

## J.R.R. Tolkien: Did You Know?

Windows on the life and work of J.R.R. Tolkien

Chris Armstrong and Steven Gertz

### Tolkien: "I am in fact a Hobbit"

In 1958, Tolkien wrote the following in a letter to a fan, Deborah Webster: "I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much."

### A crucial test

In 1936, publisher Stanley Unwin was deciding whether to publish *The Hobbit*. To help assess its popularity with children, he gave the manuscript to his youngest son, Rayner, for his opinion. This he often did, paying Rayner a standard fee of one shilling per report. Douglas Anderson tells how, with "the superiority of a ten-year-old," the boy wrote: "This book ... is good and should appeal to all children between the ages of 5 and 9." Rayner Unwin (1925-2000) went on to become Tolkien's principal publisher.

### Birth of a hobbit

*The Hobbit* was born one summer afternoon, likely in 1930. Tolkien, then a young professor, sat in his home office correcting examinations: "One of the candidates had mercifully left one of the pages with no writing on it, which is the best thing that can possibly happen to an examiner, and I wrote on it: 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.' Names always generate a story in my mind: eventually I thought I'd better find out what hobbits were like." (Seen here is Tolkien's original cover.)

### His most exacting critic

Christopher Tolkien once interrupted his father as he read a chapter of *The Hobbit* to the Tolkien children in his study: "Last time, **you** said Bilbo's front door was blue, and **you** said Thorin had a golden tassel on his hood, but you've just said that Bilbo's front door was green, and the tassel on Thorin's hood was silver." Their father let out an exasperated exclamation—but quickly strode across the room to make a note.

### The original Sam Gamgee

Tolkien once received a letter from a man in London whose name was Sam Gamgee (the name of Frodo's loyal hobbit companion in *The Lord of the Rings*). In his responding letter, Tolkien admitted that what he really dreaded was getting a communication from S. Gollum. In fact, he had picked up the name Sam Gamgee in Sarehole, his rural childhood home. There, a local man named Samson Gamgee had become a household name for a surgical dressing he had invented.

### Nine-tenths of the law?

"Possession" is a unifying theme in Tolkien's imagined world. The fallen Melkor wanted to have God's power of creation. The pathetic Gollum was twisted by his possessive love of his "Precious." No one epitomized this quality more than Smaug. The hobbit's dwarf companion Thorin could not hide his contempt: "Dragons ... guard their plunder ... and never enjoy a brass ring of it. Indeed they hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value; and they can't make a thing for themselves. ..."

## **Middle-earth as Europe**

Tolkien once told a reporter that hobbits were English, implying the Shire was England. When asked what was east of Rhun and south of Harad, Tolkien continued, "Rhun is the Elvish word for east. Asia, China, Japan, and all the things which people in the West regard as far away. And south of Harad is Africa, the hot countries." The reporter probed, "That makes Middle-earth Europe, doesn't it?" Tolkien answered, "Yes, of course—Northwestern Europe ... where my imagination comes from." (He later denied that he had said this.)

## **Alpine awe**

At the age of 19, Tolkien took a trip to Switzerland with family friends. There he saw mountains, up close, for the first time. As his children later told it, the rock-falls and snowy crevasses of these Alpine ranges lodged themselves in his imagination, to reappear in various guises in his stories.

## **His fears about a film version**

Tolkien anticipated his books might inspire a film adaption, and he stated his concerns in a letter he wrote in June 1958. "The failure of poor films is often precisely in exaggeration," he explained, "and in the intrusion of unwarranted matter owing to not perceiving where the core of the original lies." He objected to editors who "cut the parts of the story upon which its characteristic and peculiar tone principally depends, showing a preference for fights," and said he would resent "perversion of the characters ... even more than the spoiling of the plot and scenery."

## **Wartime inspiration**

Tolkien began creating the legends of Middle-earth on the front lines of World War I, where he served as an officer. He conceived *The Silmarillion*, he once said, in "grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire." Some of his early drafts of Middle-earth's legends are on the backs of official military documents.

## **They got along swimmingly**

Tolkien's friendship with C. S. Lewis (see p. 36) was more than literary. "Tollers" joined "Jack" on at least one of the latter's famous days-long walking tours. On a number of occasions the two swam together in a large pond in front of The Kilns, Lewis's home from 1930. The two Oxford dons would paddle out to the pond's middle in a small boat, tie it to a snag, and dive from it into the water.

## **Escape or truth?**

Tolkien always bristled at the charge that his writings were escapist musings bearing no relationship to real life or scientific reason. Fantasy writing, he said, "does not destroy or even insult Reason. ... On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy

would languish until they were cured."

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## J.R.R. Tolkien: From the Editor - He Gave Us Back Myth and with it, Truth

Chris Armstrong

By the 1960s, "miracle" had been co-opted to sell mayonnaise, "spirit" came from bottles or pep bands, and "Passion" referred only to the national obsession with sex. Into this materialistic, secularized decade came a wondrous visitor: J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (see p. 42).

This fantasy trilogy opened the world of myth and mystery to a generation disenchanted with the soulless corporate culture around them. The tale came from a man with a profoundly Christian imagination. Though many readers didn't (and don't) notice this fact, Tolkien has awakened at least some to the gospel. As one respondent to our recent Tolkien web poll put it:

"I read the Hobbit and the Trilogy many times as a young teen and into my twenties. I was not born again at that time, and in fact struggled through some awful rebellion and darkness. But the stories developed in me a deep sense of the unseen reality of forces I did not understand, and a commitment to not let evil win out. ... Tolkien's beautiful models of lordship, devotion, sacrifice, commitment, and the quest for truth and honor were new to me, but spoke to something inside me that responded naturally. God is full of Wonder and the Bible is replete with awesome and fantastical happenings. My mind and heart can receive and lovingly accept this 'magic' because of carefully crafted fantasy literature from faithful Christian authors like Tolkien."

### Truth in hobbit's clothing

As I've learned more about this fascinating man, I've become convinced that he would be excited—but not altogether surprised—by that reader's response. He, too, felt God was "full of Wonder," and he treasured the Mysteries of the faith (see p. 23). A lover of trees and mountains, he read God's handiwork in nature. A proud Englishman, he saw the Creator's common grace at work in the courage of his countrymen (see p. 38). A crafter of myth, he found in all such stories, as he famously remarked in his lecture "On Fairy Stories," echoes of that greatest Story of all—the gospel itself. Like the best mythical tales, the gospel tells of a "eucatastrophe"—a seeming disaster with a joyous ending:

"The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has preeminently the 'inner consistency of reality.' There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath."

I've enjoyed getting to know Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, "the man behind the myth." I hope that you will enjoy doing the same. Maybe you will even, after reading this issue, go back to his stories and find in them new vistas on the True Myth of the gospel. I think this would please the remarkable Oxford don. After all, he believed, as he told his student W. H. Auden, that the characters he created could embody

"in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life."

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## Meeting Professor Tolkien

An American professor spent a summer with Tolkien. He remembers the man, his faith, and his writings.

Clyde S. Kilby

I first met J. R. R. Tolkien late on the afternoon of September 1, 1964. His fame was then rapidly on the rise and he had been forced to escape his public whenever he could. Visitors were more or less constantly at his door and his telephone busy. Phone callers from the United States sometimes forgot the time differential and would get him out of bed at two or three o'clock in the morning. He was paying the price of sudden emergence from the relative obscurity of a professional scholar to the glare of publicity accorded to any internationally known writer.

### Close encounter

With great hopes and some fears I walked to 76 Sanfield Road, opened the gate, nervously approached his door and rang the bell. I waited what seemed to me a very long time and was on the point of a reluctant departure when the door opened and there stood the man himself. Tolkien matter-of-factly invited me inside. ) We went into his downstairs office, remodeled from a garage. Possessing no automobile, he was then using taxis for errands to Oxford, two miles away, and elsewhere. This little office was pretty well filled up with a desk, a couple of chairs, and bookcases along the walls.

After his sober greeting at the door, I found him immediately friendly as we sat down. Tolkien was a most genial man with a steady twinkle in his eyes and a great curiosity the sort of person one instinctively likes.

I briefly explained who I was and told him that, like thousands of others, I had come to love his great story and regard it as something of a classic. He laughed at the idea of being a classical author while still alive, but I think he was pleased. He then became a bit apologetic and explained that people sometimes regarded him as a man living in a dream world. This was wholly untrue, he insisted, and described himself as a busy philologist and an ordinary citizen interested in everyday things like anybody else.

He told me, surprisingly, that he and his good friend C. S. Lewis had long before agreed to do narratives dealing with space and time. Lewis wrote *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra* and thus fulfilled his part of the plan to write on space, but Tolkien said he had never embarked on a story about time.

### Second impressions

To my surprise, at the end of our brief visit, Tolkien warmly invited me back for the morning of September 4, the day before I was to fly home to the U.S. At that time Mrs. Tolkien greeted me at the door and showed me upstairs to her husband's main office, a room crowded with a large desk, a rotating bookcase, wall bookcases, and a cot. I was received like a longtime friend.

While he talked he stood up and walked about or else sat on his cot. Like C. S. Lewis, when I visited him some years earlier, Tolkien continually fiddled with his pipe but actually smoked little. As his talk grew in enthusiasm, he would sometimes come very close to me and put his face almost against mine, as though to make sure the point of some remark was completely understood. One had the feeling that he had thought considerably about whatever opinion he was expressing and simply wanted to state it accurately.

## **A deep-rooted faith**

I do not recall a single visit I made to Tolkien's home in which the conversation did not at some point fall easily into a discussion of religion, or rather Christianity. He told me that he had many times been given a story as an answer to prayer. Mrs. Tolkien joined him in remarking that one of their children had been cured, as they firmly believed, of a heart ailment, through prayer. He commonly referred to Christ as "our Lord" and was much upset when he heard others address God as though He were the Lord Mayor.

Tolkien did indeed have a special reverence for the Virgin Mary. One of his observations was that she must have jealously guarded her pregnancy since had it been discovered Mary would either have been stoned as an adulteress or, if she had tried to explain, stoned for blasphemy.

He was moved by the degradation of the birth of Christ in a stable with its filth and manure and saw it as a symbol of the real nature of holy things in a fallen world. He spoke of his special regard for the Book of Luke because that writer included so much about women.

He believed that creativity itself is a gift of God. After years of teaching aesthetics, I cannot but conclude that the whole of that difficult subject is comprehended in a single line from Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories": **"we make still by the law in which we're made."**

## **The Secret Fire of Middle-earth**

Responding to a letter from Father Robert Murray suggesting Tolkien's story impressed him as entirely about grace, Tolkien wrote: "I know exactly what you mean by the order of grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. ***The Lord of the Rings*** is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first but consciously in the revision. I have cut out practically all references to anything like 'religion,' to cults and practices in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. However that is very clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. I should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up since I was eight in a faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know ) "

Professor Tolkien talked to me at some length about the use of the word "holy" in ***The Silmarillion***. Very specifically he told me that the "Secret Fire sent to burn at the heart of the World" in the beginning was the Holy Spirit.

He described his problem in depicting the fall of mankind near the beginning of the story. "How far we have fallen!" he exclaimed so far, he felt, that it would seem impossible even to find an adequate prototype or to imagine the contrast between Eden and the disaster which followed.

***Clyde S. Kilby was a Wheaton College (IL) professor who, in 1965, established at that college a center for the study of Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, George MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield. Later named after a benefactor, the Marion E. Wade Center ([wheaton.edu/learnres/wade/](http://wheaton.edu/learnres/wade/)) houses a major collection of the books, papers, photographs, and mementos of these writers, including such items as Lewis's family wardrobe and Tolkien's desk.***

***Kilby's first visit to Tolkien took place in Fall 1964. After returning to the U.S., Kilby wrote to Tolkien, offering to come to Oxford to help him put into publishable form the many scattered manuscripts treating the early history of Middle-earth.***

***Tolkien gratefully accepted Kilby's offer, and Kilby spent the summer of 1966 in Tolkien's***

**company. In the end, the publishing of Middle-earth's early history would await the labors of Tolkien's son, Christopher (The Silmarillion was published in 1977, four years after Tolkien's death). But Kilby gained rare insights into Tolkien's character, which he gathered and published in the book from which these excerpts are quoted with permission: Tolkien and the Silmarillion. (Harold Shaw, 1976; now copyright 2003, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois).**

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## Tolkien: Man Behind the Myth

At odds with his age, he created another.

Bradley J. Birzer

On January 3, 2003, J.R.R. Tolkien would have celebrated his eleventy-first birthday, a most momentous occasion, the same birthday on which Bilbo departed the Shire for Rivendell.

What would this venerable Oxford don have thought about his position in western culture at the age of 111, almost a half-century after he initially published his trilogy?

He would have seen reason enough for distress, chilling marks of the modern secular-scientific ideal. In the East: the killing fields, the gulags, and the holocaust camps. In the West: materialism, invasive corporate capitalism, and softly tyrannical bureaucracies. An anti-modern conservative, Tolkien often fell into despair, especially toward the end of his life, as he took account of the world situation.

"The spirit of wickedness in high places is now so powerful and so many-headed in its incarnations," Tolkien wrote in 1969, "that there seems nothing more to do than personally to refuse to worship any of the hydra's heads." The world, he thought, seemed little better than a new Tower of Babel, "all noise and confusion."

Yet, this most devout Christian would also see signs of immense hope, knowing well that St. Paul accorded it the second highest place among the virtues. Karol Wojtyla, pope, poet, playwright, and philosopher, had told Tolkien's beloved Roman Catholic Church, "Be not afraid," quoting Christ. Emboldened by this message, millions between 1989 and 1991 peaceably tore down the misanthropic Marxist-Leninist regimes.

On Tolkien's 111st birthday, he would also be especially surprised to note that for fifty years, his myth—a myth he felt he had recorded rather than invented—had dramatically affected and shaped people all over the world. In it, they found depth, inspiration, and guidance; not the mere entertainment or escapism his detractors claimed. In *The Lord of the Rings*, they found models of Christian virtue, true heroism, and timeless Truth.

Indeed, since the trilogy's initial publication in the mid-1950s, Tolkien's popularity has waxed less and waxed more, but it has never waned. Poll after poll at the turn of the century declared *The Lord of the Rings* the book of the twentieth century, with a readership, by one estimate, of over 150,000,000 persons worldwide. He would also see prominent academics at prestigious schools labeling him "The Author of the Century."

### Out of Africa

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on January 3, 1892. Attempting to control the fraud that seemed rampant in the diamond trade, a British bank had relocated his father, Arthur Tolkien, there.

"My parents both came from Birmingham in England. I happened to be born [in South Africa] by

accident. But it had this effect; my earliest memories are of Africa, but it was alien to me, and when I came home, I had for the countryside of England both ... native feeling and ... personal wonder." His own Middle-earth reflects what he called his "wonder and delight in the earth"—especially his life-long love of trees.

Two years later, his mother, Mabel, gave birth to Tolkien's only sibling, his brother Hilary. In 1895, Mabel returned to England with the two boys because of Ronald's health, and Arthur remained behind in South Africa, only to die a year later. Tolkien was particularly close to his mother after his father's death. She home-schooled the two boys during their first school-age years.

Even as a young boy, Tolkien loved languages. He invented his own, but his mother viewed them as a waste of his time. "As a child, I was always inventing languages. But that was naughty," Tolkien recalled wryly. "Poor boys must concentrate on getting scholarships. When I was supposed to be studying Latin and Greek, I studied Welsh and English. When I was supposed to be concentrating on English, I took up Finnish."

Through the door of language Tolkien entered the world of myth. "The seed [of the myth] is linguistic, of course. I'm a linguist and everything is linguistic—that's why I take such pains with names." A language, he believed, could not remain abstract. It must arise within a history and a culture—or, if lacking that, a mythology. Soon he would create for his own languages a most elaborate world indeed.

### **Son of persecution**

In 1900, much to the dismay of her family, Mabel was confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church. Her family strongly disapproved of her decision—though they tended to be only nominally Protestant—and they cut her off from all family money. Four years later, Mabel died of diabetes, which might have been treated with sufficient finances. In his adulthood, Tolkien remembered his mother as "a gifted lady of great beauty and wit, greatly stricken by God with grief and suffering, who died in youth (at 34) of a disease hastened by the persecution of her faith."

It would be impossible to stress too much the influence her death had on Tolkien. He was almost thirteen when she died, and she had served, effectively, as his only parental figure to this point. She had influenced him in everything, and Ronald would attempt to live up to her memory for the rest of his life. This was especially true in his religious devotions. "I witnessed (half-comprehending) the heroic sufferings and early death in extreme poverty of my mother who brought me into the Church," he reflected in 1963.

Mabel left Ronald and Hilary to the care of Father Francis Morgan, a Roman Catholic priest at John Henry Cardinal Newman's Birmingham Oratory. Half Welsh and half Anglo-Spanish, Morgan is described by Tolkien's biographer as "a very noisy man, loud and affectionate, embarrassing to small children at first but hugely lovable when they got to know him." Ronald struggled with Father Morgan at times, especially over dating his future wife Edith, but he considered the priest his true father. Indeed, Tolkien credited Father Morgan with solidifying the faith into which his mother brought him. "I first learned charity and forgiveness from him," Tolkien wrote in 1965.

At the Oratory, Tolkien absorbed the lingering, profound presence of Newman, the founder. Newman was a devout follower of St. Augustine, another significant influence on Tolkien. In his *Apologia*, Newman recorded having been deeply influenced by the Catholic doctrine of the warfare between the City of God and the powers of darkness. He believed this battle was about to intensify, as nineteenth-century liberalism was poised to usher in a secular, modern City of Man.

"A confederacy of evil, marshaling its hosts from all parts of the world, organizing itself, taking its measures, enclosing the Church of Christ as in a net, [was] preparing the way for a general

Apostasy from it," Newman feared in 1838. Tolkien saw his world devastated by the forces that Newman had believed imminent.

## **A wartime awakening**

After a highly successful college career at Exeter College, Oxford, Tolkien became an officer in the British military. He experienced first-hand the horrors of mechanized warfare in World War I. He was a member of the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, one of the most decorated regiments of the war, and also a unit that suffered devastating casualties.

It was in the trenches that Tolkien first conceived the Middle-earth mythology. His son Christopher later found some of the first lines of verse containing "Seven names of Gondolin" "scribbled on the back of a paper setting out the chain of responsibility in a battalion."

He began writing in earnest during his sick leave in 1916 and 1917, "in army huts, crowded, filled with the noise of gramophones." As Tolkien admitted in his famous academic essay "On Fairy Stories," "a real taste for fairy-stories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life [by] war."

In the filth of northern France, Tolkien longed for beauty. Frodo's passage through the Dead Marshes in *The Two Towers*, said the author, consciously echoed the "miles and miles of seething, tortured earth" he had seen on the war's battlegrounds:

"More loathsome far was the country that the crawling day now slowly unveiled to his shrinking eyes. ... Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light."

## **Doting father, Oxford "great"**

In 1916, Tolkien began his own family when he married Edith Bratt, a woman he loved passionately and who served as the inspiration for the beautiful elven maiden, Luthien. Together, the two had four children: John (1917-2003); Michael (1920-84); Christopher (b. 1924); and Priscilla (b. 1929). Priscilla recalled:

"He was always there, at lunch and at tea. We children were allowed to run in and out of his study at any time, so long as he wasn't actually teaching. He was very much involved with family life and, since we were often hard up, he had to write and work far into the night just to make extra money."

Priscilla's reminiscences are typical. Tolkien's son Michael noted that he always took "my childish comments and questions with complete seriousness." And Tolkien's grandson Simon remembered his grandfather as "incredibly nice," with a deep voice, a laugh that "seemed full and his eyes. ... bright and full of life."

Indeed, there were few children that Tolkien seemed not to love. The last time his friend George Sayer saw him, Tolkien was with a number of children "playing trains: 'I'm Thomas the Tank Engine. Puff. Puff. Puff.'"

His children also served as the first audience for significant parts of his mythology. *The Hobbit*, which Tolkien had read at least in part to his children, "got dragged against my original will," as he put

it, into the legendarium.

Tolkien had a full academic career, first at Leeds University from 1920-1925 and then at Oxford from 1925 until his retirement in 1959. He was regarded by Oxford students as one of the "greats" in both scholarship and personality. Few, though, thought well of him as a lecturer. So muffled and incoherent were many of his lectures, in fact, that one former student remembered him as having a "speech impediment." Tolkien himself was the first to admit his failings as a lecturer.

The exception to Tolkien's poor lecturing was his recitation of *Beowulf*, much of which he had memorized. When discussing that old English tale, he became a bard, and the lecture room a mead hall. One student wrote of these performances:

"He came in lightly and gracefully, I always remember that, his gown flowing, his fair hair shining, and he read *Beowulf* aloud. We did not know the language he was reading, yet the sound of Tolkien made sense of the unknown tongue, and the terrors and the dangers that he recounted—how I do not know—made our hair stand on end. He read like no one else I have ever heard. The lecture room was crowded—it was in the Examination Halls, and he was a young man then, for his position, long before *The Hobbit* or the Trilogy were to make him famous."

In the *Atlantic Monthly*, the poet W. H. Auden confided: "I do not remember a single word he said, but at a certain point he recited, and magnificently, a long passage of *Beowulf*. I was spellbound."

Yet, this was a man who also loved the Marx Brothers and boyish pranks. He once appeared at a formal party for Oxford dons dressed in "an Icelandic sheepskin hearthrug" and white face paint. At a lecture in the 1930s, Tolkien told his audience that leprechauns really existed—then, to prove it, pulled from the pocket of his old tweed coat a four-inch green shoe.

### From myth to Messiah

Tolkien published a number of critical articles during his academic career, including numerous translations of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English works as well as the essays "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936) and "On Fairy-Stories" (1939).

In the latter essay, Tolkien describes how the perilous realm of Faerie reveals truth and beauty beyond normal comprehension; the true and the beautiful lead one to the Good and the One. Indeed, Tolkien saw the gospel standing behind and patterning all fairy stories.

Tolkien began writing—he preferred to call it "recording"—his mythology in 1916. Even at his death, he had failed to complete it, and his son Christopher has spent much of his adult life editing and completing what his father could not in one lifetime. The two most famous of Tolkien's stories, *The Hobbit* (1938) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1956), are profound manifestations of the larger mythology, which the author referred to as his legendarium. Since his father's death, Christopher has completed *The Silmarillion* (1977), *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980), and the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996), each of which is indispensable to understanding the myth as a whole.

### A double-edged fame

By the mid-1960s, Tolkien had reached the status of a popular icon. In the first ten months after *The Lord of the Rings* appeared in paperback in the U.S. in 1965, stores sold over 250,000 copies (see p. 42).

The 1960s brought not only fame but cultural change, invading even the great bulwark of

traditionalism, the Roman Catholic Church. At one Vatican II-inspired Mass, Tolkien found the innovations too much for him. Disappointed by changes in the Mass's language and the informality of the ritual, he rose from his seat, made his way laboriously to the aisle, made three low bows and stomped out.

Much to the conservative Tolkien's chagrin, in the mid- to late 1960s the drug and political Left especially embraced his mythology. Afraid that such readers might create a sort of "new paganism" around his legendarium, Tolkien spent much of the last decade of his life clarifying its theological and philosophical positions in the work that became *The Silmarillion*.

The burden of the philosophical and theological intricacies of the mythology, his wife's deteriorating health in the mid-1960s resulting in her death in 1971, and his own natural aging proved too difficult for Tolkien, and he died before finishing *The Silmarillion*. Still, the accolades poured in. In 1972, Oxford awarded Tolkien an honorary doctorate and the Queen named him a "Commander of the Order," a rank just below knighthood.

On September 2, 1973, Tolkien left the City of Man and became a permanent resident of the City of God.

To the last, critics continued to describe his works as trivial and escapist. But Tolkien was content to rest his case in a higher court.

"The only just literary critic," he concluded, "is Christ, who admires more than does any man the gifts He Himself has bestowed."

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### "Most Married Man"

***After nearly losing her to another, Tolkien adored his beloved Edith.***

When Tolkien set out to create his mythological Elvish race, he drew inspiration from a muse dear to his heart. Edith Bratt (pictured here at age 19 when she first met Tolkien) shared the same grief—both had lost their mothers in their teens. The two met in a boarding home, promptly became fast friends, and fell in love.

#### Forest Romance

***The Return of the King tells of the human Aragorn and the Elven Arwen pledging their love for one another in the forest of Lothlorien (drawn here***

But when Tolkien's guardian Father Francis Morgan discovered the romance, he split up the couple, forbidding Tolkien to speak to Edith until he turned twenty-one. Tolkien agreed, and he endured the separation for nearly three years, during which Edith became engaged to another man. Tolkien later wrote that while the whole affair was painful and bitter, "nothing else would have hardened the will enough" to give their love such permanence. He wrote to Edith as soon as his twenty-first birthday arrived, and convinced her to break off the engagement. They married three years later in 1916, just before Tolkien left to fight in France.

Following his short stint in World War I, Tolkien returned to England to finish out his military duties and reunite with Edith. He showered his young wife with love and devotion, admiring "her long dark hair, fair face, starry eyes, and beautiful voice." His adoration would continue into his years at Oxford, where he refused customary rooms at Pembroke College in order to spend more time with his family. His friend C. S. Lewis, a confirmed bachelor until late in life, once complained that Tolkien was "the most married man he knew."

by Tolkien).  
The scene  
echoed in  
Tolkien's  
life: After  
the young  
Edith  
danced for  
him once in  
a woodland  
glade, he  
began  
calling her  
"Luthien"  
and himself  
"Beren."  
These were  
the names  
of another  
Elven-  
human  
couple in his  
legendarium.  
They adorn  
Edith and  
Ronald  
Tolkien's  
gravestones.

—Steven Gertz

### A Nigging Art

*Through a character named Niggle, Tolkien revealed his own creative process.*

*The three books of The Lord of the Rings contain over a half million words. Its manuscript, when Tolkien sold it to Marquette University in 1957, stood in a stack seven feet high. Before, around, and beyond his famous trilogy, Tolkien wove a vast imaginative world, recording its origin and history in a sprawling profusion of songs, tales, and legends. Yet his perfectionism kept him from finishing or publishing this "history of Middle-earth" in his lifetime. Even *The Silmarillion*, painstakingly edited and published years after Tolkien's death by his son Christopher, contains only a part of that myth.*

*What animates a man to create such an elaborate fictional world? Fittingly, the most revealing thing Tolkien wrote about his own creative process may come to us in the form of a story. Tolkien's friend Clyde Kilby explains:*

His problem as a writer he stated with great charm and meaning at the beginning of his story "Leaf by Niggle." That story begins, "There was once a little man called Niggle, who had a long journey to make." The journey was into death and the hereafter. Niggle describes himself as a painter, not a very successful one owing not only to interruptions which usurped his time but to a tendency toward plain laziness. Niggle's real trouble was that his reach exceeded his grasp. He had various paintings that he worked on and "most of them were too large and ambitious for his skill."

Actually he preferred to paint leaves more than trees. "He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dewdrops on its edges." Yet at the same time he longed to paint a whole tree. Indeed one painting had started with "a single leaf caught in the wind" but it grew, "sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to." For me it represents both a splendid picture of his perfectionism and the increasing vision of the mythology he was creatively to inhabit.

began to show up, including high mountains in the far distance. Niggle now turned away from his other paintings "or else he took them and tacked them on to the edges of his great picture." Might this not explain the Tom Bombadil episode and the Bombadil poems that did not quite manage to get into the main story? In due course Niggle's painting got so large he needed a ladder to reach its top. What a perfect insight into the whole creative process ... of a Thomas Wolfe, a Stephen Spender, or any creative mind overwhelmed by the magnitude of its subject.

The time eventually came when Niggle began to take a hard look at what was turning out to be the main activity of his life. He looked and looked and wished for someone who "would tell him what to think." He wondered if he were simply wasting time. He wondered if he should have dropped all other paintings for this single one. Was it really a painting, or was it just a chimera? Niggle concluded contradictory things about it. "Actually it seemed to him wholly unsatisfactory, and yet very lovely, the only really beautiful picture in the world." Not only do we have here the experience of many a writer or artist, but we have what seems a most faithful description of Tolkien's own creativity.

**—From Clyde S. Kilby, *Tolkien and The Silmarillion* (Harold Shaw, 1976).**

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## A Feeling for Language

Without philology, Middle-earth would never have existed. But what is philology?

Tom Shippey

Tolkien was for thirty-five years (1925-59) a professor of English. But that phrase did not mean then what it means now. In the first place the title "Professor" meant the holder of a Chair, a distinction achieved by few faculty members. More important, as Professor of English Language, Tolkien specialized neither in literary criticism nor in modern linguistics, but rather in comparative philology. This was the study of languages, especially ancient languages, and of the literatures written in those languages. Tolkien believed strongly that to study language without literature was ultimately sterile, to study literature without language was just amateurish.

### Romancing the words

Tolkien's major professional works demonstrate this belief. He edited the fourteenth-century romance (fictional adventure) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with his Leeds colleague E. V. Gordon in 1925. In its glossary, the editors not only gave the meaning of every word, but also the origin of each one, in Old English, Old French, or (frequently) Old Norse. The mixed nature of the medieval poet's dialect made a point about literary history. It also showed that folk-belief in such fabled creatures as "woses" or "ettins" had coexisted with a high level of culture and a deep Christian piety.

A few years later, in 1929, Tolkien published a detailed study of some features of the grammar of two thirteenth-century works, a rule for female anchorites (solitary monastics) called the *Ancrene Wisse* and a treatise on *Hali Meithhad*, or "Holy Virginity." He proved that the grammar of each was regular in such detail that it must have been formally taught. This showed, in turn, that in at least one far-Western shire English had continued to be used as a literary language even during centuries of French domination.

### Monsters and morality

Tolkien's most influential professional piece was, however, his 1936 lecture to the British Academy on "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics." This argued, in brief, that the Old English poem was not a flawed historical epic, as had been generally believed by "the critics," but a successful work of fantasy. The poet had written about monsters not out of incompetence, but because this expressed something about the nature of humanity that could be expressed in no other way.

The parallel between *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* is evident, and made more so by similarly uncomprehending reactions of "the critics." But philology animates Tolkien's fiction on every level.

To give only one example, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for which Tolkien worked as a young man, provides two contradictory meanings for the word "wraith," while reporting its origin as "obscure." Tolkien solved the contradiction through his own image of the living-dead Ringwraiths, and clearly saw the origin of the word in the verb "to writhe," from which "wraith" develops by regular vowel-progressions. "Wraiths" are creatures, then, who have been "writhen," or "bent," out of their natural and original shape—for as Elrond says, "nothing is evil in the beginning."

For Tolkien, philology provided not only the Shire and the ents and orcs and woses of ancient stories, but

also a moral and philosophical framework of conviction.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## The Christian Humanists

Tolkien joined these authors in countering the decadence of a dark century.

Joseph Pearce

No author works alone—even an author who creates a new world out of his own imagination. Born in 1892, J. R. R. Tolkien came of age in a dark, secular time. He responded in terms common to a group of English Christian writers—mostly Catholics and Anglo-Catholics—who upheld older, truer values against the dehumanizing trends of rationalist science and secular philosophy.

G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, and others all lit bold flames against the century's darkness. Tolkien's torch joined theirs as he turned to classical and Norse mythology and the timeless teachings of the church to forge a new "Christian myth."

Each of these "Christian humanists," including Tolkien, wrestled against the legacy of two men: Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde.

Friedrich Nietzsche died, after twelve years of insanity, in the opening months of the new century. He was the most outspoken philosophical foe of Christianity in the late nineteenth century, and his ideas flourished in the twentieth. Convinced that Christianity was bankrupt, he proclaimed Schopenhauer's "will to power" and emphasized that only the strong ought to survive.

He maintained that Christian charity served only to perpetuate the survival of the weak and counterposed the idea of the "superman" (the *Übermensch*) who would overcome human weakness and vanquish the meek. In Tolkien's mythical world, Nietzsche's shadow emerges in the "will to power" of the Enemy, most specifically in the designs of Sauron and Saruman but also in the ambitions of Boromir and Gollum.

Oscar Wilde died on November 30, 1900. The inheritor of the decadent romanticism of Byron and Baudelaire, he flouted traditional morality and was sentenced to two years in prison as a result of his scandalous homosexual affair with Lord Alfred Douglas.

Nietzsche's pride found deadly "fruition" in the Nazi death-camps and in the rise of the abortion clinics. Wilde's prurience flourished in the sexual "liberation" of the 1960s and beyond. Nietzsche died impenitent and insane; Wilde was received into the Catholic Church on his deathbed.

Against the influence of thinkers like these, the Christian humanists reacted.

G. K. Chesterton, the most important figure in the Christian literary revival in the early years of the century, fell under the spell of Wilde and the Decadents as a young man at London's Slade School of Art during the early 1890s. But he quickly recoiled in horror from the moral implications of their position.

Much of his early work, particularly his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, was a faith-founded attempt to clear the Wildean fog of the 1890s. Chesterton also crossed swords with the ghost of Nietzsche, refuting the neo-Nietzschean ideas of George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. "Nietzsche's Superman is cold and friendless," Chesterton wrote in *Heretics*. "And when Nietzsche says, 'A New commandment I give to you, *be hard*,' he is really saying, 'A new commandment I give to you, *be dead*.' Sensibility is the definition of life." Chesterton's words, written more than ten years before the Bolshevik

Revolution and almost thirty years before Hitler's rise to power, resonate with authenticated prophecy.

Those literary figures who have expressed a specific and profound debt to Chesterton as an influence on their conversions include C. S. Lewis, Ronald Knox, Dorothy L. Sayers and Alfred Noyes. Thus, without Chesterton, the world might never have seen the later Christian poetry of Noyes, the subtle satire of Knox, the masterful translation and commentary on Dante by Sayers, and the blossoming of Lewis's many talents.

If Chesterton, along with his friend Hilaire Belloc, were the giant figures of the Christian literary revival during the first twenty years of the century, the Christian literary catalyst in the next twenty years was undoubtedly T. S. Eliot.

Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, is probably the most important poem of the twentieth century. Although misunderstood and misinterpreted by modernist and postmodernist critics, *The Waste Land* is Christian in its deepest layers of meaning. Eliot's reaction to Decadence is rooted in the same sense of disgust as Chesterton's, but whereas Chesterton alluded to the "diabolism" of Decadence, Eliot portrayed it in all its lurid, seedy detail.

Eliot's next major poem, "The Hollow Men" (1925), reiterates *The Waste Land*'s depiction of modernity as vacuous and sterile. Following his open profession of Christianity in 1928, Eliot's poems become more overtly religious, more didactic and "preachy," and perhaps less accomplished as poetry.

Eliot strongly influenced the writers of his generation, including the young novelist Evelyn Waugh, who rose to prominence following the 1928 publication of his first novel, *Decline and Fall*. Two years later Waugh was received into the Catholic Church, and thereafter, his darkly sardonic and satirical novels could be described as prose reworkings of *The Waste Land*'s fragmented imagery. Waugh's novel *A Handful of Dust* even took its title from a line in *The Waste Land*. Its plot could be seen as a tangential commentary on the disgust at Decadence Eliot had expressed in his great poem.

Waugh's 1945 masterpiece, *Brideshead Revisited*, is perhaps (setting aside *The Lord of the Rings*) the finest novel of the twentieth century. Though still akin to Eliot's "waste land" theme, its principal source of inspiration was a line from one of Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories about how the grace of God pulls back wayward sinners with "a twitch upon the thread." In this wonderful novel, Waugh wanders through the wayward world of Wildean debauchery, depicts its allure and futility with Eliotic precision, and finally emerges into the cheering charity and clarity of Chestertonian conversion. This one book thus embodies the full range of influences (negative and positive) that had animated British Christian authors in the 40 years previous.

If Chesterton and Belloc dominated the first twenty years of the twentieth century, and Eliot and Waugh the next twenty years, the century's middle years belong to C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Lewis's manifold talents shine in a variety of writings—from the peripatetic *Pilgrim's Regress* and *The Great Divorce*, to space travel and children's stories, to works of straightforward Christian apologetics. Tolkien, for the most part, channeled his own considerable gifts in one direction only.

His "sub-creation," Middle-earth, was the labor of a lifetime, as Tolkien carved the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* out of the rich substrate of *The Silmarillion*. In his mythical epic we see Sauron's "will to power" countered by the hobbits' humility, and we see the poison of the Dark Lord's decadence healed by the purity of relationships (for example, Aragorn and Arwen) in which eros is bridled by the charity of chastity.

Tolkien's mythical masterpiece stands as a pinnacle of achievement on the mountain range of the Christian humanists' writings. It may justly be classed with the most important poem, *The Waste Land*, and the

finest novel, ***Brideshead Revisited***, of the twentieth century. All three are faithful, profound responses to a dark time.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## One Truth, Many Tales

How did Tolkien's approach to writing for a secularizing world compare with those of his Christian contemporaries?

David Mills

Tolkien and his Christian literary peers wrote for people who did not know the faith, or did not like it, or did not think it important—"a public which knows no History, no Classics, no Theology, and has almost forgotten its Bible," Dorothy L. Sayers complained.

"At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily," said Flannery O'Connor.

T. S. Eliot described the writers (and readers) of the day as "those who have never heard the Christian Faith spoken of as anything but an anachronism."

This was the reader to whom writers like Tolkien, Sayers, Eliot, O'Connor, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene wrote. Yet Tolkien's books were less obviously Christian than theirs. He did see his Lord of the Rings as a "fundamentally religious and Catholic work." He even expressed some frustration that readers did not see this. But in writing Christian truth to a swiftly secularizing modern world, Tolkien took a different tack.

### Where's the faith?

First, he only wrote stories. He wrote nothing directly Christian or apologetic. C. S. Lewis wrote apologetics, literary criticism, theological studies, allegories like *The Great Divorce*, and whatever *The Screwtape Letters* is. Williams wrote apologetics, biographies, histories, and theology. Sayers wrote apologetic essays like "Creed or Chaos?" and theological works like *The Mind of the Maker*. Waugh, Eliot, O'Connor, and Walker Percy all wrote essays on the faith and reviewed religious books for secular magazines.

These writers used their literary gifts to present the old arguments in a new way. Tolkien did not do this at all. Besides his stories, he wrote a few academic papers on early English literature and just one essay, "On Fairy-Stories," giving his own religious ideas in any explicit form.

Second, he did not give his stories an overt religious meaning. Almost all his peers wrote stories whose Christian meaning was fairly obvious. In Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*, Aslan, an obvious Christ-figure, tells the children that they were brought from earth to Narnia so "that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there." At the end of Sayers's play *The Zeal of Thy House*, the archangel Michael argues theology with the main character. Eliot wrote poems with titles like "Ash Wednesday" and reflected on prayer in his poetry and his plays. In O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, a young man tries to establish the "Church of Christ without Christ" and *The Violent Bear It Away* is the story of a boy called to be a prophet.

### Stories, plain and simple

Tolkien did not do this at all. Even his story "Leaf by Niggle," which takes the painter Niggle from life

through Purgatory to Heaven, does so without making it obvious in any way. Tolkien wrote the story he felt he had been given to write, and wrote it for those who cared to read him (he didn't expect many would).

He had a reason. Whereas his friend Lewis thought that "the author as author" should only write what "the author as man, citizen, or Christian" approved, Tolkien thought that writing stories was good in itself. Writing them was the job God had given him.

The stories were stories, he insisted over and over. They were not disguised sermons, or even stories with sermons hidden inside them. *The Lord of the Rings* "is not 'about' anything but itself," he wrote his American publisher. It "was written to amuse (in the highest sense): to be readable. There is no 'allegory,' moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all," he told a reviewer. Elsewhere he wrote, "I neither preach nor teach."

So what was Tolkien trying to do in *The Lord of the Rings*? How could such a book say anything about Christianity to readers who did not know the faith, did not like it, or did not think it important?

### **Different world, same order**

It is a Christian story because it reveals the world Christians know exists, but others do not. Even with creatures like hobbits and ents and orcs, the world of *The Lord of the Rings* shares the same moral and spiritual order as ours, the order Christians know through revelation.

A good story is a "sub-creation," as Tolkien called it, which has truly and accurately to reflect the creation. Writers put the moral and spiritual rules of the "primary world," the world God created, into the "secondary world" they create.

One of his objects in writing, he said, was "the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home.'"

This Tolkien did in *The Lord of the Rings*. He wrote a story that reflected the world that Christians knew existed without giving obvious hints. Take his treatment of Providence, for example.

God is not mentioned at all in the book. All that the characters and the readers know is that some power, unnamed and unknown, is guiding events, but they do not know if the story will end well or badly.

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo had spared the life of the miserable, treacherous creature Gollum even when Gollum threatened his. Near the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, the frightened Frodo says that it is a pity Bilbo did not kill him. Gandalf exclaims, "It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need" and explains at some length how these are to work.

Throughout the story, several characters show Gollum mercy and pity, even when they could have felt justified in killing him. In the end, of course, Gollum does what only Gollum could have done, and in spite of himself destroys the Ring and saves the world.

That ending gave the story what Tolkien called "eucatastrophe," the "consolation of the happy ending" that the reader does not expect. This, he said, "denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world."

That is a simple outline of a complex and subtle story. In the unfamiliar secondary world of Middle-earth,

Tolkien showed how Providence works out its ends in the primary world we live in.

Tolkien and his peers wrote for people who did not know the Christian faith and did not much care to know it. They had to find ways to make people hear a story they did not want to hear.

### **Divine variety**

Tolkien wrote a story that put the Christian story in "unfamiliar embodiments"—in the hobbits and elves and men and nazgul of Middle-earth. What did his peers do? Almost everything else.

Most did not try to create another world. The writer, O'Connor said, "is entirely free to observe. He feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe. He feels perfectly free to look at the one we already have and to show exactly what he sees."

O'Connor herself tried to shock her readers by making the conflict between God and the world so clear and even upsetting that they saw the Christian story afresh. In her most famous story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," a serial killer called the Misfit talks with a grandmother about God while his gang takes her family into the woods and kills them.

Others tried to retrieve the older Christian forms or texts in the hope they might win a hearing by being so unusual. Both Williams and Sayers wrote modern versions of medieval mystery plays, and Sayers went on (under Williams's influence) to translate Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

### **A brazen grace**

Sayers also tried to re-present the gospel story in modern form in her long play *The Man Born to Be King*, first performed on the BBC. Among other innovations, she had the apostles speak in working class accents to make listeners remember that they were normal working men. (And some listeners were scandalized, too.)

Some of the writers tried to weaken the world's appeal by making fun of the worldly alternatives. In *The Loved One*, set mostly in a Los Angeles mortuary, Waugh satirized a secular world that could deal with death only by dressing it up. In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy proved that moderns are indeed lost through the methods of therapeutic manuals and television shows.

The more traditional novelists among Tolkien's peers wrote stories that let the reader know the secret, that showed grace at work in recognizable situations and people. In Greene's *The End of the Affair*, a man thinks his mistress had left him for another man, only to learn that she had left him for God. In his *The Power and the Glory*, an alcoholic priest perseveres in serving God and is used by him despite all his sins.

In Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, the narrator has ruined his life and yet finds at the very end of the book that the Lord is truly with him. In the book, he tells the story of God working upon a family with "the unseen hook and invisible line" and moving them to him with "the twitch upon the thread."

### **Entertaining mercy unawares**

In contrast, Tolkien did none of these. He gave the reader no obvious signs that his story was a Christian story. His was a more radical and riskier work.

The reader knows from their stories that Lewis and Williams and Sayers and the rest were all Christians, without reading a word about them. Many readers do not know that Tolkien was a Christian.

But it may well be that Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings*** has taught the most people to see the world in a Christian way, even when they did not know they were being taught. They learned the Story through a story that seemed to have nothing to do with God at all. Tolkien propagated the faith among people who had bloodhound-keen noses for propaganda.

Most modern people think as Frodo did when he first learns about the Ring and wishes his uncle had killed the vicious Gollum. They do not believe in mercy. But those who, through reading ***The Lord of the Rings***, come to see how mercy might work for good, will find it easier to love Mercy when they meet him.

***David Mills is a senior editor of Touchstone magazine.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Sacramental Imagination

Catholicism anchored Tolkien's life and suffused his writings.

Thomas Howard

Tolkien claimed that all of his work was massively influenced—nay determined—by his Catholicism. Questions crowd in straightaway:

"I've read the trilogy and *The Silmarillion* ten times, and I never saw anything Catholic in it." Or, "How can he say that? The characters have to get along in their quest without a bit of 'divine' help."

True, the hobbits and the men of Aragorn's ilk don't seem to have any "god" to invoke, though there are some talisman-like cries for help from above—most notably "O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!" But unless one has read *The Silmarillion*, one has only the sketchiest notions of the immense theological backdrop to the trilogy's "fragment" (see p. 28).

### Magnetic north

The saga of The Ring most certainly draws upon Norse and Icelandic saga for its ethos and not, *apparently*, on Catholic categories. Tolkien, like his friend Lewis, was intoxicated by "northernness." When they came upon the Nordic tales, each found himself pierced with the dart of *sehnsucht*.

This is a sweet desire; an insupportable nostalgia for—for what? It is an inconsolable yearning that finds itself not only not satisfied, but intensified, by any small taste of beauty available to us mortals. Dante's Beatrice, the Alps at sunset, T. S. Eliot's "moment in the draughty church at smokefall"—such glimpses serve only to drive the knife deeper into the wound.

*Midgard*, or "middle earth," was the name given to our world in Nordic saga. And the world of which Tolkien writes *is* our world, only the events occur in a "time" not locatable in our calendars. The Age of Men is about to come forth in Tolkien's trilogy. Titanic events mark the waning of the elder world. The elves and their kind are "passing, passing," throughout the whole drama, and finally disappear through a gray screen of rain just before the final scene, when we return to the meat-and-potatoes world of Mr. Samwise Gamgee, his wife Rosie, and their baby Elanor.

### Buying the package

All of this seems distant from Catholicism, unless we wish to suppose Tolkien's religion was a mere fancy that found a lodging in the immense mystery of the Church of Rome. Certainly many people suppose that conversion to Catholicism entails a large dollop of romanticism.

But first, Tolkien never converted to Catholicism: he was born into it. And second, no convert *to* Catholicism finds anything like the Pre-Raphaelite magic that he might, in his non-Catholic days, have fancied lay in the region across the Tiber River.

Tolkien's Catholicism was, if anything, at a polar extreme from the romantic or the nostalgic. It was utterly and un sentimentally matter-of-fact. We would never have found Tolkien rhapsodizing about The Faith. He got himself to Mass regularly, and he said his prayers, and he counted on the Sacraments and

banked on the Magisterium of the Church as the authoritative teacher of Sacred Scripture—and that was that.

Tolkien's Catholicism was as intractable and given as the stones of the old buildings at Merton College. Odd as it may seem, there isn't much to say about Tolkien's faith unless one wants to embark on a log of Catholic dogma. He simply bought the whole package. And that is archetypically "Catholic." His "faith" was of one, seamless fabric with his body, his teaching, his daily routine, his writing, and his family.

So. What about this flinty Catholicism of Tolkien's and its effect on his work?

First, Catholics are profoundly narrative. Where Protestants gravitate towards the immense abstractions of sovereignty, election, depravity, atonement, and grace, Catholics characteristically come to rest on events: Creation; Annunciation; Gestation; Parturition; the Agony in the Garden; the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. The Mass is an enactment, as opposed to the Protestant service, with its center of gravity in the sermon.

### **Stoups, relics, and lembas**

Second, Catholicism is sacramentalist. The point where the Divine touches our humanity is a physical one. Creation; pelts for Adam and Eve; the Ark; the Tabernacle; the Womb of the Virgin; the flesh of the Incarnate One; splinters, nails, whips, and torn flesh. The entire Gospel is enacted—physically, in the Catholic liturgy. Hence the ease with which the Catholic mind reaches for narrative. Tolkien believed he could not have written the saga if he had not been a Catholic. He trusted in his imagination in a way sadly rare among Protestants.

Tolkien's saga is also sprinkled with "sacramentals": the lembas, the athelas (a healing plant), mithril (finely woven magical armor), Bilbo's sword "Sting": these aren't magic, much less omnipotent. But they do have **virtu**—spiritual character, excellence. Tolkien was used to holy water stoups, crucifixes, relics, the Rosary, and so forth, which stand on the cusp between the seen and the Unseen.

Third, good and evil in Middle-earth are indistinguishable from Christian notions of good and evil in our own story. To be sure, we do not find Gollum about today, but what does a soul en route to damnation **look like**? Whereas good and evil are usually veiled in our world (is that man a lecher or a good preacher?), in the stark air of myth, the murk is blown away and we get to **see**. Goodness, too, takes a shape (Tom Bombadil, Treebeard, Galadriel, Aragorn); and the matter need not be burdened with a homily.

Ultimately, the hobbits and the rest must struggle on in **faith**—substance of things hoped for, evidence of things not seen. But Tolkien, being a Catholic, would never smuggle in a paragraph to that effect. We must find it **in** the narrative, as Catholics do in the whole treasury of Catholicism.

***Thomas Howard is Chairman (ret.) of the Department of English at St. John's Seminary, Boston.***

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## The Life and Times of J.R.R. Tolkien: Christian History Timeline

### Life Events

- 1892** Born on January 3 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, where his father worked for Lloyd's Bank
- 1896** Death of father, Arthur Tolkien. Family moves near Sarehole Mill, outside Birmingham
- 1900** Enters King Edward VI School, Birmingham
- 1904** Death of mother, Mabel Tolkien
- 1908** Meets Edith Bratt
- 1909** Father Francis Morgan discovers Tolkien's romance with Edith
- 1911** Enters Exeter College, Oxford to read Classics
- 1915** Obtains First Class in English Language and Literature. Commissioned in the Lancashire Fusiliers
- 1916** Marries Edith Bratt. Serves from July to November in the Battle of the Somme and returns to England suffering from "trench fever"
- 1917** Birth of son John
- 1920** Appointed Reader in English literature at Leeds University. Birth of son Michael
- 1924** Birth of son Christopher
- 1925** Elected to the Chair of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University
- 1926** Friendship with C. S. Lewis begins
- 1929** Birth of daughter Priscilla
- 1945** Takes up Chair of English Language and Literature at Oxford University. Inklings friend Charles Williams dies
- 1959** Retires from his work at Oxford
- 1963** C. S. Lewis dies
- 1968** Moves to Bournemouth

**1971** Death of Edith Tolkien. Returns to Oxford

**1973** Dies on September 2

### **Literary Events**

**1917** Begins writing tales that later become *The Silmarillion*

**1918** Takes up work with the new *Oxford English Dictionary*

**1925** Publishes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

**1929** Publishes *Ancrene Wisse: The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe*. Publishes his treatise on *Hali Meithhad*, or "Holy Virginity"

**1930** Begins to write *The Hobbit*

**1936** Delivers the lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" to British Academy

**1937** Publishes *The Hobbit*. Begins a sequel that becomes *The Lord of the Rings*

**1939** Delivers the lecture "On Fairy-Stories"

**1949** Publishes *Farmer Giles of Ham*

**1954** Publishes first two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*

**1955** Publishes final volume of *The Lord of the Rings*

**1962** Publishes *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, and *Other Verses from the Red Book*

**1964** Publishes *Tree and Leaf*

**1965** Increasing popularity on American college campuses after Ace issues an unauthorized paperback of *The Lord of the Rings*

**1967** Publishes *Smith of Wootton Major*

**1976** *The Father Christmas Letters* published

**1977** *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, published

**1980** *Unfinished Tales*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, published

### **World Events**

**1894** Oscar Wilde imprisoned for homosexuality

**1899** Boers initiate war with Britain in South Africa

- 1908** G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* published
- 1912** Titanic sinks
- 1914** World War I breaks out
- 1918** Allies defeat Germany and sign armistice
- 1922** T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* published
- 1929** Wall street plunges
- 1932** Aldous Huxley's Brave New World published
- 1933** Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
- 1936** American runner Jesse Owens upstages Nazis at the Olympic Games
- 1939** Britain declares war on Germany
- 1945** World War II ends with Japan's surrender
- 1948** State of Israel declared
- 1953** Elizabeth II crowned queen of Great Britain
- 1962** America and Russia step back from nuclear war
- 1964** Beatles frenzy sweeps America
- 1973** America admits defeat in Vietnam

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 78: J.R.R. Tolkien & Lord of the Rings

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## Good & Evil in Middle-earth

The characters are mythic, but the epic sweeps across a Christian moral landscape.

Ralph C. Wood

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a profoundly Christian book. Like the anonymous seventh-century author of *Beowulf* whose work he had mastered, Tolkien infuses his pre-Christian epic fantasy with Christian convictions and concerns.

He also confronts evils altogether as great as the horrors of our own time. Rather than fleeing oppressive evil, Tolkien enables his readers to escape into the freeing reality of Good.

The inhabitants of Middle-earth do not know God as triune, but they do know him as the One. In *The Silmarillion*, he is called Ilúvatar, the All-Father, and he has imbued the entire cosmos with his Spirit. There is nothing that does not bear Ilúvatar's creative imprint.

Just as in Genesis, Yahweh creates in concert with his heavenly court ("Let **us** make man in **our** image"), so does Ilúvatar employ his 15 valar in making the music of the cosmos. The valar are not polytheistic divinities but subordinate beings that Ilúvatar has created with the Flame Imperishable of his own Spirit.

### The angels of Middle-earth

As patrons over the various creative qualities and natural powers resident in the cosmos, the valar are pure spirits, having no natural bodily existence and thus no mortal limits. Yet they assume shape and gender, both masculine and feminine, in order that the Children of Ilúvatar might know and love them.

Beneath the valar are somewhat less powerful beings called the maiar. Lower still are the elves and perhaps the ents, then men and hobbits, and finally dwarves.

Yet this descending chain of being is neither static nor imprisoning: it is wondrously free and life-giving. Within every rank, there is immense room for movement—either up or down, toward life or toward death, toward good or toward evil. The lower creatures are meant to serve the higher, yet without being demeaned or diminished. So are the higher beings meant to care for the lower, yet without condescension or contempt. All the creatures of Ilúvatar are meant to dwell in lasting regard for each other. Everywhere in Tolkien's work, authentic existence is always communal. Fellowship and friendship, companionship and mutuality, lie at the heart of Tolkien's Christian vision.

Disobedience and rebellion—whether among valar or hobbits—are the main motives for sin in Tolkien's world. These evils are prompted by pride, the deadliest of the sins. And they usually entail a denial of the interdependence that the All-Father has made intrinsic to his universe.

One of the valar, named Melkor, like Lucifer in biblical tradition, comes to relish his solitude and to despise everything that he can not bring under his control. He refuses all communal reliance, even upon Ilúvatar. Resentful that Ilúvatar alone possesses the Light of creative action, Melkor seeks to make creatures that will serve only himself.

### Wraiths, trolls, and orcs

Melkor is most like Satan in forging for himself a crown of iron and according to himself a grandiose title, "King of the World."

Yet because Melkor rejects Ilúvatar's goodness, his iniquity has no real substance, no proper being. Though frighteningly actual, the demonic always remains shadowy and derivative; in the deepest sense, it is *unreal*.

Repeatedly Tolkien demonstrates that sin is a distortion and perversion of the Good. As their name indicates, the Ringwraiths—the nine men who have come totally under Sauron's sway—are ghostly figures who have been hideously twisted by their hatred.

Yet because evil has only a parasitic existence, it can never completely destroy or undo—though it can certainly mar and tarnish—the Good. The demonic Melkor is unable to create any original or free creatures. He can manufacture only parodies and counterfeits. In addition to the carnivorous trolls that he breeds in scorn for the tree-herding ents, he also makes the brutal orcs in mockery of the graceful elves.

Melkor also corrupts Sauron, one of the maiar. He is called the Lord of the Rings because he has forged the gemstone Rings of Power: nine for men and seven for dwarves. Far from being evil, these rings enable their owners to accomplish considerable good.

Treacherously, however, Sauron also forms the plain gold band of the Ruling Ring in order to control all the other rings. Into it he builds much of his own guile, and with it he purposes to dominate Middle-earth.

### **That "Precious" power**

The power of the Ruling Ring is so fatally tempting that it usually overwhelms the wills of those who possess it, addicting them to its use.

A hobbit named Sméagol, for example, becomes so obsessed with the Ring that he breaks off relations with his fellow hobbits. He becomes "Gollum," living in self-absorbed solitude, talking only to himself, communing with none but his "Precious," as he calls the Ring. Gollum is himself possessed by Sauron's seductive instrument.

Evil, Tolkien reveals, is never freeing, always enslaving. To sin is not to set the will at liberty but to put it into captivity.

To do the Good, by contrast, is to enable the will, to enlarge its freedom. As in Romans 7, so in Tolkien's world: the imprisoning power of evil can be broken only by the transcendent power of Good.

In a pre-Christian epic such as *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien cannot have recourse to Israel and Christ and the church as the means of deliverance from evil, but he can and does create remarkable parables of divine redemption. The chief of these Gospel echoes concerns the surrender of coercive power by means of radical self-sacrifice, even death.

### **Good Fellowship**

For reasons beyond his fathoming, a middle-aged hobbit named Frodo Baggins has been chosen to perform such a drastic act of self-surrender. He has been summoned to cast Sauron's Ring back into the Cracks of Mount Doom, the volcanic flames where it was originally forged. If the Ring is not destroyed, Middle-earth will fall under the Dark Lord's control, and all the Free Peoples of the world will be enslaved. Only with the destruction of the Ring can Sauron's power be broken and he himself consumed.

Frodo can succeed in his Quest—his vocation not to find a treasure but to be rid of one—only through companionship, not by solitary endeavor. Frodo's closest hobbit friends—Sam and Merry and Pippin—will not let him undertake his perilous journey alone. The four of them are joined by the wizard Gandalf, the elf Legolas, the dwarf Gimli, plus two men—the kingly Aragorn and the brave Boromir. Together, they become the Company of Nine Walkers, "set against the Nine Riders that are evil."

### **Small hands, great deeds**

Frodo and his companions constitute a radical community of the Good, whose character often resembles a true church. They are not a company of mighty and outsized conquerors but a band of small and frail mortals.

As in the Gospel, however, their weakness becomes their strength. Elrond the elflord articulates this central truth: "Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere."

Like the early Christians, the Company dwells in remarkable solidarity. When one of the Company suffers, they all suffer. When one enjoys a momentary triumph, they all rejoice. To restore their failing strength, they eat **lembas**, the airy elven-bread that possesses unmistakably eucharistic qualities.

The Company also has a Christ-like master in Gandalf. In battle with a demonic creature called the Balrog, Gandalf saves his companions from sure death. To do so, the wizard himself dies and descends into a hellish abyss. Yet Gandalf is miraculously resuscitated and thus enabled again to lead the Nine Walkers on their Quest.

The hobbits also find themselves offering prayers of deliverance to one of the valar named Elbereth, the Mary-like queen of the stars. Their Quest finally succeeds because they possess the three theological virtues—unyielding **faith** in their master and their mission, undespairing **hope** that their cause will ultimately be vindicated beyond the walls of the world and, not least of all, undying **love** for each other and for those who intervene for them.

As a Roman Catholic, Tolkien believed that divine grace does not destroy but completes and fulfills the natural virtues: Christians are meant to realize these virtues even more fully than the pagans did. As a scholar of ancient Germanic and Scandinavian cultures, he also admired the valor of pagan warriors who died in defense of their companions and communities.

Tolkien's twin convictions are united in the sterling courage of Frodo and his friends. Like sheep led to the slaughter, they repeatedly offer to lay down their lives for their friends, having no hope of victory, yet inspired by the conviction that their love for each other requires them to resist Sauron's evil, even unto death.

While non-Christians can display heroic courage, they cannot exhibit the uniquely Christian virtue of heroic forgiveness. In most ancient pagan cultures—the Greeks, for example—mercy could be given only to the pathetic, the helpless, those who were unable to relieve their own plight. To forgive the strong or undeserving was to commit serious injustice.

### **Grace even to Gollum ...**

The entire outcome of ***The Lord of the Rings*** hinges, by contrast, on Bilbo Baggins's mercy for the murderous Gollum. On first learning that his kinsman pitied the despicable creature when he could have killed him, Frodo is incensed. Bilbo should have slain Gollum, Frodo protests, giving him the death that he

deserves. Gandalf's trenchant reply is the Christian core of Tolkien's massive work:

"Deserves [death]! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. ... I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least."

If Gollum—like many other characters in the novel—had not been given repeated chances of redemption, the Quest would not have succeeded. *The Lord of the Rings* is indeed a grace-abounding book.

Yet it is not a falsely cheering work. In the end, alas, Frodo is utterly overwhelmed by the power of the Ring: the heroic hobbit is prevented from fulfilling his mission. But because Tolkien's universe is providential rather than accidental, Frodo's defeat does not mean ultimate failure. Sauron's evil finally destroys itself—but only because the Company has fought it valiantly to the end. Frodo is so exhausted by his arduous Quest that he is unable to relish the fruits of the victory over Sauron.

Tolkien is unblinkingly honest about the effects of the self-surrendering life. The joy won at the end of the book is tearfully muted, for the triumph over Sauron also brings an end to the wondrous Fellowship of the Ring. Nor can Tolkien—in a pre-Christian world such as Middle-earth—translate his faithful heroes into Heaven. But he does have Frodo and Gandalf set sail for the Undying Lands, a paradise that Ilúvatar has created for the valar and other immortals.

### **Above the darkness**

Even before this foreshadowing of glory divine, Tolkien's world is revealed to be neither an unsponsored nor an undirected universe.

Samwise Gamgee, the least articulate of the hobbits, discerns this truth in the unlikeliest place—in the heart of Sauron's sinister realm, where their efforts seem finally to have failed. Even if he and Frodo were somehow to succeed in destroying the Ring, there is no likelihood that they will themselves survive, or that anyone will ever hear of their valiant deed. They seem doomed to oblivion.

Yet, amid such hopelessness, Sam beholds a single star shimmering above the dark clouds of Mordor:

"The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of that forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach."

Sam sees that, in the ultimate reach of things, Life remains more powerful than death; Good conquers evil. Light, he discerns, is the primal, final reality—not the night that seeks to quench it. The single flickering star penetrates and defines the gargantuan gloom.

The immense accomplishment of Tolkien's work is to have given convincing fictional life to this profoundest truth, the reality made full and final in the Incarnation: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 78: J.R.R. Tolkien & Lord of the Rings

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## **J.R.R. Tolkien: The Gallery - The Inklings**

Tolkien relished his weekly meetings with this club of remarkable friends.

Jennifer Lynn Woodruff--Old Boys and Ivory Towers, Thomas Howard--The Key Inklings, Edwin Tait--The Medium is the Message

***Thursday evenings in Lewis's Magdalen College rooms and Tuesdays for lunch at the Eagle and Child public house, Tolkien joined C. S. Lewis and a revolving cast of others in a beloved ritual.***

***Over tea—or ale—and pipes, these Oxford thinkers and writers read aloud from their works, traded anecdotes and jibes, and engaged in what Lewis called "the cut and parry of prolonged, fierce, masculine argument." Many passages of The Lord of the Rings found in the Inklings their first—and unfailingly appreciative—audience, much to the delight of their author.***

***Lewis, a fellow and tutor in English at Oxford's Magdalen College from 1925 to 1954 (he moved on to a professorship at Cambridge), was the group's vociferous nucleus.***

***Around him were usually arrayed, along with Tolkien, Lewis's brother Warren (Warnie), the medical doctor R. E. ("Humphrey") Havard—known affectionately by the group as "the Useless Quack"—and the eccentric author, lecturer, and Oxford University Press editor Charles Williams.***

***Beyond these was a larger circle of friends and sometime attenders that included the London solicitor and scholar Owen Barfield, the Oxford English professor and theatrical producer Nevill Coghill, Tolkien's son Christopher (himself a lecturer in languages at Oxford after the war), and the Dominican priest and humanities lecturer Gervase Mathew.***

***We begin this brief gallery of several Inklings with a look at the "personality" of Oxford itself. We end with two pages on Tolkien's relationship with Lewis, which strongly influenced the thought and writings of both men.***

### **Old Boys and Ivory Towers**

#### ***The Inklings' Oxford***

The clock on the tower of Tom Gate at Christ Church still strikes "Oxford Time," five minutes slower than the rest of the city—or indeed the world. The spires and towers of 39 colleges and 20 Anglican churches dominate the scenery. Students punt on the river accompanied by picnic lunches and champagne, and Blackwell's Bookshop and the Eagle and Child pub invite leisurely afternoon visits. Despite the presence of the ubiquitous Starbucks and a scattering of midriff-baring teenagers, Oxford is still the Inklings' Oxford.

At Magdalen College, visitors can still see the immaculately groomed lawns and attempt to cajole the deer along Addison's Walk, where Lewis, Tolkien, and Hugo Dyson had a conversation instrumental in Lewis' conversion (see p. 36). Tolkien and his wife, Edith, lived in numerous Oxford houses—several were lodgings "in college"—and attended Catholic churches in the area. All, weather-beaten by decades if not centuries of rain, still stand unobtrusively amid showier spires.

Oxford in the mid-twentieth century was a much more masculine place than it is today: women's colleges existed, but in a second-class way (as Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Night* makes clear) until they were granted full collegiate status in 1959. Now, both women's and men's colleges admit members of the opposite sex; then, Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, Barfield, and their friends argued theology and read out passages from their works in an environment full of male camaraderie in both pub and college.

Echoes of this often come through in Tolkien's works; the men go out into the world united in fellowship to do battle, whereas the women—worshiped in the way Tolkien adored his wife Edith—wait, watch, and work a secret magic.

The English countryside has often been identified with his green and pastoral Shire (see p. 38). But Oxford University's ageless buildings seem also to have left their mark on Middle-earth. Few places, even in England, pack as much history into as little space as Oxford—"New" College was built in 1379.

The sense of living among the ruins of a much older civilization always haunts the Oxford visitor, and it perhaps haunted Tolkien's creations of an even more ancient history as well. Tolkien is even known to have compared the Radcliffe Camera (a portion of the Bodleian Library complex built in an almost obnoxiously classical idiom) to Sauron's temple to Morgoth on Númenor in the Second Age of Middle-earth.

In Wolvercote Cemetery in north Oxford, Tolkien's grave rests with Edith's under the names of "Beren" and "Luthien"—the famous lovers who were ancestors of Aragorn and Arwen, and whose tale also paralleled that later wooing (see p. 13).

In the University Botanical Gardens at Magdalen stands another memorial: a strong, tall, green tree called *Pinus Nigra*. This is said to have been the tree-loving Tolkien's favorite. Like Tolkien's mythology and the crowded, colorful streets of Oxford, it grows and spreads, but never loses its source.

—Jennifer Lynn Woodruff

## The Key Inkling

### *Charles Williams (1886-1945)*

The key Inkling? Surely not. That palm must go to Lewis or Tolkien. But in an odd sense (and "odd" is the word for Williams), it was often his agitated intellect, his wildly fecund imagination, and his sheer physical energy, that moved things along. It was Williams, for instance, who rushed in and out of the room at The Eagle and Child, fetching ale for everyone. His electric mind kept things humming, though often when he read from his works he left the assembled company scratching their heads.

Tolkien was not especially fond of Williams. He maintained that he never knew what Williams was "on" about. Readers of Williams will sympathize fervently here. But when Williams died suddenly, Tolkien had a Mass said for him, and himself acted as server to the priest. A most noble tribute.

T. S. Eliot said that Williams looked a bit like a monkey. When he lectured, Williams would pop about, sitting on the edge of the desk with legs all tangled up, then jump off, jingle coins in his pocket, and generally keep things stirred up.

He certainly did not have much in the way of looks, but women were magnetically attracted to him. His votaries (and they were votaries) tended to be women, and he had some more-than-peculiar associations with various women (see, for example, his *Letters to Lalage*). However, after almost fifty years of reading Williams and everything about him, I am convinced that he went to his grave faithful in all

senses to his wife Florence, whom he had (typically) named "Michal"—after Saul's daughter. Why? Because he was Williams.

Williams never stopped scribbling. He wrote feverishly, on the backs of envelopes, on tickets, and on any odd slips of paper he could put his hands on. He wrote novels; lots of poetry, including a cycle of Arthurian lyrics; drama; criticism; biography; and theological essays. W. H. Auden said that, when he first tried to read Williams's poetry, he couldn't make head or tail of it. But he read Williams's quirky history of the church (*The Descent of the Dove*) once every year.

Williams flitted about the edges of the Roman Catholic Church like a moth, at least in his writings; but he lived and died an Anglican. He loved to draw on the sumptuousness of Catholicism for his imagery. He liked terms like Our Blessed Lord, and Our Lady, and the Mass; and he apparently thought of the Pope as at least the Patriarch of the West, and perhaps even as Peter.

He may have had early associations with the Rosicrucians, and he certainly draws heavily on arcana: the Tarot pack, Solomon's ring, necromancy, the Holy Graal (he, typically, picked up on and used this fourteenth century spelling). He never calls Jesus Jesus: it is Messiah, usually. And God comes on stage as "The Mercy" or "The Omnipotence," ordinarily.

Williams's whole theme, in all of his work, is courtesy—that is, the courtesies fitting for citizens of the City of God. *Caritas*. My life for yours. Joy. Exchange and Substitution, which pours down from the mysteries of the Most Holy Trinity, through the Cross, to you lending me a hand with my grocery bags—or refusing to do so. Heaven vs. Hell, really.

—Thomas Howard

## The Medium is the Message

### Owen Barfield (1898-1997)

The gracious English bookstore clerk had not heard of Owen Barfield. His early, groundbreaking work of literary criticism, *Poetic Diction*, didn't ring any bells. Nor did his 1957 masterpiece *Saving the Appearances*, a brilliant explanation of the meaning of idolatry in human history. I didn't mention his children's fantasy *The Silver Trumpet* (beloved by the Tolkien family) or his whimsical autobiographical novel *This Ever Diverse Pair*, which divides the two sides of his life into two separate individuals—the stolid lawyer Burden and the creative dreamer Burgeon. Instead: "He was a friend of C. S. Lewis," I hazarded. Her face lit up. "Oh! Was he an Inkling?"

While Lewis and Tolkien enjoy fame as individuals, Barfield remains "an Inkling," known mainly because of his intermittent participation in the gatherings at the Eagle and Child, and his frequent involvement in the spring "walking tours" taken by Lewis and others. He is best-known as Lewis's "Second Friend," "the man who disagrees with you about everything." Mostly, the two disagreed over Barfield's espousal (which persisted after he became an Anglican in 1948) of Rudolf Steiner's mystical "anthroposophy."

In 1928 Barfield published *Poetic Diction*, a book that profoundly influenced the attitudes of both Lewis and Tolkien toward language. Barfield argued that the separation in the modern mind between material and spiritual realities was unknown earlier in human history. To us, the abstract meaning is the real one and the concrete image is "poetic," an imaginative aid toward the real meaning. But for premodern people the one was embedded in the other—ideas were bound up with the words that convey them.

It is easy to see why this theory would appeal to Tolkien, who believed passionately that words have intrinsic moral and spiritual meaning. Thus, in *Lord of the Rings*, the "Black Speech" is evil in itself, while the depravity of the orcs is expressed in their corruption of the Common Speech. On the other

hand, the Elvish languages reveal the beauty of Valinor as human language can not.

Barfield saw much less of the other Inklings after his 1931 move to London to become a lawyer. For thirty years, he wrote very little, until his gradual withdrawal from law practice in the late 1950s and 1960s freed him to pursue his literary career with books such as ***Saving the Appearances*** and its 1963 sequel, the Socratic dialogue ***Worlds Apart***. This renewed creative output brought him belated fame and a number of visiting professorships at American universities. He lived for more than thirty years after his retirement, dying in 1997 at the age of 99.

—*Edwin Tait*

*Jennifer Lynn Woodruff is Methodist Librarian at Drew University.*

*Thomas Howard is Chairman (ret.) of the Department of English at St. John's Seminary in Boston and author of The Novels of Charles Williams (*Ignatius*, 1983).*

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 78: J.R.R. Tolkien & Lord of the Rings

## Tollers & Jack

Tolkien and Lewis made an odd couple, but they contributed profoundly to each other's work.

Colin Duriez

No harm in him: only needs a smack or two."

So wrote C. S. Lewis ("Jack" to his friends) in his diary the night he first met J. R. R. Tolkien ("Tollers"). The comment hints at the undercurrent of tension that would run beneath the pair's stream of mutual admiration.

The two differed in temperament, approach to faith, and views of their art. But their deep affinities brought them together for nearly 40 years of friendship.

During those years, Tolkien and Lewis spurred each other to write some of the most beloved books of the twentieth century. *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. *Mere Christianity* and *The Hobbit*. Each owed much to their authors' mutual inspiration and critique.

Tolkien and Lewis first encountered each other at a meeting of Oxford University English School faculty, convened at Merton College on March 11, 1926. Lewis had been a tutor and lecturer in English for nearly an academic year. Tolkien, the older man, had for the same period held the Chair of Anglo-Saxon.

Tolkien was slight of build, compared with the thickset and taller Lewis. He was also, at least in Lewis's view, rather opinionated (hence the need for a "smack").

### The reality of imagination

Some of Tolkien's strongest opinions arose out of his Roman Catholicism. At that time Lewis was still an atheist, committed to a materialist explanation of life, and of the origins of human language. Tolkien soon noticed, however, that there were some chinks in his new friend's armor.

Tolkien soon showed Lewis his beautiful poetic translation of *Beowulf* and shared drafts detailing his until-now private world of Middle-earth. For years he had been weaving a tapestry of saga, myth, and story, often rendered both in poetic and prose versions.

Lewis's response was more than Tolkien could have hoped. The young atheist was enraptured. He had always been captivated by ancient myths and stories of "romance"—that is, tales that contained glimpses of other worlds. But here was one by a modern-day author, as elaborate and compelling as any he had read.

Soon Tolkien began trying to convince his friend of the truth of Christian faith.

A long night's talk in September of 1931 capped a months-long conversation. On that night, the two friends strolled near Lewis's rooms in Magdalen College, accompanied by Hugo Dyson. Dyson was a young English lecturer at Reading University, and also a Christian. The conversation soon turned, as it

often did with Tolkien, to myth.

Tolkien argued that the Gospels have a satisfying imaginative as well as intellectual appeal, demanding a response from the whole person. He accused Lewis of an imaginative failure in not accepting their reality. A few days later Lewis capitulated, and became a Christian believer.

After Lewis's conversion, he filled his fiction with enduring images of God, our humanity, and reality transfigured by the light of heaven. In compelling essays, he persuaded many of the truth of the Christian claims. And often he returned to those persistent arguments he had heard first from Tolkien, reconciling imagination and reason, and placing storytelling at the crux.

Tolkien, in return, also owed a great debt to his friend. He confessed that without Lewis's encouragement, he confessed, he would never have finished writing *The Lord of the Rings*. This was a huge, meticulous task that took over ten years. *The Hobbit*, too, had for many years remained a private story, enjoyed only by Tolkien's children and Lewis. The latter's warm enthusiasm helped spur Tolkien towards publication.

As he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was not simply forging a story that has won millions of readers. He was also creating a worldwide adult readership for symbolic stories and establishing the imaginative climate that has allowed the making of the recent blockbuster movies.

Fantasy and "faery tale" at the time of Tolkien and Lewis's first meeting, were still considered merely children's literature. Tolkien effectively enlisted Lewis in the task of rehabilitating these kinds of stories, once enjoyed by warriors in the mead halls, and tough enough to be a vehicle for exploring modern questions of global warfare, human evil on an unprecedented scale—and the domination of the machine.

This was the subject of Lewis's inaugural lecture when he moved to Cambridge in 1954 to take up the newly created Chair of Medieval and Renaissance literature.

Lewis had clashed with the ethos of the English School at Cambridge many times, over such topics as the modern trend of psychologizing literary works. When the invitation to the Chair came, Lewis turned it down not once, but twice (partly through concern over leaving his alcoholic brother, Warren).

As persuasive as ever, Tolkien—one of the eight electors responsible for choosing the Chair—argued Lewis into accepting. And in his colorful inaugural lecture, Lewis expounded a theme he shared with Tolkien—that the dehumanizing modern "the Age of the Machine" marked a momentous breaking point in Western civilization and the loss of precious "Old Western" values.

Tolkien's affinity with Lewis on this theme helped insulate their friendship from the differences that contributed to its cooling in later years—especially after Lewis's relationship with the divorcee, Joy Davidman.

### **Divided in Outlook**

Their differences were, first of all, theological. Lewis was an Anglican, but in an old Puritan tradition of the two Johns, Milton and Bunyan. Tolkien was a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic, opposed to divorce and remarriage. He also strongly disapproved of Lewis as a popular communicator of the Christian faith—he felt that that task should be the concern of theologians.

Second, there were differences of temperament. Tolkien was a perfectionist, meticulously working and re-working his writing. Lewis, in contrast, seemed to dash off his books—*The Pilgrim's Regress* in a

fortnight, the seven ***Chronicles of Narnia*** in as many years.

Third, the two friends differed artistically. Tolkien was the master of the allusive story. He had a natural theology of the imagination, in which the insights incarnate in the tale would be a vehicle of God's grace to the reader. Lewis was the apologist and evangelist. He built into his stories allegorical signposts that Tolkien artistically disliked. Yet Lewis's last completed fiction—***Till We Have Faces***—in its pagan, pre-Christian setting, has a remarkable affinity with Tolkien's art. Ironically, it was composed during the period when their friendship had cooled, under the influence of Joy Davidman (an accomplished novelist).

As we read Tolkien—and Lewis—we may wish to thank the Author of that providential meeting in the Spring of 1926. The world is immeasurably the richer for it.

***Colin Duriez is author of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (2003), Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings (2001), The Inklings Handbook (with David Porter, 2001), and The C.S. Lewis Encyclopedia (2000). He is a writer and editor inhabiting a house full of books in Leicester, England.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 78: J.R.R. Tolkien & Lord of the Rings

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## Hobbits & Englishmen

His were small people surmounting impossible odds.

Humphrey Carpenter

**Why** should [Tolkien] choose to specialise in early English? Something exciting happened when he first realised that a large proportion of the poetry and prose of Anglo-Saxon and early medieval England was written in the dialect that had been spoken by his mother's ancestors.

He was deeply attached to the West Midlands because of their associations with his mother. Her family had come from the town of Evesham, and he believed that his West Midland borough and its surrounding county of Worcestershire had been the home of that family, the Suffields, for countless generations. He himself had also spent much of his childhood at Sarehole, a West Midland hamlet. That part of the English countryside had in consequence a strong emotional attraction for him; and as a result so did its language.

His deep feeling that his real home was in the West Midland countryside of England had, since his undergraduate days, defined ... his scholarly work. The same motives ... now created a character that embodied everything he loved about the West Midlands: Mr Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit.

Tolkien chose for the hobbit's house the name "Bag End," which was what the local people called his Aunt Jane's Worcestershire farm. Worcestershire, the county from which the Suffields had come, ... is of all The Shire from which the hobbits come; Tolkien wrote of it:

"Any corner of that county (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way 'home' to me, as no other part of the world is." But the village of Hobbiton itself with its mill and river is to be found not in Worcestershire but in Warwickshire, now half hidden in the red-brick skirt of Birmingham but still identifiable as the Sarehole where Ronald Tolkien spent four formative years.

Tolkien once told an interviewer: "The Hobbits are just rustic English people, made small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination—not the small reach of their courage or latent power."

To put it another way, the hobbits represent the combination of small imagination with great courage which (as Tolkien had seen in the trenches during the First World War) often led to survival against all chances.

"I've always been impressed," he once said, "that we are here, surviving, because of the indomitable courage of quite small people against impossible odds."

**—Excerpted from Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). Permissions granted by the Estate of Humphrey Carpenter.**

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Father of Epic Fantasy

Scores of authors have paid Tolkien the highest homage - imitation.

Aaron Belz

When *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954-55, nothing like it had ever been seen. This epic tale in its elaborately devised world sent shock waves through the publishing world. It was, in the words of Tolkien biographer Tom Shippey, "a one-item category." But soon, it was clear that the category was destined to overflow. J. R. R. Tolkien had done nothing less than found a new genre.

There were fantasy writers before Tolkien—notably George MacDonald, with *Lilith*, *Phantastes*, and his Curdie stories. But *The Hobbit* gave epic fantasy its shape, creating Middle-earth and populating it with halflings and monsters that would become stock figures for scores of authors after him. What Tolkien had created, as George R. R. Martin has said, was "a fully realized secondary universe, an entire world with its own geography and histories and legends, wholly unconnected to our own, yet somehow just as real."

Understanding how Tolkien did this is key to knowing both why his stories are valuable literature and why so many people have imitated him.

### Raiders of the Lost Word

One element of Tolkien's genius was his knowledge of philology, the history of language.

Although casual readers might assume words such as *hobbit* and *orc*, and town names such as Withywindle, derive from sheer imagination, Shippey demonstrates in his *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000) that the language of Middle-earth has roots in the real world.

Early English was largely oral; we do not have a complete record of the way Norse, Celtic, German, and other languages shifted and settled to form Modern English. Like geologists imagining continuities in an incomplete fossil record, philologists conjecture what kinds of words might have appeared in intermediary stages, in some cases being able to identify words that must have been, even though they aren't recorded. This is how Tolkien arrived at much of the language of Middle-earth.

Tolkien also showed genius in the way he wove together themes and storylines into symphonic movements, a technique Shippey terms "narrative interlace" and also identifies in *Beowulf* (a much earlier example of epic fantasy).

Narrative interlace allows a lot of action to happen simultaneously and to be told out of sequence. It also allows for the kind of geographically expansive narrative necessary for epic fantasy. The effect is dramatic, enabling a multi-threaded plot to drift through multiple volumes without seeming ponderous.

### After J. R. R., the deluge

As these two elements are what made it possible for Tolkien to create an entirely separate world, they are also key elements in the fantasy writing of Tolkien's legion followers. For better or worse, fans have been so moved by Tolkien, so addicted to the forests and winding roads of Middle-earth, that they have

invented their own worlds. Although there are scores of obvious, middling imitations—series such as Terry Brooks's popular *Sword of Shannara* and Kenneth Flint's *Sidhe*—there are a number of worthy suitors as well.

One distinct strain is books geared for younger readers. The true primogenitor of these might be C. S. Lewis, whose *Chronicles of Narnia* were published around the same time as Tolkien's trilogy, though well after *The Hobbit*. (A strong case might be made for Tolkien's imprint on Lewis's imagination, however.) Soon there followed Alan Garner's *Alderley Tales*, which includes *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) and *The Moon of Gormath* (1963).

Based in obscure Celtic mythology, Garner's story tells of two contemporary English children who, while on holiday, discover a powerful moonstone that belongs to a friendly wizard. Their attempt to return the stone is thwarted by an evil witch, but the forces of good ultimately prevail.

### **Rising Dark & Wrinkled Time**

Susan Cooper's five-volume *Dark Is Rising* series (1965-77) tells an almost identical story: children vacationing in Cornwall discover an ancient map that leads into a world of Arthurian enchantment; eventually, the boy hero discovers that he is last of the "Old Ones."

A similar entry in American fiction is Madeleine L'Engle's ever-popular Murray Family series (1962-78), which begins with *A Wrinkle In Time*, the tale of a boy and girl who go searching through time for their scientist-father, battling the forces of evil along the way.

### **Prydain, Anthropos, and Potter**

More examples are found among the works of Anne McCaffrey, who has written more multi-volume series (13) than most authors have books. Although McCaffrey's writing is suspiciously prolific and not at all comparable to Tolkien's in quality or depth, there can be no doubt that her dragon-ridden world is inspired by Middle-earth.

Others include Lloyd Alexander's five-book *Prydain* series (1964-68), the final book of which won the Newberry Medal, and John White's six-volume *Archives of Anthropos*, a distinctly Christian work which begins with *The Tower of Geburah* (1978).

It is impossible to survey the epic fantasy genre without mentioning the latest flame in the fire, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* collection (1997- ). Rowling herself acknowledges a debt to Lewis, not Tolkien, and her stories fall neatly within the children's-fantasy paradigm established above: school-aged kids, minding their own business, find themselves magically transported into a world of witches and wizards. There they discover that they're actually worth something—that they are powerful, wonderful, and necessary.

### **Earthsea to Discworld**

Tolkien has also made possible thousands of fantasy titles for adult readers. The best of these is Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, which began in 1968 with *A Wizard of Earthsea* and recently expanded to a fifth volume.

Le Guin is nearly Tolkien's equal in terms of prose and narrative. She invents a world similar to Middle-earth, and her hero is a halfling—a boy, actually, endowed with magical powers. The *Earthsea* series is not as philosophically weighty as *The Lord of the Rings* (nor even as serious as Le Guin's later works such as *The Dispossessed*, which speculates quite convincingly on the nature of time), but it is highly

engaging.

Another worthy entry is Stephen Donaldson's three-volume ***Thomas Covenant*** series (1977), which almost seems a response—or as Tom Shippey puts it, a "rebuttal"—to ***The Lord of the Rings***. Donaldson's hero is an adult American and not at all exemplary in terms of moral fiber or courage. Others too numerous to mention include Orson Scott Card's ***Alvin Maker*** (1987-98) and Terry Pratchett's spoof, ***Discworld*** (1983- ).

Each of these transports the reader into a carefully detailed alternate world. The best of them bring the "realities" of their world to bear on our own, leaving the reader richer for the sojourn.

But none would be what they are without the pattern of the acknowledged Father of Fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien.

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## An Unexpected Party

Like Bilbo discovering one dwarf after another at his door, Tolkien found himself, in the 1960s, hosting a growing American fan club.

Michael Foster

The sudden boom in the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* in the mid-1960s began with the simple fact that it became available in paperback.

An unauthorized American edition arising from a seeming loophole in the book's copyright stirred Tolkien's publishers like a sleeping dragon roused.

In October 1965, Ballantine published an approved and slightly revised three-volume edition at 95 cents each. Now anyone with three dollars could buy a passport to Middle-earth.

By 1966, the book was the top-selling paperback, with three quarters of a million copies in print.

### Happy accident?

Tolkien scholar Douglas A. Anderson (author of *The Annotated Hobbit*) believes it was "an accident of chronology" that *The Lord of the Rings* found a wide audience thirty years after Tolkien began writing it and ten years after its first publication.

"Part of it has to do with the rise of mass market publishing, and the fact that a mass market edition came out in 1965 surely spurred things along. Before then, the hardcovers were at least \$5 each volume. Of course, the fact that the establishment didn't look kindly on Tolkien probably only fueled the fact that the younger generation did."

Tom Shippey adds other reasons:

"Perhaps one could say he offered a 'mellow' kind of heroism, which he was convinced was also old, familiar, and natural. And also, the students of the 1960s were perfectly well able to see that through the metaphor, Tolkien was writing about real life: the connection to Vietnam and the military-industrial complex (Mordor and Saruman) was obvious—though not intended."

Rightly or wrongly, contemporary accounts of the sales surge handcuffed it to the collegiate counter-culture. In "The Hobbit Habit," published July 15, 1966, *Time* magazine proclaimed that Tolkien was the new literary BMOC (Big Man On Campus):

"Holden Caulfield is a moldy fig; the Lord of the Flies is swatted. This year, the unquestioned literary god on college campuses is a three-foot-high creature with long curly hair on his feet, a passion for six vast meals a day, and the improbable name of Frodo Baggins."

### A tract for its time

The *Time* article noted the proliferation of buttons declaring FRODO LIVES and GO GO GANDALF on

many U.S. campuses and declared, "The hobbit habit seems almost as catching as LSD." Three reasons for this vogue were suggested:

"To some, it is a poetic portrayal of the times, with Sauron and his destructive force seen as an analogy to atomic war. For others, the Frodo saga represents a way to escape the mundane realities of life. ... Another enthusiast likes the Rings' old-fashioned moral simplicity: 'You cheer the hero and boo the villain.'"

The backlash against the so-called Tolkien cult came swiftly, and it was based not so much on the book itself as on its readers: an *ad hominem* attack. On February 24, 1967, *Life* associate editor Charles Elliott declared:

"Tolkien is obscure no longer. He has become, in fact, the literary darling of an entire generation of high school and college students, who have made him a flagrant best-seller—smack at the top of the 1966 paperback list." Elliott accused "the opt-out crowd" of liking *The Lord of the Rings* because it was "innocent of ideas." He concluded, "These days the student must find solace where he can, if necessary in the Baggins of Bag End bag."

The painfully dated slang aside, Elliott's article reveals one problem Tolkien's advocates faced in those early years: literary snobbishness. Edmund Wilson's scathing 1956 *Nation* article "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" is another notorious example. Wilson dismissed the trilogy as "balderdash" and "juvenile trash."

### Those charming lads

Perhaps the Tolkien boom was part of an American Anglophilia then triumphant in film, music, and literature. Ian Fleming's James Bond spy novels were spawning several superlatively successful Sean Connery films, peaking with the top-grossing *Goldfinger* in 1964 and *Thunderball* a year later.

And the hobbits weren't the only four charming, cheeky English lads to win American hearts. On February 9, 1964, the curtains parted on Ed Sullivan's stage and the Beatles entered American popular history as an estimated 73 million viewers watched. Other English bands would invade hot on the Beatles' boot-heels.

As Phillip Norman first revealed in his Beatle history *Shout!*, in 1968 the two foursomes nearly fused when the Beatles planned producing a film version of *The Lord of the Rings* starring themselves. That idea was aborted when the chosen director, Stanley Kubrick, convinced John Lennon and Paul McCartney that a Tolkien film was "unmakeable," according to Denis O'Dell's fascinating account in *At The Apple's Core*.

Seen thus, Tolkien's popularity was a third manifestation of pop-cultural Anglophilia. Other factors, from political paranoia to "pipeweed," have also been credited with spurring the trilogy's success.

### The real reason

But Tolkien's popularity wasn't only counter-cultural. When the *Time* article above was first published, precocious grade-school readers were discovering the book. Professor Clyde Kilby of Wheaton College (Illinois), hardly a hippie, was in Oxford working with Tolkien on what would become *The Silmarillion*.

By the end of the decade, scholars and fans were joining to form groups like the Tolkien Society of America, The Tolkien Society, and the Mythopoeic Society.

The Tolkien boom had begun. There has been no bust: combined sales for the four Ballantine editions

and Houghton Mifflin trade paperback editions comprising *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* totaled 10.5 million copies in 2001, according to *Publishers Weekly*. The Peter Jackson films brought many readers to Tolkien for the first time and many erstwhile readers back for another look.

Perhaps the reason *The Lord of the Rings* has been popular with so many of such different backgrounds is as simple as this: it is, first and last, a great story. Its themes—friendship, choice, power, nature, machines, loss, salvation—are not of one time, but for all time. As Bilbo once sang, "The Road goes ever on."

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### **The "idol" speaks Tolkien had mixed reactions to his newfound fame.**

Writing to his colleague Norman Davis, he referred to the widespread enthusiasm for his books as "my deplorable cultus"; and to a reporter who asked him if he was pleased by the enthusiasm of the young Americans he replied: "Art moves them and they don't know what they've been moved by and they get quite drunk on it. Many young Americans are involved in the stories in a way that I'm not." ... Americans who were enthusiastic about his books began to make pilgrimages to see him. ... Early in 1968 the BBC made a film about him, which they called "Tolkien in Oxford"; he performed unselfconsciously to the camera, and enjoyed himself in a mild way. Yet on the whole this kind of thing did not please him. He wrote to a reader: "Being a cult figure in one's own lifetime I am afraid is not at all pleasant. However I do not find that it tends to puff one up; in my case at any rate it makes me feel extremely small and inadequate. But even the nose of a very modest idol cannot remain entirely untickled by the sweet smell of incense."

—*Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien: A Biography (Houghton Mifflin, 1977).*

Perhaps rather naturally, he had mixed and somewhat antithetical feelings about any public image of himself. On the one hand, he was proud of seeing himself as a successful writer. I had the impression that some of his colleagues at the university (and possibly also some of his own relatives) had lifted eyebrows concerning his decades of toil over Elves and Orcs and dragons. Now all but the most cynical were put in their places and even the cynical could not fail to admit that the work, whether good or bad, had paid off financially. On the other hand, Tolkien took appreciations with a grain of salt. Like Lewis, he held a low opinion of the twentieth century, literary critics and all.

Reporters, he assured me, always got things wrong. Actually Tolkien was not the sort of person, if indeed anyone is, who could be captured in the oversimplification of the feature article. This was especially true of articles which emphasized him as a cult-figure and something more or less than human. This attitude may have been why Tolkien managed so remarkably to keep the events of his actual life hidden from the public. Of some of the features published about him, he remarked that too many people thought him 'a gargoyle to be gaped at.'"

—*Clyde Kilby, Tolkien and The Silmarillion (Harold Shaw, 1976).*

*Permission to quote from Tolkien and the Silmarillion, by Clyde S. Kilby, granted by The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.*

## Understanding Tolkien: Recommended Resources

From light romps to profound reads, a bumper crop of books tells us more about the maker of Middle-earth.

Steven Gertz and Chris Armstrong

### Books on the man

The standard Tolkien biography is Humphrey Carpenter's authorized *Tolkien* (George Allen & Unwin, 1977). Both this book and Carpenter's *The Inklings* (George Allen & Unwin, 1978) provide intimate, detailed portraits of Tolkien and his circle, liberally sprinkled with unexpected insights. A recent biography that explores Tolkien's faith and its impact on his work is Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (Ignatius: 1998).

For a warm portrait of the man and his work, see Clyde Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Harold Shaw, 1976). It is in part a record of Kilby's attempt to assist Tolkien in finishing *The Silmarillion*, but its lasting value lies in the many interesting personal and professional details it provides about Tolkien, as Kilby gently relates in anecdotal detail the Oxford author's working habits, his convictions, and his foibles.

In *The Tolkien Family Album* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), an easily accessible "photo-biography," John and Priscilla Tolkien chronicle memories of their father. Containing many rare pictures of Tolkien, his family, and the places they lived over the years, along with affectionate reminiscences illuminating his life and times, the book is a treat for fans.

### Books on his books

An invaluable reference work covering every aspect of Tolkien's imaginative world is Colin Duriez, *The J. R. R. Tolkien Handbook* (Baker, 1992). This also contains a valuable short bibliography of books by and about Tolkien.

Professor Tom Shippey has produced an outstanding literary analysis of Tolkien's work in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002). Shippey's grasp of Nordic and Celtic myth makes for some penetrating insights into how Tolkien constructed Middle-earth. Readers will especially appreciate Shippey's reflections on the concept of evil as developed in *The Lord of the Rings*. For more on Tolkien's myth, check out Shippey's classic *The Road to Middle Earth* (George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

A thorough and insightful inquiry into the Christian convictions at the heart of Tolkien's mythic world, including in its first chapter a delightful mini-biography, is Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (ISI Books, 2002).

For a quick, enjoyable tour of the moral world of Tolkien's writings, pick up Mark Eddy Smith's *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues* (InterVarsity Press, 2002). Smith takes almost a devotional tack by exploring, one by one, a set of virtues exemplified in Tolkien's characters. These include generosity, friendship, hospitality, courage, hope, and faith.

A perceptive study relating Tolkien's work to that of other Christian imaginative writers, past and present,

is Rolland Hein, *Christian Mythmakers* (second edition, Cornerstone, 2002). The book provides a revealing, theologically sensitive account of the literary techniques of "mythmaking" employed by such classic authors as Dante Alighieri and John Bunyan, and such modern-day writers as Madeleine L'Engle and Walter Wangerin.

Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: A Celebration* (Ignatius Press, 1999), provides a set of essays that focus on the author's work, values, and legacy, along with recollections by two authors who knew Tolkien personally, George Sayer and Walter Hooper.

Finally, a classic study dealing with Tolkien's debt to Owen Barfield's linguistic theory of the fragmentation of meaning is Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (revised edition, Kent State University Press, 2002; first published by Eerdmans in 1983).

### For fun

No book better captures Tolkien's flair for illustration than Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator* (Houghton Mifflin, 1995). Beginning with his early sketches of nature, Hammond and Scull follow Tolkien's work chronologically to *The Lord of the Rings*, reinforcing the art with running commentary and description.

Fans of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* will enjoy an unexpected but delightful romp in Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999). Displaying every one of Tolkien's illustrated Christmas letters to his children from 1920 to 1943, this book celebrates both the author's imaginative genius and his energetic love for his family.

Douglas A. Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002; revised and expanded) provides the complete text of Tolkien's classic children's tale, along with illustrations from many of the book's numerous international translations. Handsomely produced, the book's introduction alone, relating how Tolkien wrote and published his famous story, makes this one worth picking up.

### Websites

Tolkien scholars and fans alike will want to check out The Tolkien Society's website, <http://www.tolkiensociety.org/>. In addition to finding a superb index of archival resources, enthusiasts can read breaking news on new Tolkien art and scholarship, and locate information on events the Society is sponsoring.

For an unusual look into Tolkien's life, browse the websites of the parishes formative to the man. The Birmingham Oratory at <http://www.birmingham-oratory.org.uk/tolkien> has a succinct biography covering the author's youth, while the Oxford Oratory (formerly St. Aloysius) at <http://www.oxfordoratory.org.uk/> offers readers a virtual tour of the church at which Tolkien worshipped for many years.

For a dive in the deep end of Tolkien and Inklings studies, visit the Marion E. Wade Center in Wheaton, Illinois (<http://www.wheaton.edu/learnres/wade/>). The Wade Center houses thousands of manuscripts relating to seven authors: G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and George MacDonald. The Center also produces the annual scholarly literary review *Seven*.