics. At times I did feel that the book had been rather forced together, and that the changes of focus and topic, while cleverly linked, were unsettling. The most valuable chapters seem to me to be those on MacDonald and modern fantasy generally.

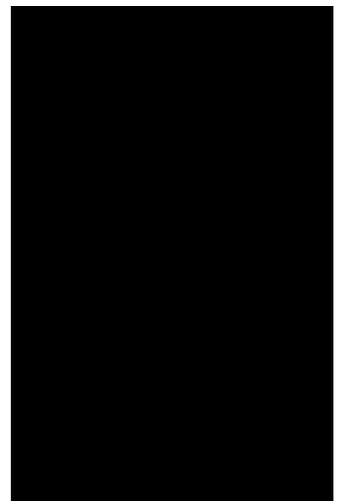
There are eight chapters; the first two focus on MacDonald's insistence on the fundamental and regenerative importance of the child-like (as opposed to the childish) in human imagination. Gray convincingly finds the restorative power of

stimulating analysis of Stevenson's neglected novel *The Wrecker* and a final chapter search for 'the uncanniest Scot', again lively and perceptive, left this reader with the sense of a confusion of pleasures. Indeed, the title, *Fantasy, Art and Life*, in its huge implications, suggests a much more ambitious volume rather than the present gathering of what are nevertheless fine essays.

References & Further Information

Fantasy, Art and Life: Essays on George MacDonald, Robert Louis Stevenson and Other Fantasy Writers by William Gray is published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

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