

A Brief Analysis of the Content of *George MacDonald: An Anthology* by C. S. Lewis

by Paul F. Ford

There are 365 citations in *George MacDonald: An Anthology* by C. S. Lewis, dedicated to Mary Neylan, a former pupil who sought Lewis's soul-friendship. Lewis undertook a significant correspondence with her, the first published letter of which is 26 March 1940 in which he advises, "If you can stand serious faults of style (and if you can get them, they are long out of print) Geo. Macdonald's 3 vols of *Unspoken Sermons* go to the very heart of the matter."¹ Largely to make available again to readers, especially those who sought Lewis's direction, the riches in these sermons, numbers 1–257 (or 70%) of the *Anthology* are extracts from the three volumes of MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons* (see, below, the ranking of the sermons according to the number of citations). The rest of the book is extracts from other MacDonald fiction in the order of the year of their publication, beginning with *Phantastes* (1858) and ending with *Lilith* (1895). The most significant citations may be those from *Phantastes*, "The Golden Key" (1867), and *The Diary of an Old Soul* (1880), since these were Lewis's personal MacDonald favorites.

MacDonald's *Phantastes* was for Lewis his mentor's most important book, the one which in those now famous words, from *Surprised by Joy* (p. 181), baptized Lewis's imagination on the Fourth of March, 1916. Since this is the case, the fact that Lewis selected only two passages from *Phantastes* for his anthology would make them deeply significant. They are numbers 258 and 259. The first selection, to which Lewis gives the title, "The Loss of the Shadow," reads thus:

I learned that it was not myself but only my *shadow* that I had lost. I learned that it is better . . . for a proud man to fall and be humbled than to hold up his head in pride and fancied innocence. I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood.²

To the second citation, Lewis gave the one-word title, "Love": "It is by loving and not by being loved that one can come nearest to the soul of another."³

Lewis's favorite⁴ MacDonald story, "The Golden Key" is also accorded only two citations:

(279) *No Other Way*

¹ L/CSL (1988 ed.), p. 345.

² GM, p.108.

³ M, p. 109.

⁴ Sometime before November 15, 1916 Lewis read this story, calling it "absolute heaven" (TST, p. 150). His enthusiasm has since been shared by Lewis's friend and biographer (see n. 6 below), Roger Lancelyn Green, who said that MacDonald's "best magic is in it . . . and the strange gift which sets him among the very greatest story-tellers" (see above edition, p. 9); by Glenn Edward Sadler who calls it "one of his best tales" (Introduction to his edition of *The Gifts of the Child Christ: Fairy Tales and Stories for the Childlike* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], p. 17); and by Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids: Christian College Consortium/Eerdmans, 1982), who calls it "the finest of the fairy tales" (p. 143).

The Old Man of the Earth stooped over the floor of the cave, raised a huge stone, and left it leaning. It disclosed a great hole that went plumb-down. “That is the way,” he said. “But there are no stairs. You must throw yourself in. There is no other way.

(280) *Death*

“You have tasted of death now,” said the Old Man. “Is it good?” “It is good,” said Mossy. “It is better than life.” “No,” said the Old Man. “it is only more life.”

In the crucial period of Lewis’s life, between the time he had become a theist but not yet a Christian, Lewis began reading *The Diary of an Old Soul* sometime before October 1929 because he says to Greeves in a letter of October 10th that he has been “slowly reading . . . MacDonald’s *Diary of an Old Soul*. . . . I strongly advise you to try it. He seems to know everything and I find my own experience in it constantly . . . There is a delicious home-spun, earthy flavour about it, as in George Herbert. Indeed *for me* he is better than Herbert.”⁵ Even in term-time Lewis could write to his friend Greeves:

All private reading has ceased, except for 20 minutes before bed . . . when I drink a cup of cocoa and try to wash the day off with MacDonalds [sic] *Diary of an Old Soul*. I shall soon have finished it and must look round for another book. Luckily the world is full of books of that general type: that is another of the beauties of coming, I won’t say, to religion but to an attempt at religion—one finds oneself on the main road with all humanity, and can compare notes with an endless succession of previous travellers. It is emphatically coming home: as Chaucer says ‘Returneth *home* from worldly vanitiee.’⁶

This is accorded eight citations:

(333) *Preacher’s Repentance*

O Lord, I have been talking to the people;
Thought’s wheels have round me whirled a fiery zone,
And the recoil of my word’s airy ripple
My heart heedful has puffed up and blown.
Therefore I cast myself before thee prone:
Lay cool hands on my burning brain and press
From my weak heart the swelling emptiness.

(334) *Deeds*

I would go near thee—but I cannot press
Into thy presence—it helps not to presume.
Thy doors are deeds.

(335) *Prayer*

My prayers, my God, flow from what I am not;

⁵ TST, p. 313.

⁶ TST, pp. 333–334 (January 26, 1930); see also pp. 314 and 403.

I think thy answers make me what I am.
Like weary waves thought follows upon thought,
But the still depth beneath is all thine own,
And there thou mov'st in paths to us unknown.
Out of strange strife thy peace is strangely wrought;
If the lion in us pray—thou answerest the lamb.

(336) *The House Is Not for Me*

The house is not for me—it is for Him.
His royal thoughts require many a stair,
Many a tower, many an outlook fair
Of which I have no thought.

(337) *Hoarding*

In holy things may be unholy greed.
Thou giv'st a glimpse of many a lovely thing
Not to be stored for use in any mind,
But only for the present spiritual need.
The holiest bread, if hoarded, soon will breed
The mammon-moth, the having pride. . . .

(338) *The Day's First Job*

With every morn my life afresh must break
The crust of self, gathered about me fresh.

(339) *Obstinate Illusion*

Have pity on us for the look of things,
When blank denial states us in the face.
Although the serpent mask have lied before
It fascinates the bird.

(340) *The Rules of Conversation*

Only no word of mine must ever foster
The self that in a brother's bosom gnaws;
I may not fondle failing, nor the boaster
Encourage with the breath of my applause.

The following is a ranking (RANK) of the sermons according to the number of citations (NUMBER) made by Lewis in his anthology:

RANK	NUMBER	SERMON TITLE(S)
1	16	"The Truth"
2	15	"Life," "Righteousness"

3	13	“The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity”
4	12	“Man’s Difficulty Concerning Prayer
5	11	“The Word of Jesus Concerning Prayer,” “The Last Farthing,”
“The		Final Unmasking”
6	10	“The Way,” “Self-denial,” “Creation in Christ”
7	9	“The Eloi,” “The Hardness of the Way,” “Justice”
8	8	“The Consuming Fire,” “The New Name,” “Abba, Father,” “The
		Inheritance”
9	7	“Love Thy Neighbor,” “The Voice of Job,”
10	6	“The Temptation in the Wilderness,” “The Fear of God”
11	4	“Kingship,” “Light,” “The Displeasure of Jesus”
12	3	“It Shall Not be Forgiven,” “The Heart with the Treasure,” “The
		Hands of the Father,” “The Truth in Jesus,” “The Knowing
		of the Son,” “The Mirrors of the Lord,” “Freedom”
13	2	“Love Thine Enemy”
14	1	“The Child in the Midst,” “The Higher Faith,” “The God of the
		Living”