

# “George MacDonald and the Prophetic Imagination”



Bicentenary Conference (1824-1905)

May 29-31, 2024. Wheaton College, Illinois ([map](#))

Sponsored by the [George MacDonald Society](#) and the [Marion E. Wade Center](#)

Expanded Programme

## Wednesday

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11:00-12:35 Fischer Hall (Harrison Ave. and Centennial Dr.)

Registration

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1:00-2:15 Phelps (in the [Todd M. Beamer Center](#))

1:00–1:15 Welcome

1:15–2:15 Plenary – [Daniel Gabelman](#)

Playing with Prophecy: Imagining MacDonald’s Imagination



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2:30–3:30 Breakout Sessions

Panel 1: Literary Inheritance – [Phelps](#)

Bret Van Den Brink

“This Wonderful Man”: MacDonald’s Reception of Sir Philip Sidney

Though George MacDonald claims to “have long loved” Sir Philip Sidney in *A Cabinet of Gems*, an anthology MacDonald made of excerpts from Sidney’s writings, relatively little attention has yet been given to Sidney’s influence upon MacDonald. This presentation will trace some of the explicit appreciations of Sidney in MacDonald’s writings (especially *A Cabinet of Gems*, *England’s Antiphon*, and *A Dish of Orts*), and it will speculate on how Sidney influenced MacDonald’s conceptualization of the imagination as a moral force that may bring one (whether writer or reader) in touch with the mind of God.

Amanda Vernon

Practicing Love: MacDonald, Shakespeare, and Post-Critical Reading

This paper explores MacDonald's scholarly claim that reading Shakespeare may act as a form of spiritual practice. It will argue that MacDonald's insistence on the primacy of character in drama relates to his concerns about poor contemporary reading practices and the impact he believed these practices had upon interpretation of Shakespeare's work and a reader's moral or spiritual life. This paper posits that MacDonald's commentary on the role of character in drama demonstrates how theology informs nineteenth-century ideas about character and drama and reveals a way of thinking about reading that anticipates the current post-critical movement in literary studies.

### Celia Farrow

"A breaking of the pitcher": MacDonald on Form and Freedom in the Poetry of George Herbert

The importance of MacDonald's obvious affinity for and deep understanding of the work of George Herbert is largely overlooked. *England's Antiphon* argues that Herbert was unduly influenced by the contemporary "increase of respect to symbol and ceremony", and that he would have been an even greater poet had he attended more to "nature's symbols" and less to a sometimes exaggerated "desire after system or order." The nuances of MacDonald's understanding of this struggle against an unhelpful desire for order illustrates his careful reading, and also uncovers something of MacDonald's own contentions with the questions of form, nature, and grace.

## Panel 2: Evolving, Dying, into Life – Wade Bakke

### Melody Green

"The Sound of a Far Off Song": ATBOTNW as a Response to the Calvinist Dying Child Story

This paper explores the intertextual relationship between George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* and earlier 'conversion' dying-children stories. MacDonald's text responds to the pervasive dying-child narrative by presenting a romantic instead of puritan view of the child. His Diamond is not the typically repentant, depraved child-sinner separated from God, but rather a holy innocent living out a life of goodness and joy before his death. The interplay between the earlier stories and MacDonald's also brings into sharp focus the differences between MacDonald's later romanticism and the Calvinism taught in his childhood.

### Baronger Bieger

Growing Perfection or Chaos Dreaming: MacDonald's Ideas of Biological Evolution

Not long after Darwin published the *Origin of Species*, MacDonald began incorporating the idea of evolution into his novels, essays, and sermons. Though he held a deep appreciation for science, he did not accept Darwin's theory without careful consideration. In an attempt to shed light upon what he valued about Darwin's theory, I will contextualize MacDonald's beautiful descriptions of physical and biological evolution within his time and discuss how Darwin's revolutionary theory is a product of what MacDonald called the "scientific imagination."

### Laurel Samuelson

Paper Skin: Female Subjectivity and Embodiment in *Lilith*

By creating an afterlife that regenerates tangible living flesh as well as souls, *Lilith* posits that bodies themselves are holy and eternal. Lilith's redemption, which necessitates a reconciliation between her body and soul, imagines an extra-Victorian valuing of

nonconforming bodies by transcending social constructs through divine subjectivity. MacDonald envisions a corporeal-spiritual connection beyond allegory: he conceptualizes holy flesh as a fundamental truth of existence, and proffers a holistic model of identity formation through spiritual restoration.

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### 3:30-4:15 [Phelps](#)

#### Coffee & Tea

#### Ayumi Kumabe: Bonus Paper from Japan – [Wade Bakke](#)

Seeing from Women's Points of View: The Mother-Daughter Relationship through MacDonald's Imaginatively Creative Descriptions of the Female Body

Generally in literature, there is a gendered dichotomy: man/woman = seeing subject/seen object. Since women have been regarded just as objects to be seen from the androcentric and heterosexual viewpoint, the female relationship has remained unseen. I will cast a new light on the female body by focusing on women's eyes and the mother-daughter relationship in *Lilith*. I will not just look into how women are seen, but also view them as seers, including how Lilith sees herself, and how she and her daughter Lona see each other. By seeing from women's points of view, I will reveal how MacDonald describes/creates the female body vividly, and throw into relief his prophetic, "advanced" view of women.

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### 4:15-5:15 [Phelps](#)

#### Plenary – [John Patrick Pazdziora](#)

Prophetic Seeing in George MacDonald's Fiction



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### 5:30-6:30 Dining Hall (in the [Todd M. Beamer Center](#))

#### Dinner

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### 7:00-8:30 [Amerding Concert Hall](#)

#### *"If there be music...": MacDonald & the Musical Imagination*

#### George MacDonald Conference Evening Concert

This evening concert will be a gala celebration of the musicality of MacDonald. Composers JAC Redford and Joshua Rodriguez will introduce their work his writing has inspired, and Chuck King will direct the performances. We will also be privileged to hear the award-winning song of Rebecca Abbott, inspired by a passage in *Phantastes*, performed in person.

# Thursday

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7:30-8:15 [Dining Hall](#)

Breakfast (for those onsite)

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8:30-9:30 [Phelps](#)

Plenary – [Crystal Downing](#)

The Architecture of MacDonald: Defying a Literary Tradition



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9:40-11:10 [Breakout Sessions](#)

Panel 3: Theologians — [Wade Bakke](#)

**Julie Canlis**

Pebbles & Soul-Schism: George MacDonald & Calvinism

MacDonald's relationship with John Calvin is complex in part because of the type of Calvinism expressed by many of his contemporaries, and the (Federal) Calvinist mark upon religiosity so pervasive in his youth. MacDonald spent much of his life relating to, distancing himself from, and renovating what those theologians preached about God. Examining what Calvin wrote, what Scottish Presbyterianism preached, and MacDonald's sensitivity to emotional alignment in theology, forces a reconsideration of MacDonald as simply "anti-Calvinist." Instead, we discover MacDonald to be against schism – both of the soul and of the church.

**Joyce McPherson**

The Legacy of Thomas Chalmers in MacDonald's Prophetic Imagination

A young George MacDonald once preached to his congregation of brothers and cousins, declaring that the Reverend Geordie MacDonald was next to "Dr. Chaumers...the grandest preacher in a' Scotland!" Thomas Chalmers's work as a Presbyterian minister in a time of revival, as well as his writings as a natural theologian, had a profound effect on MacDonald's prophetic imagination. Especially in the integration of reason and faith with an evangelical purpose, his impact can be traced in MacDonald's fantasy, fiction, and non-fiction.

**Marilyn Piety**

Imagining the Incarnation: Kierkegaard & MacDonald on 'the Paradox of Christianity'

Søren Kierkegaard describes the Incarnation as "the absolute paradox," or "the thought that cannot be thought." But if the Incarnation cannot be thought, how can it be believed? Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of the paradox, I will argue, dovetails perfectly with MacDonald's account of how it can come to be understood, even if not grasped by

“thought” in the traditional sense. That is, I will argue that MacDonald uses analogical, which is to say imaginative, reasoning to illuminate the essence of Kierkegaard’s position and that in doing so he anticipates the growing movement of Christian universalism.

## Panel 4: Poetry, Language, & Levity – Phelps

### Sarah Emtage

The Gravity of Light Verse in George MacDonald

This paper will explore the ways in which MacDonald demonstrates the value of light verse. It will focus on the characters of Curdie (*The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*) and Diamond (*At the Back of the North Wind*), and delve into the poetry that each character creates and uses in the context of their stories. Both Curdie and Diamond are underestimated by other characters in their novels, but are shown to have hidden strength in their levity. I consider the strength of their light verse as it relates to community, humility, and transcendence.

### Siobhan Maloney Latar

Image of the Maker: The Artist as Mystic in MacDonald’s Theological Poetics

MacDonald claims that the “poetic” or “symbolic” is an essential method for communicating truth, “the first in which truth will admit of being embodied.” He uses the term “mysticism” to describe this. The mystic is the one who sees: who can penetrate beneath the surface of things to their fullness. Why then, is the “indirect” method of poetry more excellent in revealing than a direct and discursive method? This presentation will explore MacDonald’s understanding of the crucial role of poetic language to man’s vocational task within creation, and the theological framework that enables him to give this work of the imagination such a privileged place.

### Sarah Waters

Tripping into the Light Fantastic: Seeing (through) MacDonald

This paper will draw on my own experience and the experiences and insights of my students at a secular university reading George MacDonald (specifically “The Light Princess” and “The Fantastic Imagination”). It will sketch the way these students see MacDonald prophetically pointing towards later critical and theoretical trends, such as his remarkably democratic understanding of the imagination and the significance he gives to the role (and agency) of the reader. Ultimately, it will show the value of our own impressions of MacDonald being destabilized by seeing his deceptively (and indeed destabilizing) “light” princess through the 20/24 vision of my students.

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11:10–11:30 [Coffee and Tea](#)

11:20-11:50 [Wade](#) Tour 3

11:50-12:20 [Wade](#) Tour 4

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12:30-1:30 [Dining Hall](#)

Lunch

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1:30-2:30 [Phelps](#)

Plenary – [Rebecca Reynolds](#)

A Dream within a Dream: The Prophetic Voice in the Vision Episodes of Edmund Spenser and George MacDonald



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2:35–3:30 [Wade Center](#)

Books & Art/ Coffee & Tea

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3:30-5:00 [Breakout Sessions](#)

Panel 5: Scots & Goths — [Wade Classroom](#)

Rhiannon Jeffrey

Ossian in Glenruadh: GMD's Critical and Creative Engagement of *The Poems of Ossian* in *What's Mine's Mine*

The influence of *The Poems of Ossian*, James Macpherson's controversial text upon George Macdonald's novel of 1886, *What's Mine's Mine*, has yet to be examined in detail. After Ossian's publication in 1761, Macpherson's claim that the text was a direct translation from an old Gaelic manuscript was quickly contested. In *What's Mine's Mine*, Ossian is considered apart from these charges and given a new locality and context. Though Ossian is most visible in the novel through explicit reference, this paper will argue that Macpherson's text forms a background, if not a landscape, in which the narrative of *What's Mine's Mine* can operate.

Holly Nelson

James Hogg, George MacDonald, and the Scottish Supernatural

In this paper, I consider the influence of Scottish literature, notably that written by James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, on George MacDonald. I contend that while there were many influences on the life and writing of MacDonald, Scottish oral and written tradition had a major impact (e.g., aesthetic, affective, psychological, spiritual) on his works, especially in terms of his psycho-spiritual vision.

Daniel Larson

"Turn Your Back on Fear": *Lilith* & the Gothic Imagination

This paper considers George MacDonald's 1895 novel *Lilith: A Romance* as an imaginative renegotiation with the Gothic. Using genre conventions to cultivate the expectations of readers, *Lilith* creates space for new affective responses to emerge from the experience of reading, responses that produce deeper levels of contemplation and revelation. Applying MacDonald's essay "The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture," the paper positions *Lilith* in dialogue with both contemporary literary theory and nineteenth-century assessments of the Gothic, presenting MacDonald as an adept literary critic whose insights are uniquely suited to address literary discourse today.



## Panel 6: Personhood & the Self — Phelps

Mark Lama

Hearing the Raven Croak: *Lilith*, Kierkegaard, & Selfhood

In *Lilith*, Mr. Raven employs a prophetic form of riddling speech to awaken Mr. Vane to his alienation and lack of self knowledge. Explore the threefold challenge of the riddle in the story: “You do not know yourself; you are not at home; you are not free,” and its power to point us toward a truly grounded, restful existence. As Mr. Vane ultimately learns, even the evasions of cowardice and bad faith cannot turn aside our blessed, divine fate to find and be at home.

Chelle Stearns

“How can [the gods] meet us until we have faces?”: The Search for One’s Face in George MacDonald & C.S. Lewis

Lewis’ novel *Till We Have Faces* explores what it means for the novel’s protagonist Orual to find her face in the wake of the neglect and cruelty of her childhood. Lewis uses the image of a veil over Orual’s face to symbolize how her genuine self (persona) slowly dies and her false self dominates. Lewis borrows from MacDonald’s dancing skeletons in *Lilith*. They are grotesque in their facelessness and inability to interact with one another. Much like the skeletons, Orual must come to terms with the exposure of her false self if she is to find her face.

Robert Garcia

Why Faces at All? Lewis and MacDonald on the Uniqueness of Persons

The uniqueness of individual persons is a central but relatively neglected theme in C.S. Lewis. In his view, each person is unique in virtue of having an essential capacity to image God in a way that no other person can. This is adopted from MacDonald, but from ideas which arguably have more metaphysical depth – as is shown when (re)constructing MacDonald’s metaphysical theory. How Lewis deploys MacDonald’s view is shown in an examination of Chapter 10 of *The Problem of Pain*. The payoff is an enriched understanding of both author’s work, and especially their shared and attractive view about persons.

## Panel 7: Readings & Receptions — Wade Bakke

John McNeil

Theological signification in MacDonald’s *Seaboard Parish* and Lilius Trotter’s *Parables of the Cross*

GMD’s sermons are metaphysical landscapes in which their creator provides a liminal space for theological reflection and spiritual maturation. His transcendental dialectic and *modus operandi* of divine sonship has a Wesleyan emphasis on “our real life with Christ concealed.” *Seaboard Parish* will be considered in light of this dialectic and Ruskinian understanding of divine light, and its profound effect on the artist Lilius Trotter and her later work *Parables of the Cross*.

Robin Phillips

From Phantasmic to Prophetic: MacDonald and the Victorian Redemption of Imagination

Though it may seem self-evident that imagination can have a prophetic and spiritually elevating quality, few people thought of imagination in these terms prior to the 19th century. Instead, imagination tended to be associated with “phantasm” and lumped in with the sources of temptation. George MacDonald is a key figure in the shift that occurred in Victorian England as the imagination began to be considered for its spiritualizing and prophetic potential. This shift did not occur in a vacuum, however, but arose in conjunction with specific socio-economic circumstances. Understanding these circumstances may provide fresh insight for how a resourcement of MacDonald’s insights can speak to the challenges we face today.

### Sharin Schroeder

The 1924 Allen & Unwin Centenary Editions and GMD’s Reception History

In 1924, George Allen & Unwin published Greville MacDonald’s biography of his father and five Centenary Editions (*Fairy Tales*, *Lilith*, *The Tragedie of Hamlet*, *Diary of an Old Soul*, and *The Portent*). As can be seen from the correspondence between Greville and Stanley Unwin (at the Wade Center and the University of Reading), Greville funded the publication of all but the biography and *Fairy Tales*; he was, both in his own mind and Unwin’s, more likely to lose financially than to gain by those books’ publication. This paper explores the history and impact of the 1924 Allen & Unwin publications.

5:00–5:30 Free Time

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5:30-7:00 [Amerding Lobby](#)

Conference Banquet

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7:00-8:30 [Amerding Auditorium](#)

### Keynote – Malcolm Guite

When A Heart Is Really Alive: George MacDonald and the Prophetic Imagination

8:30-9:00 George’s MacDonald’s birthday cake





# Friday

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7:30-8:15 [Dining Hall](#)

Breakfast (for those onsite)

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8:30-9:30 [Phelps](#)

Plenary – [Trevor Hart](#)

Taking Flesh: MacDonald, “Making,” and the Material Conditions of Art



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9:40-11:10 [Breakout Sessions](#)

Panel 8: Literary Criticism — [Phelps](#)

Jennifer Koopman

Poetic Prophecy: Repetition, Typology, and MacDonald’s Vision of Literary History

Profound concern with matters of literary history, especially its spiritual trajectory, anchor MacDonald to a prophetic understanding of history. In *England’s Antiphon* equation of poetic song with religious utterance results in more of a spiritual genealogy than a discussion of literary genre. MacDonald envisions this history as part of a much larger sacred plot, the end of which is apocalypse and transcendence. This preoccupation is also evident in his fiction – interweaving the works of other writers, repeating and creatively reworking the past. The typological relationship between *Sir Gibbie* and *Donal Grant* evidences such a process of progressive repetition.

Karl Persson

A Voice is Heard in Ramah: Processing Grief Poetically and Prophetically in George MacDonald’s *England’s Antiphon*

In George MacDonald’s *England’s Antiphon*, he calls himself a “leader of the chorus,” collecting spiritually inclined English poems and poetic excerpts drawn from various historical periods. But what are his selection criteria? My paper shows that one guiding principle is an interest in grief, and discusses the reason for this interest. MacDonald argues that sincerity, truth, and humility were gradually eclipsed by an eighteenth-century worship of power only beginning to subside due to the twin forces of Romanticism and Victorian doubt. Thus, MacDonald is arguably interested in grief as a practice counteracting the power-knowledge that had infected eighteenth-century faith.

Robert Trexler

Chasity in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* & *The Light Princess*

MacDonald associates Edmund Spenser with “The Light Princess” in several interpolated passages in the novel *Adela Cathcart*. Additionally, MacDonald combined a reading of “The Light Princess” with passages from *The Faerie Queen* for his college students. Therefore, one can benefit by reading “The Light Princess” in light of Spenser, particularly in book three “Chastity”. Spenser’s understanding of chastity can be viewed through the story of Amoret and Sir Scudamore. I contend that MacDonald affirms sexual desire when it leads to integrated personalities and marriage. As such, natural desires lead the Prince and Princess to balance opposing forces and achieve harmony.

## Panel 9: Theologically — Wade Classroom

### Jeffrey Cornelius-White

What is GMD About and What Ideas Influenced CSL? A Thematic Analysis of George MacDonald: An Anthology 365 Readings

C. S. Lewis regarded MacDonald as his “master,” publishing an anthology of poignant passages by MacDonald who he considered to be “more continuously close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself” than other writers. This paper presents a qualitative thematic analysis of this anthology having used open coding and distilling of codes together into 10 themes and 5 meta-themes. Example meta-themes include Humbly Approach God, Identification with the Good Obscures Life, and Inexorable Love Consumes. The presentation encourages consideration of themes and representative passages to explore a broader understanding of main points in MacDonald’s writings as depicted in Lewis’s anthology.

### Annie Mae Platter

Fire & Forgiveness: How MacDonald’s Theology of the Holy Spirit was Formed

Scotland 1824 was painted by the religious fervor of Calvinism; historical depth, unswerving conviction, and gray orthodoxy. Many challenging these views paid dearly. However, in a highland village, a sickly little boy with a strong imagination and a curious heart, was growing up to stand firm. By reflecting on these formative years and looking to his key influences, we can see how George MacDonald’s theology of the Holy Spirit was formed.

### Drew Baker

A Worthy Blossom: Imaginative Practical Theology in Sir Gibbie

Just as heart and brains are not mutually antagonistic, neither does the imagination preclude practicality. While the field of practical theology is still dominated by the Cartesian bias toward the intellect, the contributions of philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James K. A. Smith have made space for a new appreciation of MacDonald’s emphasis on the imagination. This essay will observe how key characters in *Sir Gibbie* demonstrate the crucial role of the imagination as they perform the four tasks of practical theology (as articulated by Richard Osmer).

## Panel 10: Literature in Conversation — Wade Bakke

### Caroline La Plue

Hale to the Scot: Finding GMD in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North & South*

Significant biographical and epistolary evidence links George MacDonald to Elizabeth Gaskell through their mutual Mancunian friend, AJ Scott. In 1853, MacDonald was exiled

from a small church in the south of England, moved to Manchester, and lectured part-time to support his family—a story that uncannily mirrors the opening chapters of Gaskell’s pivotal work *North and South*, which was published one year after MacDonald moved north. This presentation explores their connection, arguing for a missing scholarly link between the two authors’ lives by examining Gaskell’s fiction, MacDonald’s reality, and their overlapping experiences in Manchester.

### Natalie Morrill

“Like Innumerable Goblin Eyes”: GK Chesterton’s detective fiction as a portal to GMD’s vision of the fantastic

G. K. Chesterton’s public praise for George MacDonald began with his 1901 essay on *The Marquis of Lossie*, reading it as a fairy tale in disguise. Chesterton’s interpretation aligns with MacDonald’s idea of fairy tales revealing truths hidden within the commonplace. This paper examines how Chesterton’s detective stories, especially *The Man Who Was Thursday*, reflect MacDonald’s romantic vision. Contrary to interpretations positing Chesterton’s preference for detective protagonists as being at odds with MacDonald’s mystical worldview, this reading suggests these detectives might be types of MacDonald’s characters who bridge mystery and everyday reality.

### Brenton Dickieson

GMD’s Spiritual Theology of the Imagination & the Prophetic Critique of *Anne of Green Gables*

2024 is George MacDonald’s bicentennial and L.M. Montgomery sesquicentennial. A visual and literary rereading of the early chapters of the beloved classic *Anne of Green Gables* reveals an hermeneutical key to Montgomery’s novels drawn from Jesus’s prophetic imaging of childhood. Although she is “next door to a perfect heathen,” Anne is a peculiarly apt exegete offering a penetrating—if somewhat precocious—spiritual-theological critique. I suggest that the Rev. George MacDonald, Miss Anne Shirley of Green Gables, and her creator, Mrs. L.M. Montgomery-Macdonald, share something akin to a provocative and inversive narrative spiritual theology of the imagination.

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11:10-11:40 [Phelps](#)

Coffee and Tea

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11:40-12:40 [Breakout Sessions](#)

Panel 11: Active Imagination — [Wade Bakke](#)

### Joe Ricke

“Second Only to the Bible”: MacDonald’s Shakespeare Scholarship

My presentation traces the details of MacDonald’s scholarly interaction with the works of Shakespeare (and other Shakespeare scholars), especially his close readings of Shakespeare as reflected in his three interleaved Shakespeare manuscripts, his involvement with the New Shakspeare Society (and its controversial founder and director, F. J. Furnivall), and his ten-year project of bringing an edition of *Hamlet* to completion and publication. The critical response was underwhelming, although comparisons with his

contemporaries as well as his rediscovery by more recent scholarship, suggests the quality and the ongoing significance of MacDonald's serious work on Shakespeare.

### Michael Phillips

MacDonald's Spiritually Prophetic Imagination

An imaginatively conceived transformational vision of God's nature and eternal purposes in his universe and in the lives of his created men and women.

## Panel 12: Art in Action — Phelps

### Andrew Peterson

Walking with the Giant: A personal history with MacDonald

I will share the story of my discovery of George MacDonald, how it's affected my writing, art, and theology, and also my travels to where the stories were born.

### Molly Z

MacDonald's view of the Imagination, Biomorphc Abstraction, & Public Art

In "The Fantastic Imagination," MacDonald writes "The best thing you can do for your fellow man is to wake things up that are in him." His writings on the imagination correlate to Kandinsky's writings on abstract painting "arousing the soul." In contemporary culture, Public Art is a poignant example of an artistic practice that "awakens culture" and transforms something ordinary into a new creation. I found the choices I was making as a biomorphc abstract painter and public artist had been drawing upon MacDonald's book *Phantastes*. To illustrate the phenomenon that MacDonald describes, I will be reading and showing paintings that parallel passages from *Phantastes*.

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12:40-1:40 Dining Hall

Lunch

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Afternoon and Evening — Phelps

1:40-2:40 "Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture" (Reading/Discussion)

2:40-3:10 Summation by Malcolm Guite

3:10-3:40 Thank-you's and Farewells

3:40-4:15 Free time and set up for Light Princess

4:15-5:30 Bonus: Performance of Light Princess

5:30-7:00 Dinner (make your own arrangements)

7:00-8:30 Open Mic Evening with Joe Ricke, Andrew Peterson, Malcolm Guite, and more!

