

THE  
MAKING OF

# MIDDLE- EARTH

A NEW LOOK INSIDE THE WORLD  
OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN



CHRISTOPHER SNYDER



*Frontispiece: A ca. 1890 photochrom of Magdalen College, Oxford, where J. R. R. Tolkien and his fellow Inklings would meet on Thursday evenings.*

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*“The making of things is in my heart from my own making by  
Thee.”<sup>1</sup>*

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—J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE SILMARILLION*, “OF AULË AND YAVANNA,” 1977

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Unlike most medievalists I have met, I did not have an appreciation for Tolkien as a young reader. I fell in love with the Arthurian legends as a teenager, became a professional historian, and only discovered the genius of Tolkien later in life. I owe a debt to all the Tolkien enthusiasts I have met during these years; to Peter Jackson, for kindling the flames; and to my Oxford Honors students for helping me focus my thoughts for this book. Special thanks are due to the staff of the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford; the Emerson G. Reinsch Library, Marymount University; the Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; and to Tom Shippey and Walter Hooper, for their help and encouragement.

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Lastly, I thank my daughter Carys for reading Tolkien (and watching the films) with me, and give my love to my wife Renée for never complaining about this newest obsession. And Professor Tolkien, *in caelum observans*, I beg your forgiveness for all errors herein.

*“The world has changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it.”<sup>2</sup>*



—GALADRIEL [CATE BLANCHETT] IN *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, THE MOVIE, 2001

MANY WHO HAVE READ the fictional works of J. R. R. Tolkien, or who have seen the trilogy of films made by Peter Jackson, would agree with the above sentiment of Galadriel. After our first encounter with Middle-earth, our world does not quite feel the same. We cannot look at gently rolling hills without thinking of the Shire, cannot watch autumn leaves turning gold without recalling Lothlorien, while the call of seagulls over the waves carries our spirits “into the West.” Indeed, how many of us have looked hard into a mighty tree hoping to find the eyes of Treebeard peering out at us?

Tolkien’s Middle-earth seems at first to be an utterly new and exciting creation. But on closer inspection, it is a very old world and dimly recognizable. Professor Tolkien—like his friend and colleague C. S. Lewis—was one living among us who *did* remember it. To be more accurate, he *recognized* this world in the languages, myths, and history of ancient and medieval Europe. Captivated as a child by what he later called “fairy stories,” he became a professional medievalist and devoted his career to the study of early medieval language and literature, especially that of the Anglo-Saxons. The holder of no less than three (!) professorships—two at Oxford University, Tolkien turned increasingly away from academic pursuits and instead channeled his immense learning into his fiction. Tolkien’s fiction “lives” in such a vivid way to its readers because his books are grounded in a reality, albeit one that has become alienated from modernity. “We were born in a dark age out of due time,” he wrote to his son Christopher, referring to the modern world, not the medieval period that many have dismissed as dark.<sup>3</sup> And for those of us who have been drawn into the adventures of Middle-earth and Narnia it is the medieval that feels like “home,” as Tolkien once wrote, and “in unexplored desire we would still go home.”<sup>4</sup>

There seems to be at least three *worlds* of J. R. R. Tolkien. There is the physical world in which he was born and educated, and in which he taught, wrote, made friendships, worshipped, and raised a family. These experiences—and places like Birmingham and Oxford—had an enormous impact on Tolkien the person as well as Tolkien the writer. The second world is the intellectual realm where Tolkien spent much of his time, beginning with his first fascination with fairy tales through his adult obsessions with Northern languages and legends. This is the world of Beowulf and Brunhild, of Gawain and Fafnir, and the power and beauty of this world emanates from the very names of its places: Avalon, Heorot, Valhalla. Lastly, there is the world most familiar to Tolkien fans: Middle-earth, a land of elves and dark powers and Tom Bombadil. All three worlds will be discussed in this book, along with a fourth of which Tolkien had only a glimpse before he died: that of Tolkieniana, of fandom and franchise, culminating (as of this writing) in three of the most successful movies ever

made.

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*Water, earth, and sky: a bucolic scene photographed ca. 1890, in Devon, England, where Tolkien visited as a boy.*



FOR A LONG TIME THERE WAS ONLY ONE significant biography of J. R. R. Tolkien. It was written by Humphrey Carpenter in 1977 and based, in part, on interviews he conducted with Tolkien and his family and friends.<sup>5</sup> This biography is a companion and very similar in approach to Carpenter's *The Inklings* (1978), which deals with Tolkien alongside other members of his Oxfordian circle, especially the writers C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams. Carpenter felt that Tolkien deserved separate treatment, but wisely sought to publish the biography only after Tolkien's death, for Tolkien was not at all fond of the genre. Carpenter's biography has never been surpassed, though now it should be supplemented by the published letters of Tolkien, the recently discovered war record given full treatment by John Garth, and the invaluable two-volume reference work by Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond. Tom Shippey succeeds admirably in peering into the "inner life" of Tolkien the Philologist—philology, now called historical linguistics—being both Tolkien's passion and his profession, as it is for Shippey as well).<sup>6</sup> But the handful of competing biographies, many of which appeared around the time of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, reveal little more than what Carpenter, Shippey, Garth, and Tolkien himself have provided us.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, literary criticism of at least Tolkien's major works has never been lacking. As the modern literary genre of fantasy—virtually invented by Tolkien—has matured in the second half of the twentieth century, many academics have turned to serious and scholarly discussion of its major works. Those who have specialized in Tolkien studies (see Appendix I) have been aided in recent years by the publication of annotated scholarly editions of both *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) as well as the *History of Middle-earth* series (1983–96), edited by Christopher

Tolkien, which traces the permutations of *The Lord of the Rings* and the “legendarium” (i.e., *The Silmarillion* and related stories of Middle-earth legends). The release of new Tolkien material, such as *The Children of Húrin* (2007) and *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (2009), provides yet more discussion for fans and critics alike.<sup>8</sup>

A few recent books have attempted to look at the whole Tolkien phenomenon, or at least at the varying reception of Tolkien’s fictional works over the last few decades and of Jackson’s films.<sup>9</sup> With the release of the three *Hobbit* films in 2012, 2013, and 2014, the name J. R. R. Tolkien may then be associated with one of the most successful film franchises in the history of cinema (alongside Harry Potter, James Bond, and Star Wars). Since Tolkien was overwhelmingly critical of an attempted animated version of the *Lord of the Rings* (he read the script in 1957–58) and thought that a live-action version could *never* be accomplished, one can only imagine his astonishment at the fact that his invented world is now equally as well known from cinematic images as it is from books.

Still, despite the continuing popularity of Tolkien’s books and the flurry of attention surrounding the Jackson films, no one book has attempted to connect these modern literary and cinematic threads with the Middle-earth that Tolkien knew first, the one he found in the ancient languages and poetry of northwestern Europe. Long have we known the influence of works like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* upon Tolkien’s fiction, but what of the historical cultures from whence these came? Historians and archeologists have, since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, revealed much about the cultures of the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Norse in the late Iron Age and the early Middle Ages. Tolkien himself embarked on such pursuits through his academic publications, seldom read by the fans of his fiction. *The Making of Middle Earth* will attempt to place Tolkien’s scholarship *and* his fiction within the context of his wider pursuit of knowledge about the early inhabitants of the British Isles and of the remote Germanic-speaking realms on the Continent. Both the material and the literary cultures of these ancient peoples can help us to have a deeper appreciation of Tolkien’s books and even their recent film and gaming adaptations.

In a famous 1936 essay, Professor Tolkien once excoriated historians for dismantling the masterful poem *Beowulf* in search of mundane clues about Anglo-Saxon society.<sup>10</sup> Let this book serve as an apology—not an *apologia*—from one historian who tries not to knock over towers in order to understand how they are built. In recent years archaeologists and historians have uncovered a few monuments that might even have prompted the professor to remove his ever-present pipe—if just for a moment—and take notice of the boldness and beauty, of the craft and ingenuity of his beloved Northern peoples.



*John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, ca. 1955.*

## Learning His Craft

### FROM AFRICA TO BIRMINGHAM

JOHN RONALD REUEL TOLKIEN was born on January 3, 1892, in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State, which was later incorporated into South Africa. His parents were Arthur Reuel Tolkien and Mabel Suffield, who had come to southern Africa a year earlier and were married in Capetown. Mabel gave birth to two sons there, John Ronald (later known to his friends as Ronald) and Hilary. Arthur Tolkien, a bank manager, was the descendant of German immigrants who had come to England in the eighteenth century. His eldest son later took a linguistic interest in the family name, *Tolkiehn*, with its origins in Old Saxony, birthplace of “that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe.”<sup>1</sup> But two wars against Germany—and the virulent anti-Semitism of the Nazi period—somewhat tempered Ronald’s pride in his German roots.<sup>2</sup>

Ronald Tolkien had a far greater interest in his mother’s family, the Suffields, whose origins he believed lay in the Anglo-Saxon West Midlands county. “Though a Tolkien by name, I am a Suffield by tastes, talents, and upbringing, and any corner of that country [Worcestershire] (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way ‘home’ to me, as no other part of the world is.”<sup>3</sup> It became literally home to him when, suffering from the torrid South African climate, Mabel moved back to the West Midlands, bringing Ronald and Hilary with her to live in Birmingham in 1895. Though meant to be a temporary move, it became permanent when the tragic news of Arthur Tolkien’s death from rheumatoid fever reached his family in February 1896.



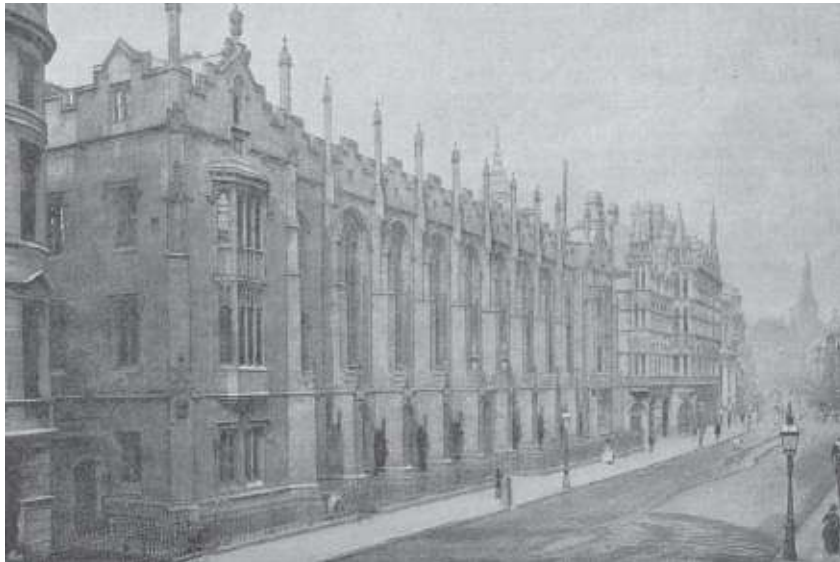
*Mabel Tolkien sent this hand-colored Christmas card from South Africa to her family, the Suffields, in Birmingham, in 1892. A nurse holds baby Ronald, then ten months old. Their cook and a servant pose with the Tolkiens.*

Africa did not have a great influence on Tolkien the writer, given that he left the land of his birth at age three (and before the outbreak of the Boer war in 1899). He later recorded a few African memories, such as being bitten by a spider that gave him slight arachnophobia—a fear embodied by

his menacing Middle-earth spiders. As a white, middle-class child surrounded by black servants, as well as an *Uitlander* (foreigner) in the eyes of the Dutch Boers, he offers an unusual colonial—perspective. However, unlike near-contemporary writers such as Kipling and T. H. White, Tolkien showed little interest in the exotic lands where many British military and civil servants found themselves in the *fin de siècle*. Instead, he clung fiercely to his English roots and remained loyal to monarchy and empire.

Mabel Tolkien raised her boys—with little help from her family—in the tiny village of Sarehole, a few miles southeast of Birmingham. Mabel never cut the fair hair of Ronald and Hilary when they were toddlers, leading the local children to call them “wenches,” an archaic term that greatly interested Tolkien in later years, during his work for the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>4</sup> To him, turn-of-the-century Worcestershire (which at that time contained Sarehole) was a land of “good water, stones and elm trees and small, quiet rivers and . . . rustic people.”<sup>5</sup> Both Ronald and Hilary would later recall their misadventures at Sarehole Mill, where the miller (“the Black Ogre”) would steal their shoes when they dipped into the millpond and his son (“the White Ogre”—white from the milled flour) would chase them back home.<sup>6</sup>

In 1900, Tolkien obtained a place at King Edward’s School in Birmingham, which had been his father’s school. Because the school was four miles from Sarehole and Mabel could not afford the train fare, she and the boys moved into the city, which Tolkien remembered as “dreadful.”<sup>7</sup> That same year Mabel Tolkien became a Roman Catholic, leading to a near complete separation from her family (her father was a Unitarian) as well as from the Tolkiens (many of whom were Baptists). She turned for support to Fr. Francis Xavier Morgan, a priest at the nearby Birmingham Oratory. When Mabel was hospitalized for diabetes in early 1904, Ronald went to stay with his Aunt Jane Neave near Brighton. Fr. Francis arranged for Mabel to convalesce in a cottage on the Oratory grounds, and her boys rejoined her there for a few months of idyllic living. But in November, she slipped into a diabetic coma and died at the cottage, with Fr. Francis at her side.



*King Edward’s School, Birmingham, 1894; Tolkien was a student there from 1900–1902, and after a brief enrollment at a different school, he returned in 1903, graduating in 1911.*

The premature death of his mother would have an enormous and lasting impact on Tolkien. One immediate result was that it drew him even more closely to the Church. In her will, Mabel had appointed Fr. Francis as her sons’ guardian, but since they could not live with the priest in the Oratory

he arranged for the boys to stay with various relatives and allowed Ronald to continue his studies at King Edward's School. Every morning the two boys would go to the Oratory and have breakfast with Fr. Francis, after which they would help him serve mass before departing for school.



*Ronald and Hilary Tolkien, 1905.*

Tolkien started to excel at King Edward's, winning a prize—a book on Roman history—on Speech Day in Autumn 1905, and becoming close to a group of like-minded schoolmates, including Christopher Wiseman, Rob Gilson, G. B. Smith, Vincent Trought, the brothers Wilfrid Hugh and Ralph Payton, Sidney Barrowclough, and T. K. “Tea-cake” Barnsley. At first it was rugby that brought these young men together, but soon they found that they shared a common interest in the history, literature, and art of the ancient and medieval worlds. In addition to the Greek and Latin of their studies, Tolkien became attracted to Old English and Gothic, Wiseman to Egyptian hieroglyphics, Smith to the Welsh language, and Gilson to early Renaissance art. During Tolkien's last term at King Edward's, he and his friends formed the Tea Club and Barrovian Society, or T.C.B.S.

*“The fire's very cosy here, and the food's very good, and there are Elves when you want them. What more could one want?”<sup>8</sup>*



—BILBO DESCRIBING RIVENDELL IN *THE RETURN OF THE KING*

These “clandestine teas [and] secretive feasts,”<sup>9</sup> which began in the school library before moving to the tearoom at the local Barrow's Stores shop, was where he sharpened his wit and ad hoc critical abilities. It is also where he found his first intellectual community, a band of brothers who conspired against the modernist tendencies of the day. Tolkien's deep affection for these gifted young men made all the more tragic the premature death of Trought in 1912 and the loss of Barnsley, Ralph Payton, Smith, and Gilson in the Great War less than five years later.

It was also during these years that Tolkien met Edith Bratt. She was a fellow orphan and lodger at



Mrs. Faulkner's house in Edgbaston, an area in Birmingham where Ronald and Hilary took up residence in 1908. Edith smuggled extra food to the boys and the three became close friends, and after many long walks and bicycle rides together the young couple declared that they were in love. Fr. Francis stepped in at this point, demanding an end to the relationship so that Tolkien could focus on his study for the Oxford entrance exams. He failed in his first attempt at an Oxford scholarship, but by the end of 1910 he had passed the Oxford and Cambridge examination and won a scholarship to study classics at Exeter College, Oxford. He wrote with the good news to Edith, now living in Cheltenham, but believed that he would have won a more prestigious scholarship had he not been distracted from Greek and Latin study by his obsession with Gothic.<sup>10</sup>



*The young Edith Bratt, 1906.*

## OXFORD

GRADUATION FROM KING EDWARD'S SCHOOL included another prize-winning speech for Tolkien, as well as his playing the role of Hermes in Aristophanes' play *Peace* (in Greek, of course). Following a walking tour of the Swiss Alps, Tolkien took up residence at Oxford's Exeter College in October 1911, his room overlooking Turl Street. He began his studies in Literae Humaniores—the honors course in classics, philosophy, and ancient history at Oxford—which then included classical history and philosophy in the original Greek and Latin. Tolkien chose comparative philology as his "Special Subject" (i.e., discipline specialization). In addition to attending lectures on Gothic by Joseph Wright, he was spending much time on both Welsh and Finnish, having recently read the Finnish epic *The Kalevala*. These languages and poems increasingly lured his attention away from his classical studies.



A recent photograph of Exeter College at Oxford, where Tolkien studied the *Literae Humaniores*.

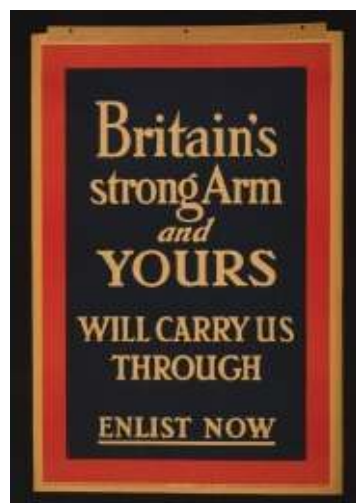
There were other distractions as well. Tolkien was active in Oxford's undergraduate extracurricular activities, including joining Exeter College's Rugby XV team and Boat Club, a debating society (the Stapledon), the Dialectical Society, and the Essay Club, of which he became president in 1914.<sup>11</sup> He also founded his own dining club, the Apolausticks, in 1912. This list does not even include the numerous teas, dinners, and concerts sponsored by his college and others in Oxford. Indeed, all of the fun and frivolity threatened to plunge Ronald Tolkien and other members of the T.C.B.S. into the world of the Oxford Aesthetes, the decadent and frivolous young men who Evelyn Waugh would later memorably describe in *Brideshead Revisited* and who both Tolkien and C. S. Lewis came to despise. Perhaps to counter this impression, Tolkien also joined King Edward's Horse, a territorial cavalry army regiment (of students drawn mostly from the colonies), which served for Tolkien as a continuity of the Officer Training Corps he had participated in with his friends at King Edward's School.

At midnight on his twenty-first birthday, Tolkien wrote to Edith in Cheltenham to explain that his feelings for her had not changed and that they could now be married. Edith informed him that she had become engaged to another man, George Field, but agreed to meet with him in Cheltenham. At the end of this visit in January of 1913, Edith broke off her engagement to be with Tolkien, even agreeing to instruction in Catholicism. That February he took the Honour Moderations (examination in classics) and received discouraging Second-Class Honours (the second honors tier of British degree ranks), though his philology essay was praised. He was then advised to start attending lectures in English language and literature, and gravitated toward Old and Middle English, receiving instruction from (among others) eminent scholars A. S. Napier and Kenneth Sisam. He also continued in philology, the study of the structural and historical development of language, a field esteemed in the nineteenth century (especially among German scholars) and now all but extinct (historical comparative linguistics is its successor). Happier with his new field of study, Tolkien continued to see Edith whenever he could, and the two became formally betrothed (though without Fr. Francis's knowledge). They were not married, however, until March 22, 1916, for Tolkien had more than just his Oxford studies weighing on his mind. By August of 1914, Germany had invaded Belgium, and the War to End All Wars had begun.

## THE GREAT WAR

IN THE MICHAELMAS (i.e., autumn) term of 1914, there was much enthusiasm among Oxford students to join the British war effort. Almost all of Tolkien's T.C.B.S. friends volunteered. Back

home, Hilary Tolkien signed up and would become a bugler in one of the Birmingham volunteer battalions in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. For Ronald Tolkien, however, the decision to fight against Germany was neither quick nor easy. Despite his cadet training at King Edward's and Exeter—and mock battles on the rugby pitch—the elder Tolkien brother took great pride in his Germanic ancestry and was passionate in his study of the Germanic languages. He also wanted to complete his degree at Oxford and to begin his academic career so that he could support both Edith and himself. A temporary solution presented itself: he could receive army officer training while continuing his studies at Oxford until called up on active duty, hopefully after he had received his degree. Over the course of the academic year, Tolkien would settle into a daily routine of military drills in the mornings, lectures and tutorials in the afternoon, and a still-active social life in the evenings. Still, there were moments of despair and depression as he watched the majority of his fellow Oxford students, and many of the young professors, leave the dreaming spires for the battlefields of France.



*In 1914, when this World War I recruitment poster was printed, Tolkien received army officer training while continuing his studies at Oxford.*

It was during this time, separated from Edith and his closest friends, that Tolkien began composing poetry in earnest. There was “Goblin Feet” (published in the volume *Oxford Poetry 1915*), “The Tides,” the Lewis Carroll-esque “The Man in the Moon Came Down Too Soon,” and “The Voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star.” This last was inspired by his reading the following lines from *Crist II*, an Old English poem composed by the Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf in the eighth or ninth century (translation follows):

*Eala Earendel! engla beorhtast  
ofer middangeard monnum sende*

Hail Earendel, brightest of angels,  
Over Middle-earth sent to men.

These lines, as Tom Shippey has shown,<sup>12</sup> were the catalyst for Tolkien’s “subcreation” of Middle-earth. (“Subcreation” is Tolkien’s term—according to the OED—for inventing an imaginary secondary world.) From here on, he would focus his vague ideas about fairies and goblins into a cohesive universe of related tales, imbued with that same Northern spirit captured by Cynewulf, who had given Tolkien a name begging for explanation. Éarendel the Mariner would become the first hero of Middle-

earth, and around his story would grow the great legendarium of which *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarilion* are only a part. But in September 1914, the seed of these great works was a poem—a brief forty-eight lines of verse penned at Phoenix Farm in Gedling (Aunt Jane’s new home), to which he gave the Old English title “Scipfæreld Earendeles *Æfensteorran*” (“The Voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star”).

Following a December meeting with T.C.B.S. members Wiseman, Smith, and Gilson—the inspirational Council of London—Tolkien also began his first systematic attempts at constructing a Gnomish language (“Gnome” becoming his preferred term for “Fairy”) that he called “Quenya,” based on the Finnish that he was now studying.



A contemporary map of the Norse mythical realm of Midgard, which inspired the name “Middle-earth.” Unlike Tolkien’s Middle-earth, Vikings believed Midgard to be surrounded by a sea that was encircled by a great serpent, *Jörmungandr*, with a land of ice to the north and one of fire to the south.

## MIDDLE-EARTH

Tolkien wrote that “Middle-earth” was not a term of his own invention, but rather a modernization of a very old word for the inhabited world of men.<sup>13</sup> The location, nature, and even spelling of Middle-earth have confused many people. But Tolkien clearly had in mind the Norse Midgard, the mythic inhabitable land between the ice-covered land of the north and the region of fire to the south. It appears in Old English as *middan-geard*, in Middle English as *midden-erd* or *middle-erd*. In Tolkien’s fiction Middle-earth is set in the midst of encircling seas. It is perhaps more than

coincidental that Tolkien's own roots were in the Midlands of England.

In June 1915, Tolkien sat for examinations in the School of English Language and Literature. No doubt the small number of students remaining, and recent British setbacks in the war, dampened the usually boisterous celebrations that follow third-year exams at Oxford. After the examinations, he applied for a temporary commission in the regular army for the remaining period of the war, requesting to be posted to the 19th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, in which G. B. Smith and other Oxonians had been serving and training in North Wales. By July, Tolkien learned that he had received First-Class Honours in English, and that he had been appointed second lieutenant in the 13th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, much to the chagrin of Smith. Lt. Tolkien reported to Bedford later that summer for officer training.



*Second Lieutenant Tolkien in uniform, 1916.*

Tolkien had begun his military training by breaking in horses for the King Edward's Horse regiment in Oxford. But in the Lancashire Fusiliers he was to break in men, and these not of the Oxbridge variety. As a junior officer, his duty was to drill the troops and prepare them for battle, treading "the dull backwaters of the art of killing."<sup>14</sup> But he chose infantry signaling as his specialty, with cryptography in particular making good use of his philological training. It was also a choice that might keep him from harm's way. By the end of January 1916, his closest T.C.B.S. friends—Wiseman, Smith, and Gilson—had all departed England for combat duty. It was not until June 6 that Tolkien left to join the British Expeditionary Force in France, arriving first at Étapes before joining his battalion at the front.<sup>15</sup> When the Battle of the Somme began on July 1, the 11th Battalion (to which he was now assigned) was held in reserve, but nevertheless fell under fire from a German field gun at Bouzincourt. Gilson and Payton were among the 400,000 British casualties of the Somme Offensive. On July 15, Tolkien's company finally went "over the top" into No Man's Land for an attack on Ovillers, which was captured the next day. In September, he was involved in the capture of a Saxon regiment at the Schwaben Redoubt during the Battle of Thiepval Ridge, and in October he also helped capture Regina Trench. Toward the end of the month, Lt. Tolkien was diagnosed with "trench fever" and transported to the British Red Cross Hospital at Le Touquet. Trench fever was caused by a bacterium transferred by the lice that were so common and numerous in the filthy trenches. On November 8, he was placed on the hospital ship HMHS *Asturias* and returned to England, to the

Southern General Hospital set up at the University of Birmingham. Although eager to rejoin his company, Tolkien would experience lingering and often severe effects from the fever that would keep him in and out of army hospitals for months. Though he did not know it then, the Great War was over for J. R. R. Tolkien.

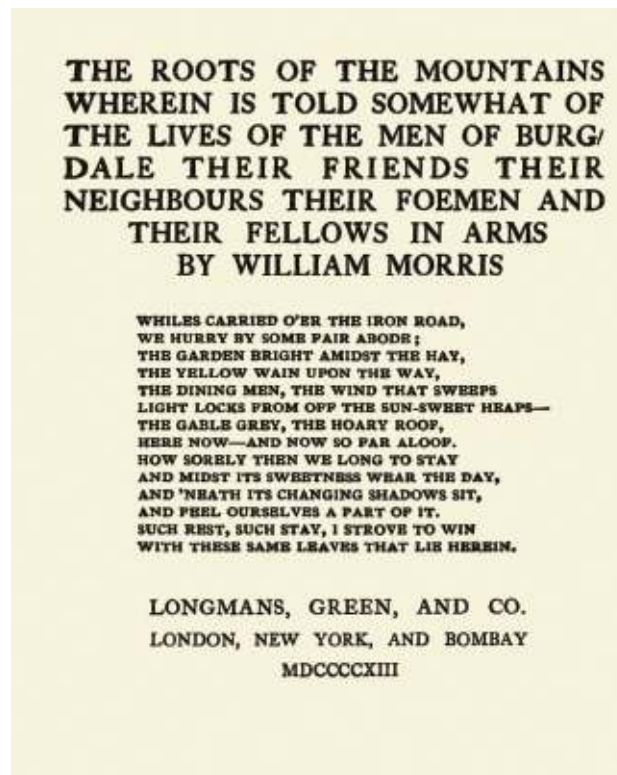


*Troops of the Lancashire Fusiliers during the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916. Tolkien's battalion would "go over the top" into No Man's Land two weeks later.*

It was also to be over soon for G. B. Smith, due to deadly gas gangrene, which developed from shrapnel wounds he received on November 29 while on routine patrol not far from Bouzincourt. Not long before this, Smith had written an impassioned letter to his friend and fellow poet from King Edward's School, with a rather poignant sign-off: "May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot."<sup>16</sup> The belief of his closest T.C.B.S. friends in his own writing abilities, and the untimely deaths especially of Gilson and Smith, laid a heavy burden on Ronald Tolkien. All their boasts of greatness and promises of cultural reform would be mere youthful illusions if he survived yet did not publish his tales of ancient and enchanted lands. "You ought to start the epic," urged the other survivor, Christopher

Wiseman. Back in the English countryside, with his wife by his side once more, J. R. R. Tolkien began systematically constructing the history of Middle-earth.

While Tolkien would later reject outright equation of battles and characters in *The Lord of the Rings* with figures and events in the World Wars, he did recognize some influence from his own wartime experiences. “The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme,” he would confess many years later. “They owe more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans, as in *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains*.”<sup>17</sup>



*The title page from the 1913 edition of The Roots of the Mountains, a novel by William Morris that influenced Tolkien. One of the earliest works of fantasy, it was originally published in 1889.*

The last sentence is characteristic of Tolkien, who, like C. S. Lewis, rejected the notion from modern criticism that contemporary concerns outweigh those of the past. Yet Tolkien also admitted that writing was therapeutic for him during the dark and terrible days in the trenches. Writing in May 1944 to his son Christopher (in training with the Royal Air Force in South Africa), who was like his father in temperament and feeling depressed by military camp conditions, the elder Tolkien suggests

I think if you could begin to *write*, . . . you would find it a great relief. I sense amongst all your pains (some merely physical) the desire to express your *feeling* about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes. Lots of the early parts of which . . . were done 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.<sup>18</sup>

What served as a positive distraction from the terrors at the front continued during Ronald Tolkien's almost two years of convalescence back in England. Sketches, notes, and poems from this period bring together the personal—new wife and home, loss of boyhood friends, horrific images from

the Western Front—with the realm of Faërie, now taking shape through the language, cosmology, and history of the “subcreator” Tolkien. Many years later, he would create a hobbit named Frodo who was healed by Elves in a remarkable place named Rivendell, “the Last Homely House east of the Sea. . . . Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness.”<sup>19</sup>

## THE LOST GENERATION

While many scholars and critics have looked to Tolkien’s wartime experiences to explain his fiction, it was not until the recent release of restricted records of British Army officers that one could speak with any specificity about the impact of the Great War on Tolkien. British author John Garth was the first to take full advantage of these records, along with private letters from both the Tolkien estate and several members of the T.C.B.S.; his book entitled *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (2003) is a fascinating study of these members of the “lost generation.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite Tolkien’s aversion to biographical criticism, there are many traces of the Great War that can be found throughout his Middle-earth works. There is, for example, the crucial relationship between Sam and Frodo. Many modern readers find it uncomfortable when they read the dialogue between Frodo and Sam that makes it clear there is a master-servant relationship between the two. Indeed, the Peter Jackson films play down this aspect of the story. Tolkien, however, supplies an explanation and context for Sam’s role in *The Lord of the Rings*. “My ‘sam Gamgee’ is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier,” he told Humphrey Carpenter, “of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as far superior to myself.”<sup>20</sup> The batman was the personal servant of the officer in the English army. Originally the man who took care of the luggage and the packhorse, the batman had become more of a valet by the late Victorian period.<sup>21</sup> Tolkien found the company of these working-class men, mostly miners and weavers from Lancashire, much preferable to that of the senior officers in his battalion.

“The Fall of Gondolin,” later incorporated into *The Book of Lost Tales* (1984), was written as Tolkien was emerging from the grips of trench fever in early 1917. Garth describes the prose tale as a “dark and complex story of an ancient civilization under siege by nightmare attackers, half-machine and half-monster . . . [with] corpse-choked waters and smoke-filled claustrophobia.”<sup>23</sup> In this struggle between good (gnomes) and evil (goblins) in the Faërie realm, we glimpse orcs and balrogs, medieval heraldry and William Morris, not to mention the iron dragons whose hollow bellies carry the enemy—a clear reference to the tanks newly employed on the Western Front. But it was the British who introduced tanks in the war, and so, as Garth points out, the goblins represent for Tolkien the evil in both camps.<sup>24</sup>



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