Bonnie Gaarden

This text is a collection of critical commentary on MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, his first book-length children’s fantasy story. Chronologically arranged from 1947 through 2008, these articles and book excerpts provide a kaleidoscope of perspectives on this most complex of MacDonald’s works for children. The anthology thus makes a particularly useful resource for MacDonald scholars, for scholarly MacDonald fans, and for educators offering classes which include MacDonald’s text.

The outstanding virtue of this collection is its eclecticism. Some selections focus on one small part or particular theme of the text, while others provide broad interpretations of the work as a whole. Some are extremely brief; others are fully-developed articles. The contexts in which MacDonald’s book is viewed range from Victorian social history to Greek mythology to Freudian psychology. And the commentary is stimulating: whatever a reader’s experience with *At the Back of the North Wind* might be, this collection will teach and delight and, quite possibly, outrage him or her. Great stuff.

As a bonus feature, the editors have included in their text a generous number of beautiful illustrations of *At the Back of the North Wind*, done by a variety of artists.

Somewhat arbitrarily, I have sorted out the anthologized selections into four types of critical approaches: Biblical/Literary, Social/Historical, Psychoanalytic, and Ontological, and provided the briefest of summaries below.

**Biblical/Literary**

**Roland Hein** sees the book presenting MacDonald’s take on the nature of evil. While physical “evil” (adversity) is actually sacramental, a means of grace, real evil comes from the human psyche, the “undersides” of our own natures.

**David Robb** asserts that MacDonald’s children’s books share the same “character-types, plot situations, images and symbols” as the rest of his
fiction; in *North Wind* MacDonald is primarily writing to confirm his own beliefs to himself. In his presentation of death, he is attempting to armor his child-readers—as well as himself—against “fear and anguish.”

Leslie Smith says MacDonald presents Diamond as an analog for a Biblical prophet: a person of “understanding” who “awakens” people to God’s word. Like a prophet’s, Diamond’s death is a blessing for others because he “absorbs” death’s fearfulness and recasts it as “rest.”

Fernando Soto uses details and connections from Greek mythology to suggest multiple identities between characters within the text; North Wind “is,” for example, not only the Greek god Boreas, but also the horse Diamond and Diamond’s mother.

Richard Reis views *North Wind* as, essentially, MacDonald’s attempt to “justify death” to children. Diamond’s return from North Wind’s back is typical of MacDonald, but atypical of other children’s books (Victorian and modern) that treat the theme of death.

William Raeper compares Hogg and MacDonald as Scottish writers. He says Diamond is saved from “priggishness” by being “fey,” the equivalent of a “Scots brownie,” and explores the connection MacDonald makes between the land at North Wind’s back and the land visited by Hogg’s Kilmeny. MacDonald’s ability to give the fairy tale a “moral vision,” which helped make the fairy acceptable to the Victorian public, is attributable to the lowland Scots upbringing he shares with Hogg: the mixture of “Bible and fairy.”

Alison Milbank observes that both Charles Kingsley in *The Water-Babies* and MacDonald in *North Wind* annex Dante’s terrestrial paradise, re-imagined as “the growing place of those who die young” which provides the only possibility of “natural development” for poor children.

**Social/Historical**

Coleman Parsons analyzes *North Wind* as the “single most important influence” on Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*. MacDonald’s Diamond and Sewell’s Beauty both complete the pattern of “willing service, decline in status, hard work, and rehabilitation.” MacDonald and Sewell share other social themes: drink as deleterious to the characters of “grooms and cabmen,” people’s treatment of horses as an index to their characters, and the
paltry “legally fixed fee” for a cab ride as an economic injustice.

Robert Lee Wolff says that *North Wind* is yet another presentation of MacDonald’s key theme of “good death,” and that its blunt portrayal of “rough” slum life was both “socially incendiary” and highly unusual in children’s books of the period.

Lisa Makman reports that between the 1860s and 1920s, the “value” of children shifted from the economic to the emotional/spiritual. She says that Diamond’s career path retraces that shift: from a cabbie bringing home money, he becomes a page whose value is primarily inspirational. Social educators of the late 1800s believed that adult work, if it was not to be enslaving, must be approached in the childlike spirit of imaginative play; Diamond learns such a spirit from *North Wind* and embodies it, with salvific effects for all around him.

Jean Webb sees *North Wind* as drawing on the disparate Victorian trends toward both “realistic” fiction and toward fantasy for children in such a way as to illustrate the Romantic claims for the imagination made in MacDonald’s essay, “The Imagination: Its Function and Culture.” Though living in a Dickensian “reality,” Diamond’s imagination (represented by *North Wind*) gives him an alternate view of the world that lets him make very real changes for the better in his grim surroundings.

Psychoanalytical

Naomi Wood asserts that *North Wind* expresses “the pleasure and pain of dominant and submissive relationships” that she sees widely expressed in MacDonald’s work. In the first half of the book, *North Wind* is a “dominatrix” preparing Diamond to obey the father figures of the book’s second half, who use their powers of language and money to “buy” Diamond and make him take pleasure in submitting to pain. This pain, though presented as beneficial to Diamond, actually only gratifies the sadism of the “fathers” themselves. Similarly, novels such as *North Wind* cater to the voyeuristic pleasure of the adult reader rather than providing enjoyment or benefit to children.

U. C. Knoepflmacher suggests that *North Wind*, especially the dreams of Diamond and Nanny and the fairy tale “Little Daylight,” constitute MacDonald’s reaction against the preference for the “purity” of prepubescent females that his friends Lewis Carroll and John Ruskin express in their own
stories. In contrast, in these interpolated texts, MacDonald celebrates the sexual maturation of women.

**Ontological**

**John Pennington** observes that MacDonald’s shifts between a “realistically” portrayed world and “fantasy” (Diamond’s adventures with North Wind, as well as the novel’s interpolated dreams and texts) have the effect of treating all of these realms as equally “real.” This presentation constitutes a metafictional questioning of the nature of our common construction of “reality” and expresses MacDonald’s belief in an “ultimate” Reality “behind” this one, into which we are introduced by a “benign” death.

**Roderick McGillis** focuses on the “East Window” chapter of *North Wind* to make the case that MacDonald, unlike the traditional “liberal humanist,” does not understand the self as a unified whole, but sees it as a constantly becoming “function of desire.” The shifting of persons and locations in this scene, the narrator’s presence both inside and outside the novel, and North Wind’s inability to answer Diamond’s questions all suggest a “self” that is, in this life at least, always incomplete, always uncertain, and always making beginnings.

**Colin Manlove** says that MacDonald’s mixing of fantasy and reality in *North Wind*, which constantly subvert the reader’s assumptions about what is “real,” is an attempt to draw the reader into MacDonald’s own radical relativism: a belief that the imagination is the way to truth, and that the worlds produced by the human mind are as “real” as the world we experience as “out there.” All equally are “thoughts in the mind of God.” Manlove observes that *North Wind* is full of paradox, inversion, contradiction, argument, and “double views.” For instance, while “perfect” in his innocence at the book’s beginning, Diamond grows spiritually in the course of the novel in that he learns how to help others. And paradoxically, his growth into life is also a growth toward death. The antinomy of trust and uncertainty that marks Diamond’s relations with North Wind represents both the inevitable uncertainty and the necessity for trust in a human relationship with God.