

**George MacDonald (ed. Nick Page),
Phantastes: Special Annotated Edition,
Review by Judith E. Toning
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Phantastes: Special Annotated Edition. By George MacDonald.
Edited by Nick Page. London: Paternoster Press, 2008. 284 pp.
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There has been a bewildering number of editions of George MacDonald's 'Faerie Romance for Men and Women' in the past two years, marking the 150th anniversary of its first publication in 1858 (and, one fears, capitalizing on the text's free availability in the public domain). The edition under review is a handsomely produced pocket volume, and is distinguished by carefully assembled extraneous matter. In addition to a newly written introduction, annotations, and a bibliography, the edition reproduces the 1905 illustrations by pre-Raphaelite Arthur Hughes (though unfortunately often reduced in size) and, as an appendix, MacDonald's programmatic essay 'The Fantastic Imagination'.

The editor, Nick Page, is an Oxfordshire author of over sixty books (primarily on the Church, the Bible and literature), and brings to the task veteran research skills, an eye for good stories and illuminating connections, and a sincere love of MacDonald. The introduction, both biographical and interpretative, is well-researched and deftly written. Reproducing family letters, original reviews, and photographs of MacDonald's home and family, it sets his work firmly in its historical-biographical context, without losing sight of the fact that for MacDonald, it was often stories which shaped life and its interpretation, not the other way around. An epitomic passage here is from MacDonald's earliest story, 'The Singer', an 1854 addition to his first published work, *Within and Without* (written 1851, published 1855). In it, the narrator, contemplating the recent death of his son, dreams of an assembly of Immortals, who send a young man that has appeared before them into a deep cavern. One Immortal explains to the questioning dreamer:

The youth desired to sing to the Immortals. It is a law with us that no one shall sing a song who cannot be the hero of his tale—who cannot live the song that he sings; for what right hath he else to devise great things, and to take holy deeds in his mouth? Therefore he enters the cavern where God weaves the garments of souls; and there he lives in the forms of his own tale; for God gives them being that he may be tried. The sighs which thou didst hear were his longings after his own Ideal; and thou didst hear him praying for the Truth he beheld, but could not

reach. We sang, because, in his first great battle, he strove well and overcame.
We await the next.¹

Here is an interpretative key to MacDonald's understanding of both his life and the nature and aim of his writings.

Page's annotations comprise well-researched and -presented bibliographical references and glosses, as well as, more controversially, interpretative comments, which seem in turn helpful and intrusive (no doubt in differing proportions to different readers). MacDonald's German and French epigraphs are translated, and their original versions appended.

To readers of C.S. Lewis, this volume offers a window on MacDonald's life and work that is refreshingly uncoloured by Lewis' interpretation, and so allows them to discover this strange and marvellous author alongside Lewis rather than merely 'after' him—this former no doubt being what Lewis would have liked.

Judith E. Topping

Notes

1. *Within and Without: A Dramatic Poem* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), p. 70; quoted on p. 17 of the present volume.