# Contributors

**Rolland Hein** is Emeritus Professor of English at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL He teaches classes on the works of the Wade authors at the Wade Center and is the author of several books on George MacDonald, including *The Harmony Within* (revised 1999) and *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker* (1999).

**U. C. Knoepflmacher** is the Paton Foundation Professor Emeritus of Ancient and Modern Literature at Princeton University. He has authored, edited, or co-edited a dozen books in 19th Century British literature and in children's literature, and has written over a hundred articles in these two fields. His children's book, *Franny, Randy, and the Over-the-Edge Cat Person*, appeared on 2009 and his edition of *Victorian Hybridities: Cultural Anxiety and Formal Innovation* in 2010.

**Lisa Hermine Makman** has published essays in such journals as *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *The Children's Literature Association Quarterly*.

**Colin Manlove** is a literary critic with an especial interest in fantasy. *His Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (1975) is a seminal exploration of fantasy literature. Since then, many books have followed including, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (1983), *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (1992), and *The Fantasy Literature of England* (1999).

**Roderick McGillis** taught English and Film at the University of Calgary. He has edited two collections of essays on George MacDonald, *For the Childlike* (1992) and *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs* (2007). With John Pennington, he edited a scholarly edition of *At the Back of the North Wind* (2011).

**Alison Milbank** is a professor at the University of Nottingham in the theology and religious studies department. Her research and teaching focus on the relation of religion to culture in the post-Enlightenment period, with particular literary interest in non-realist literary and artistic expression, such as the Gothic, the fantastic, horror and fantasy. She is the author of *Dante and the Victorians* (1998).

**Coleman O. Parsons** (1905-1991) was a scholar, author and professor of literature, last as Professor Emeritus of English at CUNY's City College. He was the author of an important book on Sir Walter Scott, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction* (1964), and he wrote extensively for academic journals in the United States, Scotland, England and Germany.

**John Pennington** teaches English Literature at St. Norbert College. He is co-editor of the George MacDonald journal, *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. He has published essays on George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, J. K. Rowling, Ursula LeGuin, Peter Beagle, and others in such journals as *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, Extrapolation, The Lion and the Unicorn*, and *North Wind*.

**William Raeper** (1959-1992) was born in Kirkcaldy in Fife. His most significant work is his biography of George MacDonald (1987). He won a scholarship to Hertford College, Oxford, where he read English and had the rare distinction of being twice elected President of the Junior Common Room. He is the editor of the collection of essays on MacDonald, *The Gold Thread* (1990).

**Richard H. Reis** (-2008) received his Ph.D. from Brown University. He is the author of *George MacDonald* (1972). He was Chair of the English Department at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.

**David S. Robb** 's research interests include Scottish literature from the eighteenth-century to the present. His publications include studies of George MacDonald and Sydney Goodsir Smith. He has also published on Hugh Miller (1802-56), and on Muriel Spark. Recently, he has been concerned with the work of the late Alexander Scott (1920-89): he is editor of the Collected Poems and has recently completed a book on this well-known Scottish figure. He has also served as Joint General Editor of the Scottish Writers series and General Editor of the Scottish Classics series.

**Lesley Smith** was at one time teaching at the University of Guelph.

**Fernando Soto** holds a Ph.D. - with a thesis devoted to the works of George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll - from The University of Glasgow - and he is one of the two current editors of *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. Fernando is interested in, among other topics, MacDonald's and Carroll's use of Greek, Roman and Hebrew mythology. His latest work (on Carroll's use of Aeschylus' *The Furies)* will be published in the upcoming issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

**Jean Webb** is Professor of International Children's Literature at the University of Worcester, UK, where she is Director of the International Forum for Research in Children's Literature. Her publications include: Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature: Romanticism to Postmodernism* (2002); Jean Webb ed., *'A Noble Unrest': contemporary essays on the work of George MacDonald* (2007)

**Robert Lee Wolff** was a Professor of History at Harvard University, and a collector of Victorian books. He was the author of *The Golden Key*, the first major study of MacDonald's fiction. His other works include, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (1979) and *Strange Stories and other Explorations in Victorian Fiction* (1971).

**Naomi Wood** is an associate professor at Kansas State University where she teaches undergraduate and graduate classes in children's literature, young adult literature, and the Victorian novel. In addition to her work on MacDonald, she has published on other Victorian writers such as Charles Kingsley and Robert Louis Stevenson and on twentieth-century and contemporary writers of fantasy.

# Contents

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## A Note on the Texts

The articles in *Behind the Back of the North Wind* come from a variety of sources—books, articles, and other collections of critical essays. For consistency, we use endnotes for the articles, even when the original used footnotes. When we provide an excerpt of an article or book chapter, we took the liberty of reordering endnotes. Any obvious editorial or factual errors in the selections have been silently corrected.

# Introduction

"I have been asked to tell you about the back of the North Wind." So begins George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, a novel serialized in the magazine *Good Words for the Young* from 1868-1869 (while MacDonald was editor) and published as a single-edition novel by Strahan in 1871. Let's follow MacDonald's lead: it seems appropriate in this introduction that we tell you about the creation of *Behind the Back of the North Wind: Critical Essays on George MacDonald's Classic Children's Book*, the name of the collected essays that you are now holding in your hands. The creation of this volume follows from our preparation of a critical and scholarly edition of *At the Back of the North Wind*, published by Broadview Press (2011). While working on this edition of the novel, we realized the richness of the critical commentary on MacDonald's book, and we felt a collection of the major commentary on *North Wind* would prove to be a useful complement to the scholarly edition. We hope that this double focus on a classic Victorian children's book will generate further conversation.

*Behind the Back of the North Wind* is the first collection of critical essays devoted solely to MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*. There are excellent volumes of collected essays on MacDonald—*For the Childlike*, *The Gold Thread*, *A Noble Unrest*, *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*—but none of these collections focuses on this seminal work. Only the recent collection, Lilith *in a New Light*, concentrates on one particular work by MacDonald. Our collection follows in *Lilith's* light. But why a volume devoted to *At the Back of the North Wind*? A flippant reply might be, "Why not?" But there is a compelling case to be made for the literary centrality of this fantasy novel.

Michael Patrick Hearn, who has edited *The Annotated* Wizard of Oz, *The Annotated* Christmas Carol, *The Annotated* Huckleberry Finn, as well as the important *The Victorian Fairy Tale Book*, agrees. He argues that, "*At the Back of the North Wind* is one of the most remarkable children's books in the English language." This is certainly high praise. "Curiously," continues Hearn, "although it is said to be the best-selling of George MacDonald's many works, it can hardly be called popular" (303), especially if we compare it to two other works of fantasy—Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). Or as Alice might say about *North Wind's* lack of popularity, "Curiouser and curiouser!" The comparison to the Alice books is not, however, entirely fair. Carroll's books have proved to be best sellers in the rare sense of books that have become an integral part of Anglo-American culture. They have spread beyond the confines of the book: Tim Burton's 3-D movie updating of *Alice* was a smash hit, as is the interactive e-book for Apple's immensely popular iPad. *At the Back of the North Wind*, for its part, has rarely been out of print since its first appearance, and this fact suggests staying power, if not best-seller popularity. It is popular in the sense of a book that has found a niche, and also in the sense of a book that appeals to a popular audience, that is an audience of children.

*At the Back of the North Wind*, in many ways, is as strange as the wonderland that Alice tumbles into—and as important a literary work. On the one hand, the novel is part social realism as practiced by Charles Dickens, exposing the harsh working conditions of the poor and the tenuous safety of children who are often required to act like adults: Diamond, the male hero of *North Wind*, befriends Nanny, a young street-sweeper who is neglected at home; Diamond becomes a moral touchstone to a drunken cabman, who promises to change his ways; Diamond takes on breadwinner responsibilities after his father's sickness by driving his father's horse-drawn cab throughout the often-dangerous streets of London. On the other hand, the book is an otherworldly fantasy that takes Diamond on a journey to a mystical land at the back of the north wind. Behind North Wind's back is an enticing place, yet it is the land of death. In addition, the book toys with narrative cohesion: it has an interpolated fairy tale—"Little Daylight"—nonsense poems that rival Edward Lear and Carroll, and sequences where characters relate their dreams in narrative form.

Yes, *At the Back of the North Wind* rivals the *Alice* books. *Behind the Back of the North Wind* positions MacDonald's novel in the center of Victorian literature generally and children's literature specifically. The essays gathered here argue for the importance of the book in generic, thematic, and historical terms. As we noted above, this volume complements the critical edition of *North Wind* that we have edited for Broadview Press. Now teachers and scholars will have a definitive scholarly edition of the novel and a dedicated collection of critical essays that can be used in the classroom and beyond.

*North Wind*, with its fusion of the real and the fantastic, is a touchstone for MacDonald's writing career, for he was torn between his fairy writing and the need to produce realistic novels that were more marketable. C. S. Lewis, the most important popularizer of MacDonald we have, claims in *The Allegory of Love* that MacDonald, a "mystic and natural symbolist," was "seduced into writing novels" (232). With *North Wind*, however, MacDonald is able to appease the call of the realistic narrative and the desire to promote fairyland. *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895) are MacDonald's adult fantasies; these play with fairy-tale structures and use "portals" that bring the protagonists from the real world to fairyland. But in *North Wind* MacDonald is more sensitive to the interchange between these two worlds, which becomes central to the novel's larger themes. We might say that in this book MacDonald found a way to satisfy his poetic ambitions by creating a world in which the noumenal and phenomenal interpenetrate.

*North Wind* is MacDonald's attempt to satiate his desire for faery and the public's desire for the more mundane found in the realistic novel. The novel hinges on the interrelation between the fantastic and the real. We see a preview of this approach in an odd early novel, *Adela Cathcart* (1864). Adela, like Miss Coleman in *North Wind*, suffers from some spiritual malady and one method of healing is to subject Adela to stories, particularly fairy stories—"The Light Princess," "The Shadows," and "The Giant's Heart" appear in the first edition of the novel. This therapeutic quality of literature reflects Matthew Arnold's and John Stuart Mill's claims about the power of Wordsworth's poetry. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth confesses that "there are in our existence spots of time" (XI, 258) where "our minds / Are nourish'd, and invisibly repaired . . ." (263-65). MacDonald's fairy tales and fantasies are such spots of time for Adela and the reader. Mark Twain writes in a letter to MacDonald that he would like another copy of *North Wind*, "for our children's sake; they have read and re-read their own copy so many times that it looks as if it had been through the war." And Twain writes to William Dean Howells: "But how desperately more I have been moved to-night by the thought of a little old copy in the nursery of *At the Back of the North Wind*. Oh, what happy days they were when that book was read, and how Susy [died in 1896] loved it! … Death is so kind, benignant, to whom he loves, but he goes by us others and will not look our way" (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 458). While *North Wind* is primarily about Diamond's preparation for death, or more life as MacDonald would argue, the novel has a homeopathic quality that nourishes the reader. We cannot necessarily say *that* about the Alice books.

*North Wind* is MacDonald's longest sustained fantasy narrative for younger readers, and the only one that focuses on the dual worlds. *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), also published in *Good Words* while MacDonald was editor, *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), and *The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story* (1874) round out MacDonald's full-length fairy tales/fantasies for children, but these tales are set in a Grimm-influenced world that is not directly connected to the real world. *At the Back of the North Wind*, in other words, is unique in MacDonald's canon.

MacDonald continued to write shorter fairy tales modeled after those from *Adela Cathcart*, and these are set in a distinct fairyland out-of-time from the real. "Cross Purposes" and "The Golden Key" (certainly a precursor to *North Wind*) appeared in *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867). H. A. Page, writing a review of *Dealings* for the *Contemporary Review* in 1869, claimed that MacDonald, "more than any other in our country, has raised child-literature to the level of high art. He has a pure, graceful phantasy. There is in his book a soft, gradual dawning of beauty and delight, like the clear light of a northern morning, as bracing as it is clear, he lifts and lightens and inspires" (23), thus signaling the importance of MacDonald to the evolving field of children's literature. In a glowing review in 1871 of *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Athenaeum* claims that it "is a poet's own book. Whether children will understand the whole of it or not, they will be sure to love it for the sake of the lovely spirit by which it is animated, and for the charming sights and sounds from Fairyland and Dreamland, which come and go like the colours of the

sky at sunset." The reviewer ends with this comment: "The whole work is woven into a lovely tissue, partly dream, partly vision, and partly a story which will be charming for readers of all classes and all ages" (303). *The Athenaeum's* contention about *North Wind* mirrors comments that MacDonald will make in "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893):

> "Everyone … who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another." (7)
>
> "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy five." (7)
>
> "The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended." (9)

*At the Back of the North Wind* does indeed appeal to "readers of all classes and all ages" and challenges readers—whether of five, or fifty, or seventy five—to decipher the narrative complexity. All this mirrors MacDonald's self-reflective intent in "The Fantastic Imagination." In critical parlance, *North Wind* is an example of cross-writing—that which appeals to both the child and the adult. Some might call it fiction for all ages.

What does it mean, however, to write for both the child and the adult? As Jacqueline Rose points out, "children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple." But that assumption is problematic, Rose argues. She posits that such children's fiction is not possible, reflecting "the impossible relation between adult and child" (1). U. C. Knoepflmacher, in turn, argues that Victorian fantasies, in particular, require a delicate "balancing act" between child and adult, for "by the last third of the nineteenth century, when fantasies for children flourished in England, authors went one step further by self-consciously admitting their own role as mediators between the states of childhood and maturity" (498). At the end of *North Wind*, the adult narrator tells us that, "I saw at once how it was. They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind" (378). The reader understands that the entire novel has been the narrator's (shall we say MacDonald's) attempt to prepare us for Diamond's death, for his continued journey to—and beyond—the back of the north wind. Death may not be the most comfortable theme for a children's book, but it is a recurring theme, not only in Victorian children's books, but also in children's books today.

Certainly Dickens relished in his ability to mine death melodramatically and sentimentally to reinforce his social outrage—think of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), or Paul in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), or the street-sweeper Jo in *Bleak House* (1851-53). These books, like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*, were embraced by children and adults, but these writers, one is tempted to argue, had an adult reader in mind. MacDonald seems more intent on addressing the child reader. Diamond is akin to Oliver Twist. Oliver's fate, interestingly, mirrors the traditional fairy-tale ending: he lives happily-ever-after. Diamond's death should reassure us of eternal life that is found in the fairy tale, but he must leave the known world for the unknown, thus complicating our reaction. When Robert Lee Wolff writes that *At the Back of the North Wind* may give "children the shivers" as it continues "delighting and disturbing generation after generation of children" (148), he enters the central debate. What constitutes children's literature? What precisely is cross-writing? How, exactly, we should approach a text like *North Wind*?

And that is the goal of *Behind the Back of the North Wind*: to focus on the critical interpretations of such an enigmatic work. The essays in this volume grapple with the fundamental tensions between the adult and child that are at the forefront of MacDonald's novel, as he explores the ways to present death to the child and adult reader. You will find essays that run the gamut from those situating MacDonald's Christian world-view in *North Wind*, to those examining the tension between fantasy and reality, to those grappling with *North Wind* as children's literature. In every case, the essays illuminate a complex book.

The organization of *Behind the Back of the North Wind* is straightforward: the essays are arranged chronologically, which provides an intriguing look into the evolution of criticism on *North Wind* and gives the reader a holistic sense of criticism on MacDonald's novel. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Hans Robert Jauss claims that "the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees. For it is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into

the changing horizon-of-experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them" (19). Jauss's "aesthetics of reception" (19) situates a writer's critical reputation over time as readers' needs and expectations change. "The coherence of literature as an event," writes Jauss, "is primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations of the literary experience of contemporary and later readers, critics, and authors" (22). Jauss's "literary evolution" (34) suggests that a work's aesthetic response transforms—positively or negatively—according to the readers' views over time. Current MacDonald scholarship, consequently, is directly related to past criticism, and contemporary attitudes toward MacDonald will influence MacDonald studies for the future. *Behind the Back of the North Wind* traces the horizon of expectations that has defined MacDonald scholarship on *North Wind* historically, and may suggest to readers the future direction or directions for MacDonald studies.

The earliest essay (1947) by Coleman Parsons instigates the critical road for contemporary literary critics of MacDonald. Parsons argues that "MacDonald's greatest originality" in the novel is his "chronicle of the horse," thus connecting MacDonald to Anna Sewell and *Black Beauty* (1877) and demonstrating the centrality of MacDonald to the nineteenth century. Robert Lee Wolff's excerpt on *North Wind* from *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* is vital to the development of MacDonald criticism, for Wolff's work is the first full-length critical examination of MacDonald, primarily a Freudian interpretation of MacDonald and his work. Wolff highlights the tension between the real and the fantastic in *North Wind* and argues that this tension allows MacDonald to construct his key "mythology": "Evil is only the shape that good takes if we but knew it."

Richard Reis argues that "perhaps the most remarkable thing about *At the Back of the North Wind* is that MacDonald is trying, in fact, to justify death, that most inscrutable of the ways of God, to children," and Rolland Hein examines the sacramental nature of the novel and suggests that MacDonald subverts traditional Christianity to highlight "his belief in the essential goodness of man's primary feelings and passions to produce a view of human experience quite different from that of much historic Christianity. It opposes the ascetic tradition and solidly challenges the essentially Platonic assumptions upon which that tradition is based." Reis and Hein are foundational critics on MacDonald, as central to the development of MacDonald criticism as Wolff. So far, however, modern criticism of MacDonald and *At the Back of the North Wind* does not consider in any sustained manner children or their literature.

With David Robb we see a turn to the issue of MacDonald as a writer for children. Robb argues that children's fantasy literature "was a ready-made medium for the imaginative freedom [that MacDonald] so often needed," but, for Robb, MacDonald used children's fiction to explore personal issues "in order to contemplate difficulties and to reassure himself, one again, that it would be all right in the end." Lesley Smith examines how MacDonald reimagines the prophetic spirit of Old Testament prophecy that leads to Diamond's sacrifice that is demanded by such prophecy. William Raeper locates MacDonald in the Scottish folk-tale tradition by examining the connections between Diamond and James Hogg's Kilmeny, who also travelled to the back of the north wind, while John Pennington analyzes the metafictional aspects of *North Wind* (and the *Alice* books by Lewis Carroll), contending that the self-reflective qualities of the novel "redefine fantasy and fairy-tale discourse by dislocating structure through metafictional means." Naomi Wood engages gender and, by implication, Lacanian theory as she challenges MacDonald's "fundamentally conflicted ideology of fatherhood" that is depicted in the novel: "*At the Back of the North Wind* contains both masochistic and sadistic paradigms; this division attempts to resolve the problem of submission to a god who both loves and punishes." Roderick McGillis focuses on one chapter—Chapter 8: The East Window—to argue that MacDonald is subversive in *North Wind*, presenting "the reader with a radical critique of totalizing systems—whether these systems be political, economic, or religious—and an understanding of the self as a function of desire."

Dante plays a crucial role in *North Wind*, and Alison Milbank in an excerpt from *Dante and the Victorians* demonstrates how the author of *The Divine Comedy* informs MacDonald's novel: "Like Kingsley, MacDonald turns to Dante for an educative model of development in the afterlife, and similarly includes an element of the erotic in leading the soul to a fuller understanding of the divine." Milbank calls

Diamond (the boy) "a junior Dante." U. C. Knoepflmacher's excerpted chapter on *North Wind* from *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* provides a gender analysis of MacDonald, arguing that the novel "dramatizes the same yearning for incorporation with a female Other that so powerfully fuels MacDonald's imagination." Whereas most studies of *North Wind* concentrate on the human hero, Diamond, Knoepflmacher spends equal time examining the importance of Nanny in the novel.

Lisa Hermine Makman's cultural reading of *North Wind* analyzes the novel in relationship to the evolving attitudes the Victorians had toward children and play. She argues that as children ceased to have "concrete economic value" as workers, their value transformed as their play made them a kind of useful moral toy: "As such, play in the novel comes to contribute to the reform of moral corruption in adults, thus bettering society for all." Fernando J. Soto provides an illuminating catalog of allusions to Greek mythology that inform *North Wind*. Soto suggests that these allusions to Greek myth complement the Christian readings of the text, for myth creates "darker and earthier aspects … which counterbalance the sweet, safe, and perhaps childlike Christian readings of the book." Colin Manlove examines the incarnational sprit of the novel that "work[s] on us … by using the frustrations of intellectual uncertainty to drive us towards simply testing the water through a relationship with God." The novel achieves this by "putting doubt at its core beside faith" and depicting "how both ordinary human life and the wild elemental forces of this world are joined in God." Finally, Jean Webb situates MacDonald squarely in the "realist social problem novel" tradition of Elizabeth Gaskell and the fantasy tradition of Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll. Webb demonstrates how the fantasy elements of *North Wind* allow MacDonald to engage "in a philosophical and moral discussion and critique of the contemporary Victorian English society" that is unique to the social problem novel.

The criticism of *At the Back of the North Wind* that comes after David Robb's work is instructive in its consideration of the social, philosophical, and theological aspects of the book. What we might notice is that the approaches to this Victorian children's book transcend a specific readership and preconceptions concerning the kind of literature a child is capable of understanding. More often than not, readings of this novel assume that *North Wind* contains complexities and ambiguities beyond the comprehension of most (or many) child readers. MacDonald himself imbeds such a view of child readership in his depiction of the relationship between North Wind and Diamond. North Wind is well aware that some of the things she is compelled to say will flummox Diamond, but that he will come to understand these lessons intuitively. The novel thus empowers the child reader. We might also notice another implied aspect of these essays: the respect these critics bring to MacDonald's novel is testimony to the power of his writing, writing that C. S. Lewis famously undervalued for its supposedly prolix prose. As Lewis claims about MacDonald: "If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank—perhaps not even in its second" (xxvi). This volume challenges Lewis's contention.

*Behind the Back of the North Wind* allows us to see the evolution of criticism on one of the most provocative Victorian children's books. Our hope is that the collection will spur further discussion about the novel: the transatlantic connections of *At the Back of the North Wind*; a more focused examination of gender and sexuality; the importance of law, justice, and legal theory to the text; the notion of Empire as related to post-colonial studies; or the significance of geographical mapping and the city in *North Wind*. The novel also offers opportunity to examine the relationship between verbal and visual texts since many illustrators, beginning with Arthur Hughes, have illustrated it. May the critical journey into *Behind the Back of the North Wind* be as exciting as Diamond's travels to the back of the north wind.

John Pennington
Roderick McGillis
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