

**Kerry Dearborn,**  
***Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald,***  
**Review by P.H. Brazier**  
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Kerry Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts). Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006. 199 pp. ISBN 9780754655169 .

It is highly questionable whether we would have had the great theological stories and analogical narratives (not fantasies) of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis without the theological writings of the Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister George MacDonald (1824-1905). Reading *Phantastes* was the catalyst for a life-changing ‘Damascus Road’ epiphany for the angrily atheistic young C.S. Lewis (an experience recounted in *Surprised by Joy*). MacDonald’s work can also be seen as in many respects the foundational ground from which emerged the work of many of the Inklings. Despite the fact that MacDonald was sorely criticized by his Calvinist and Congregationalist peers (certainly by his pietistic ecclesial employers), his writings are considered of considerable value by theologians in the early twenty first century. Kerry Dearborn, in *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald*, addresses the paucity of scholarly analysis of MacDonald. This is a work about theology and imagination, the intersection of word, flesh and image.

Dearborn sets the scene well for readers not familiar with MacDonald’s corpus and the profound influence he exerted on English literature and theology. She classifies MacDonald’s contribution as a theologian in seven areas that correspond to the seven chapters in this book: ‘Calvinist and Celtic’: MacDonald’s context and early influences; classical and literary influences on MacDonald’s life and thought; British theological influences; MacDonald’s theology of the imagination; MacDonald’s vision of humanity (closely aligned to a Calvinistic theological anthropology, but where humanity is renewed in Christ); and finally, the concept of renewal in the context of suffering and death. In summary, Dearborn assesses MacDonald’s imaginative approach to theology, understanding and giving weight to the early influences of Scottish Calvinism, but also to his Celtic heritage. Emphasis is placed on the Federal Calvinism he was raised in, and how he moved away from its formative influence in his mature work. Dearborn deftly shows how Christ became central to his work. An exploration of the various sources, both classical and literary, demonstrates just how image-rich (to use Dearborn’s term) MacDonald’s approach to theology was. Among MacDonald’s resources, here, are his appropriation of concepts and images from the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

including a classification of the workings of the imagination by Coleridge; the poet William Wordsworth; and European theological and literary trends as represented by Novalis (Friedrich Philipp von Hardenberg), particularly in the field of Christology. In theological terms, Dearborn is at her most original when she identifies the importance of God as triune communion for MacDonald. MacDonald's theology of the atonement is presented as two areas that are sometimes seen as controversial among some readers, therefore she discusses MacDonald's understanding of the imagination and how it offers an alternative vision of God. It is in this area that Dearborn is at her most illuminating and incisive, producing, if not a systematic analysis of MacDonald's theology of the baptized imagination, then a sound prolegomena. Of particular value is her emphasis on MacDonald's view of the Incarnation as a validation of the created forms of the imagination, asserting an inherent rather than a projected meaning in the imagination's fruits, and thus avoiding a charge of subjectivism. This leads quite correctly into MacDonald on the baptized imagination, allowing her to assert that for MacDonald, the closer one is to Christ as the Creator, the more faithful and vibrant the imagination will be, because such communion enables the human to see beyond and behind visible reality with perceptiveness and depth. There is much more of value in this work which would be useful for theologians of various, numerous and often contradictory persuasions to read, particularly on the role of the imagination and theological transformation. For one who values the writings of C.S. Lewis, this is certainly an excellent study. If there is room for criticism, it is that it is a relatively slender volume (179 pages, plus a sound bibliography and indices); perhaps Dearborn could have spent more time on a systematic analysis of the ramifications of MacDonald's theories on the imagination, particularly his progress beyond Coleridge's relatively brief exploration of the subject.

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