

Three Ways of Looking at Victorian Fantasies

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An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald, ed. Glenn Edward Sadler. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994.

The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship, by John Docherty. Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1995.

Inventing Wonderland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, and A. A. Milne, by Jackie Wullschlèger. New York: Free, 1995.

These three books cover the same general subject: the life and literary works of major Victorian fantasy writers for children. Since Sadler, Docherty, and Wullschlèger use different critical approaches to their topic, it is fascinating to realize how little these books as a group have in common with one another. The George MacDonald who emerges from Sadler's massive collection of letters barely resembles the George MacDonald whom Docherty shows to be a writer involved in an intense and extended literary wrestling match with Lewis Carroll. Only one single letter to Carroll appears in Sadler's volume, a brief response to Carroll's request for an introduction to Noel Paton, whom Carroll was considering as a possible illustrator for *Looking-Glass*. The Lewis Carroll who provides the title for Wullschlèger's group biography of five pivotal Victorian and Edwardian fantasy writers is not the same Carroll who Docherty claims was involved in a long-standing literary and religious debate with MacDonald that, he suggests, resulted in their children's books being filled with reciprocating allusions. MacDonald is excluded from Wullschlèger's master list of fantasy writers and barely makes a mention in her book.

Sadler's *An Expression of Character* is a much-needed collection of letters of George MacDonald, perhaps best known by children's literature scholars for *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie*, as well as his many visionary fairy tales. Sadler has also edited the outstanding two-volume *The Gifts of the Child*

Children's Literature 27, ed. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser (Yale University Press, © 1999
Yale University).

Christ: Fairy Tales and Stories for the Childlike (Eerdmans, 1973), which is the standard edition for MacDonald's fairy tales. *An Expression of Character* will undoubtedly find an important and useful place next to *The Gifts of the Child Christ* and William Raeper's *George MacDonald* (Lion, 1987) as essential scholarly texts for anyone wishing to do serious critical work on MacDonald. Sadler has chronologically arranged more than three hundred letters divided into six major periods of MacDonald's life. Sadler provides necessary annotations to the correspondence, an accurate register of the letters, and an index to the people and places mentioned in the collection. Although not as extensive or detailed in its scholarly notes as Morton Cohen's two-volume *The Letters of Lewis Carroll* (Oxford, 1979), *An Expression of Character* is a treasure trove for those interested in MacDonald's religious beliefs.

There is one great limitation to this volume, however, although the fault lies not with Sadler but with MacDonald. MacDonald's withdrawal into total silence during the final years of his life is well known, as is the complexity of his highly mystical and mythopoetic prose. Any reader hoping to find the "golden key" to unlock the mysteries of his intricate fantasies will be sorely disappointed. In one letter to a cousin, MacDonald explains, "A man whose business is writing is seldom fond of letters" (328). Although MacDonald dutifully wrote hundreds of letters, they are surprisingly flat and impersonal when compared to his emotionally and erotically charged fiction. The only two letters that equal MacDonald's published work are a touching letter to John Ruskin written four days after the death of Rose La Touche and a guiltily penned note to Thomas Carlyle begging him to duplicate a letter written to a mutual friend that MacDonald had inadvertently misplaced. MacDonald avoids analysis of his work in the letters; as he wrote to A. P. Watt, his literary agent, "I will do nothing to bring my personality before the public in any way farther than my work in itself necessitates" (355).

Occasionally there is a brief reference to his own work, such as the letter to his wife in which he suggests that *The Princess and the Goblin* is "as good work of the kind as I can do, and I think will be the most complete thing I have done" (174). But those seeking insights to MacDonald's fantasies are better off reading his "The Fantastic Imagination" than the letters collected in *An Expression of Character*.

A strikingly different look at MacDonald is provided when Docherty places MacDonald's literary works next to those written by Lewis Carroll and argues forcefully that for forty years the two writers

engaged in a spirited "literary game with each other," confirming William Blake's dictum that "Opposition Is True Friendship" (xii). The mention of Blake reveals much about *Literary Products*, since this study resembles a wildly hermeneutical study that promises to reveal the meaning behind all of the esoteric symbolism and personal mythology that are imbedded in Blake's poetry. Several of Docherty's charts, which are meant to illuminate "the structure of Alice's Wonderland trials as a caduceus" (115) or "Alice's trials and transformations superimposed upon the cycle of the year" (172), for example, are worthy of the visual imagery of Blake, or at least that of Harold Bloom's interpretation of Blake.

Since Lewis Carroll makes up half of this dense study, which is restricted to the influence of the two writers on each other, I must say this is the most curious interpretation of Carroll that I have read since Abraham Ettleson's *Lewis Carroll "Through the Looking Glass" Decoded* (Philosophical Library, 1966), which maintains that *Looking-Glass* is a result of Carroll's close reading of religious writing of Baal Shem Tov and that it has more in common with the *Jewish Daily Prayer Book* than with chess. I have serious reservations with Docherty's analysis and yet, as the King of Hearts says in *Alice in Wonderland*, "I seem to see some meaning in them, after all" (155). This is no parody of scholarship like Frederick Crews's *The Pooh Perplex*, but an amazingly detailed, overly convoluted, yet highly insightful book that is woefully in need of editing.

The friendship between MacDonald and Carroll, and their admiration for each other's writing, have been long acknowledged, although no scholar has ever attempted as rigorous or extended a comparison of the texts as does Docherty. The Novalis epigraph that MacDonald used for the concluding chapter of *Phantastes*— "Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will" (180)—is revised to "Life, what is it but a dream?" (347) in the final line of the valedictory poem that concludes *Looking-Glass*. The epigram, which MacDonald was fond of citing throughout his work, clearly influenced much of Carroll's writing, including *Alice in Wonderland*, *Looking-Glass*, and *Sylvie and Bruno*. Docherty suggests that MacDonald modeled the figure of the bad knight, who is Anodos's double in *Phantastes*, on Carroll. Docherty calls this portrait a "character assassination" of a "helper of girl children" (301) that eventually pressured Carroll into producing his positive image as the White Knight in *Looking Glass*. MacDonald followed up his allusion to Carroll in *Phantaste*

with "My Uncle Peter," a short tale in which a lonely, older man befriends a young girl but her family puts an end to their relationship. Uncle Peter falls into depression, but proper theology revives him; Docherty sees the story as intended as both a warning to and an attempt to comfort Carroll, who was beginning to involve himself with the Liddell family. Carroll responded to MacDonald's "My Uncle Peter" with the poem "Stolen Waters," which is an attempt to address MacDonald's criticism. These short texts then lead to fairy tales by both that feature Alice exploring her unconscious: Carroll's *Alice's Adventures Underground*, which would later become *Alice in Wonderland*, and MacDonald's "Cross Purposes." Docherty continues to find example after example of allusions to Carroll in MacDonald's writing and vice versa.

Docherty's most astonishing claim is that *Alice in Wonderland* has as many and as significant references to *Phantastes* as it does to Alice Liddell. As audacious as this sounds, Docherty compellingly shows that the structure of *Alice in Wonderland* both parallels that of MacDonald's "Cross Purposes" and then inverts the structure of *Phantastes*. The study continues in this cross-referencing fashion, stating that Carroll's "Bruno's Revenge" was written in response to *Phantastes* and MacDonald replied to "Bruno's Revenge" with "The Giant's Heart." Throughout their careers, Docherty claims, MacDonald and Carroll continued the complicated literary call-and-response, Carroll's *Looking-Glass* being written in reaction to MacDonald's *Adela Cathcart* and MacDonald's *Lilith* being an answer to *Looking-Glass*.

This is a difficult and frequently perplexing book, and by the conclusion, the reader might think that Docherty has uncovered so many hidden passageways between the two writers that, like the city of Gwytystorm in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Curdie*, the entire structure seems to collapse of its own weight. The chief limitation is that Docherty examines MacDonald and Carroll almost myopically and does not sufficiently place them in the wider context of the Victorian sphere. Although I have no doubts that both writers read each other with as much care as Docherty claims, both read widely in multiple areas and were undoubtedly influenced by other writers. But if even half of what Docherty claims about the literary relationship between MacDonald and Carroll is correct, then this is one of the most original and significant analyses of Carroll produced in the past twenty years.

Whereas Docherty's book suffers from overambition, the opposite

is true for Wullschlèger's *Inventing Wonderland*. Using the lives and works of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, and A. A. Milne, she makes the case that the Victorian and the Edwardian periods constituted a golden age of fantasy writing for children. This is hardly an original concept. Humphrey Carpenter's *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature from Alice in Wonderland to Winnie-the-Pooh* (Houghton Mifflin, 1985) made a similar point ten years earlier and in a far more convincing fashion. One wonders who the intended audience for this book is, since it is primarily a synthesis of previous research. Admittedly, there are some slight variations between the two books: Wullschlèger includes Edward Lear, who is missing from *Secret Gardens*, but Carpenter includes chapters on Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, E. Nesbit, and Beatrix Potter in his survey. Wullschlèger and Carpenter do not do as good a job as Stephen Prickett (*Victorian Fantasy* [Indiana University Press, 1979]) and Gillian Avery (*Nineteenth Century Children* [Hodder and Stoughton, 1965]) do in placing these fantasy writers in the broader and more carefully examined literary context of Victorian and Edwardian culture that includes texts written for children and adults.

Moreover, Wullschlèger's book is riddled with errors. It is unclear why her chapter on Carroll precedes the one on Lear whereas the rest of the book follows chronologically. She argues that these five writers created "between 1865 and 1930" a "radical new literature for children" (4), although Lear published *A Book of Nonsense* in 1846. Wullschlèger reports that Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* is "a collection of stories about fairies and giants" (102), which seems to suggest that she has read not the novel but only the frequently reprinted interpolated fairy tale that Uncle David tells Laura and Harry. She maintains that "the golden age of Victorian and Edwardian children's books appeared to come from nowhere" (97), which sounds as though she has chosen to ignore how fairy tales and literary fairy tales modified the content of children's literature during the first half of the nineteenth century, as shown in the scholarship of Jack Zipes, U. C. Knoepfelmacher, and Brian Alderson. She repeats the charming but discredited story that the dormouse of Carroll's *Wonderland* was based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's pet wombat.

Many of Wullschlèger's conclusions seem equally flawed. She argues that Lear's limericks reveal "classlessness" (73). Other critics suggest that the limericks reveal inflexible codes of Victorian society personified as the unnamed "they" in the final line who regularly punish

individuals who dare to vary from accepted behavior. Wullschlèger examines this group of writers and argues for their childhood unhappiness and disappointments as the basis for their creation of fantasies that idealized childhood, although she acknowledges that A. A. Milne simply doesn't fit the pattern, since he was a "happy child" who became "a charming young man excelling in the adult playground of prewar London" (181).

Despite the many problems with this book, Wullschlèger does make some valuable connections. Her chapter on J. M. Barrie is the strongest in the study; she situates Barrie's *Peter Pan* among the numerous literary Pans that were part of the cultural landscape of the period, including Robert Louis Stevenson's essay "Pan's Pipes," Maurice Hewlett's play "Pan and the Young Sheperds," Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, and Aubrey Beardsley's *Under the Hill*. Wullschlèger's pairing of Kenneth Grahame and Thomas Hardy as the two great writers of the period engaged by "the rural myth" and championing rural tradition against the modernist enemy that would eventually defeat them (168) is equally persuasive.

Each of these books contains serious limitations, although they are different in nature and varying in degree. Of the three, Docherty's study, although it is the most complicated of the group, is also the one that will most reward the reader who is willing to engage in its argument.

Works Cited

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