

Foreword

IT IS A REFRESHING delight when one finds a text which brings new thinking to authors and texts which have been highly researched and become set into seemingly unbreakable moulds. Rachel Johnson's *A Complete Identity: The Youthful Hero in the Work of G. A. Henty and George MacDonald* is a deeply and thoroughly researched book which brings new readings and understandings of the work of G. A. Henty and George MacDonald, plus new ways of thinking about the construction of heroism in the nineteenth century. This book emanates from a lifetime's engagement as a reader with these two authors which resulted in her successful PhD thesis upon which this book is based. The work is set against and illuminates the nineteenth-century context in terms of historical event, philosophy, ideology, and prevalent attitudes. Having been the Director of Studies for Rachel's doctoral work I was constantly impressed by her depth and range of knowledge which is now incorporated into this text and which will bring new ways of understanding and reading to the work of Henty and MacDonald. She has disrupted and exploded the "given" knowledge and stereotyping accorded to these two influential authors and demonstrates that instead of being on opposing poles of a continuum, that there are, in fact, considerable cross-over points and places where one might have otherwise not positioned each writer.

The notion of the hero is one which has been central to writing for children since fairy tales were first told and literary texts for children were produced. As Lord Byron wrote at the beginning of *Don Juan*:

"I want a hero: an uncommon want
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one."
—Byron, *Don Juan*

The desire for an heroic focus is strong: the need to have the embodiment of that which is valued philosophically and morally and then brought to life through characterization, action, and plot. Heroic attributes can often be attached to characters without substantial proof, especially in the contemporary age of celebrity. Johnson's *A Complete Identity* rectifies the populist and academically constructed images of Henty and MacDonald and re-positions their work to articulate the complexities which lie beneath the populist reputations of Henty as the "Boy's Historian," intent upon creating the imperialist boy hero, and MacDonald as a writer of fairy tales. In conclusion, Rachel Johnson's work strips away clichéd thinking and draws the reader closer to discovering the "true" hero in the nineteenth century, albeit satisfyingly subject to multiplicity in a postmodern age.

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