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The Bottle Imp

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Scottish Studies Profile:

Professor John Pennington

As I attempt to write a profile for *The Bottle Imp*, I feel as if I am in the midst of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse." In that story Poe calls *perverseness* a defining quality of being human. He writes: "Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should *not* ... I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution." Why do I feel such perversiveness in my Bottle Impishness and act for "the reason I should not"? Because I'm really an interloper in Scottish Studies – an American to boot, like Poe – certainly not in the same league as previous *Bottle Imp* profilers: Liam McIlvanney, David Borthwick, Donald Smith, Graham Tulloch, Carla Sassi, and John Corbett.

I am just a humble George MacDonald scholar. You know, George MacDonald, the Scottish writer? Born in Huntly, Aberdeenshire in 1824, MacDonald was raised on the farm family, a deeply religious family that belonged to the chapel, the Missionar Kirk. In 1840, he went to Kings College at the University of Aberdeen, where he received his M.A. in 1845 specializing in chemistry and physics. By 1850, MacDonald was trained as a Congregational minister and moved to Arundel, only to leave the pulpit under duress in 1853. That was a fortuitous event. He changed careers and became a writer. But a Scottish one? Certainly in works such novels as *David Elginbrod* (1863) and *Alex Forbes of Howglen* (1865). MacDonald's lasting reputation, however, does not rest on these Scottish novels. No, it is based on his fairy tales and fantasies, set in a country that has no geographical boundaries – fairyland. His best work includes the adult fantasies

Phantastes (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), and his all-ages fairy tales such as the full-length *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), and his classic shorter works, "The Light Princess" and "The Golden Key," to name only two.

Scotland has a rich tradition of faery, yet MacDonald still appears a marginal figure. While doing research in Scotland last year, I looked for MacDonald everywhere we went but could hardly find him. I needed, it seemed, to enlist Scotland Yard to track down the elusive writer. In Edinburgh I spotted an antique bookshop and found an 1890 edition of *At the Back of the North Wind*; the bookseller told me that not many people inquire about MacDonald, and that he knew about him but had never read him, though he was always meaning to. At the Writer's Museum on the Royal Mile, dedicated to Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson, there is copious material on other important Scottish writers. MacDonald is not mentioned, not once. The City of Edinburgh Council on Museums publishes a variety of histories on its website: in Chapter 1, "Scotland's Contribution to World Literature," no mention is made of MacDonald, not even in its section on children's writers that includes, of course, J. K. Rowling and others – Michael Ballantyne, Stevenson, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame. But all hope is not lost: you can find MacDonald at the websites *Undiscovered Scotland: the Ultimate Online Guide* and *Writing Scotland: A Journey Through Scotland's Literature*. Maybe I don't need Scotland Yard after all.

Why hasn't Scotland claimed MacDonald as its own? He's quite popular in America, primarily riding the coat-tails of C. S. Lewis, who wrote after reading *Phantastes*, that MacDonald "converted" and "baptised" his imagination. And in "On Fairy-Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien demonstrates his indebtedness to MacDonald. Lewis and Tolkien are still literary gods to us. And when Madeleine L'Engle, the writer of the immensely popular *A Wrinkle in Time*, lists MacDonald as a central influence, she furthers his reputation in America. But Lewis has been a mixed blessing to MacDonald. He admits that MacDonald "certainly ... has no place in its first rank – perhaps not even in its second." That leaves, it seems, MacDonald as a third-rate writer. But Lewis argues that MacDonald excels at one form of literature, the "mythopoeic," which is not dependent of words but rather on the myth of the story – once you know the myth "you can throw the means of communication away," writes Lewis. Strike one: MacDonald isn't

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necessarily a very good writer – he’s just great at myth-making. Furthermore, America’s fascination with Lewis – *The Chronicles of Narnia* his most popular literary work – goes beyond the fiction to his sermons, particularly those found in *Mere Christianity*. In other words, Lewis’s conversion to Christianity is partly attributed to MacDonald; consequently, much of MacDonald’s following in America comes from conservative, evangelical Christians who focus on MacDonald’s theology (quite incorrectly, in most instances). Strike two: MacDonald is seen as a conservative Christian, his writing, including the fairy tales and fantasies, lauded for its sermonizing qualities.

But MacDonald hasn’t had strike three yet. And maybe I’ve had some small part in that, making me an undiscovered Scottish scholar of literature, one who focuses on George MacDonald. As an undergraduate English assistant for Robert Boyer and Kenneth J. Zahorski at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, United States, in 1978, I read “The Light Princess” for a collection of fantasy stories they were editing, called *The Fantastic Imagination*, a title, I later learned, coming from MacDonald’s critical essay of the same name. “The Light Princess” stayed with me, and in graduate school, when it came time to choose a dissertation focus in 1987, I narrowed my choices to Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and George MacDonald. As you can anticipate, my dissertation committee asked suspiciously, “Who is George MacDonald?” When I decided that work on MacDonald had potential, I had to convince those committee members that MacDonald was, indeed, an important writer. That was no small task. One member even brought up Lewis’s comments about MacDonald. No one on the committee was interested in his Scottishness. In retrospect, I made a wide choice, for interest in fairy-tale studies, particularly of the Victorian age, is at its height, and MacDonald is central to that study. My scholarly work has attempted, I hope, to add to the scholarly discourse on MacDonald.

I am currently editor of *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* (with Fernando Soto, from Canada) and we have redesigned the journal to reflect, we hope, the growing scholarly interest in MacDonald, including work not only on his fairy tales and fantasies, but on his realistic novels, poetry, sermons, and literary criticism. We are also creating a digital archive of all scholarship from *North Wind* (founded in 1982), which will make access to such scholarship easy – just a mouse click or two away. This database will be the most

complete archive on MacDonald scholarship to date. To learn more about the journal *North Wind* and explore the digital archive, please go to www.snc.edu/english/northwind.html.

Currently, I am working with Roderick McGillis (from the University of Calgary, Canada) on two projects related to MacDonald. Broadview Press will publish our critical edition of *At the Back of the North Wind*; our text will provide an authoritative edition of the novel (including annotated notes that clarify the novel) and provide supplemental material that places the fantasy novel squarely in the Victorian age. That the text will be an academic textbook should make MacDonald more accessible in the university and college classrooms. In addition, Winged Lion Press will publish our *Behind the Back of the North Wind: Critical Essays on the Fantasy Classic*, furthering bringing notoriety to MacDonald.

Maybe I’m not, after all, so perverse in writing my profile for *The Bottle Imp*. I just may be more of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, an American who works on a Scottish writer. The “authentic” Scottish scholars on MacDonald – Colin Manlove and David Robb – should really be contributing profiles to *The Bottle Imp*, for their scholarly career has been partly devoted to centering MacDonald in the Scottish canon. In particular, David Robb concludes in *George MacDonald* (1987 – part of the Scottish Writers Series) that “much has been achieved in the academic revival of interest in Scottish literature in recent decades, but MacDonald has benefited scarcely at all; he is not much better known to Scottish readers or critics ... His ultimate place is not yet decided, and his location on the scale between oblivion and universal acclaim is still to seek.” Not much has changed in the 23 years since Robb wrote those words (and I finished my dissertation on MacDonald). Yet MacDonald scholars are a persistent lot, it appears. In my own little way, I hope to bring MacDonald to more readers and scholars, creating a little scholarly space that complements the fairyland MacDonald writes about in *Lilith*, where we can become “lost in a space larger than imagination.”



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