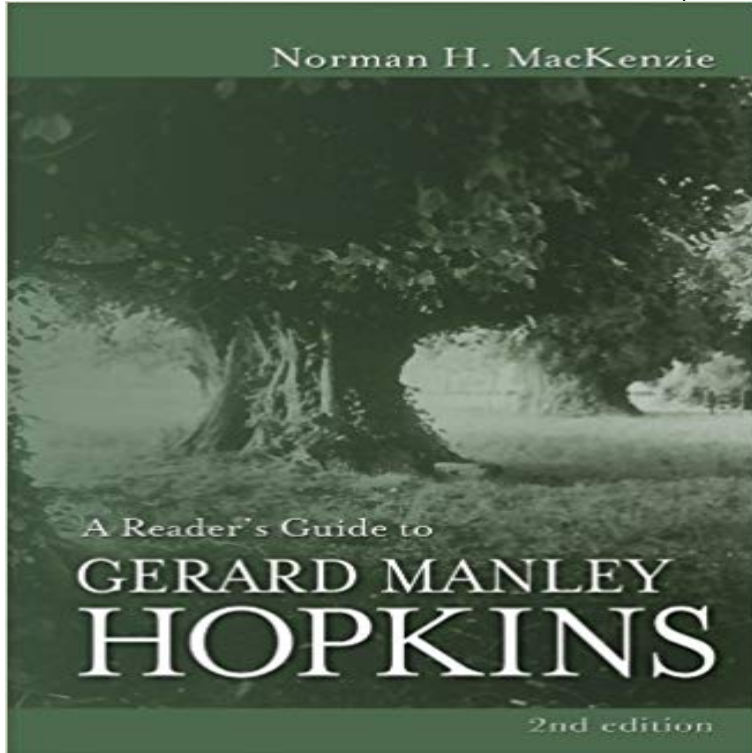


A Readers Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins



Norman MacKenzie accurately described the writings of the poet Hopkins in topographic terms as Hopkins Country. This concept has profound implications for anyone who is trying to understand the poems which present every reader with challenges of reference to local and international events, autobiography, religious belief, trades, agriculture, philosophy, theology, aesthetics, culture—the actual list is much longer. Add to this the matter of how the poems sound: meter, rhythm, Anglo-Saxon alliteration and primordial diction, tempo, dynamics. This Hopkins Country is rich and varied. To make one way through it one needs a guide. MacKenzie is that guide, almost as Vergil was Dante's guide through three levels of another country (and Dante made it up!). The best guide in any country is a well-worn footsoldier who has weathered and worked the terrain, not a temp like the rest of us who parachute in, or hover above a lovely spot or bird in flight and pontificate on this or that view or inscape, and then like a hummingbird or bee, fly off to another country. Reading Hopkins is work, as MacKenzie reported of his encounter in 1945 with the poet: Hopkins was invitingly difficult, obviously worth exploring. At that point MacKenzie started an apprenticeship on the ground, in the field, that imperceptibly changed to lifetime mastery. For 57 years Norman MacKenzie was the senior tenant of that country. Paradoxically, he lived longer with Hopkins than Hopkins lived with himself. Hopkins died before he was 45. And when in 2004, just short of reaching the age of 89, MacKenzie died, he was bringing his precious Readers Guide into the new century. His daughter, Catherine Phillips, as worthy a Hopkins scholar and editor as she is a daughter, with filial discretion has completed the revision, leaving most of the text as it was—most of us felt it could have been reprinted as it

was-but taking note of scholarship and editing that have happened since 1981. The voice is still unmistakably that of Norman MacKenzie. What makes MacKenzie's book different? Precisely that lifetime of familiarity with the Country that the rest of us really just plan on visiting. For the armchair traveler, a map and descriptions of anywhere are likely to be enough. But not for an explorer. To try to read Hopkins the way one reads a map is to distort the Hopkins Country, like the world, to flatness. The true world is configured in infinitely varied ways. So too the Hopkins Country. Norman MacKenzie put it this way in the Preface to the 1981 edition: to the reader on foot, healthily determined to follow the poet's trail, [existing specialized studies] seldom supply the mile-by-mile direction he needs. It is for him that *A Readers Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* is intended, designed . . . to accompany the author through the poems in more or less chronological sequence. The territory, too rugged for the taste of his own contemporaries, is on that account all the more inviting to us today. Generations of students and instructors have treasured their rare copies of the 1981 edition, as they were unable to share the compendium of that Country as a gift to friends. Small as the book seems (277 pages), it is an encyclopedia of knowledge. There is a brief chronology of the life and interests of Hopkins, followed by 230 pages of guidance through the poems in the form of facts about the composition, manuscript variations, interpretations, paraphrases, and critical disagreements. A recently discovered playful poem is printed with commentary. An enlightening reference section of poetic terms and biographical notes on the poet's friends is followed by a select bibliography and full index.

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