**J. R. R. Tolkien**

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, CBE (3 January 1892 – 2 September 1973) was an English writer, poet, philologist, and university professor, best known as the author of the high fantasy classic works The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

Tolkien was Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford from 1925 to 1945, and Merton Professor of English language and literature from 1945 to 1959. He was a close friend of C. S. Lewis—they were both members of the informal literary discussion group known as the Inklings. Tolkien was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II on 28 March 1972.

After his death, Tolkien's son, Christopher, published a series of works based on his father's extensive notes and unpublished manuscripts, including The Silmarillion. These, together with The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, form a connected body of tales, poems, fictional histories, invented languages, and literary essays about an imagined world called Arda, and Middle-earth[2] within it. Between 1951 and 1955 Tolkien applied the word legendarium to the larger part of these writings.[3]

While many other authors had published works of fantasy before Tolkien,[4] the great success of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings when they were published in paperback in the United States led directly to a popular resurgence of the genre. This has caused Tolkien to be popularly identified as the "father" of modern fantasy literature[5]—or more precisely, high fantasy.[6] Tolkien's writings have inspired many other works of fantasy and have had a lasting effect on the entire field. In 2008, The Times ranked him sixth on a list of 'The 50 greatest British writers since 1945'.[7]

**Tolkien family origins**

Most of Tolkien's paternal ancestors were craftsmen. The Tolkien family had its roots in the German Kingdom of Saxony, but had been living in England since the 18th century, becoming "quickly and intensely English".[8] The surname Tolkien is Anglicized from Tollkiehn (i.e. German tollkühn, "foolhardy", etymologically corresponding to English dull-keen, literally oxymoron), and the surname Rashbold, given to two characters in Tolkien's The Notion Club Papers, is a pun on this.[9]

Tolkien's maternal grandparents, John and Edith Jane Suffield, were Baptists who lived in Birmingham and owned a shop in the city centre. The Suffield family had run various businesses out of the same building, called Lamb House, since the early 1800s. Beginning in 1812 Tolkien's great-great grandfather William Suffield owned and operated a book and stationery shop there; Tolkien's great-grandfather, also John Suffield, was there from 1826 with a drapery and hosiery business.[10]

**Childhood**

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on 3 January 1892, in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State (now Free State Province, part of South Africa) to Arthur Reuel Tolkien (1857–1896), an English bank manager, and his wife Mabel, née Suffield (1870–1904). The couple had left England when Arthur was promoted to head the Bloemfontein office of the British bank he worked for. Tolkien had one sibling, his younger brother, Hilary Arthur Reuel, who was born on 17 February 1894.[11]

As a child, Tolkien was bitten by a baboon spider (a type of tarantula) in the garden, an event which would have later echoes in his stories. Dr. Thornton S. Quimby cared for the ailing child after the spider bite, and it is occasionally suggested that Doctor Quimby was an early model for such characters as Gandalf the Grey.[12]

When he was three, Tolkien went to England with his mother and brother on what was intended to be a lengthy family visit. His father, however, died in South Africa of rheumatic fever before he could join them.[13] This left the family without an income, so Tolkien's mother took him to live with her parents in Stirling Road, Birmingham. Soon after, in 1896, they moved to Sarehole (now in Hall Green), then a Worcestershire village, later annexed to Birmingham.[14] He enjoyed exploring Sarehole Mill and Moseley Bog and the Clent Hills and Malvern Hills, which would later inspire scenes in his books, along with other Worcestershire towns and villages such as Bromsgrove, Alcester, and Alvechurch and places such as his aunt's farm of Bag End, the name of which would be used in his fiction.[15]

Mabel tutored her two sons, and Ronald, as he was known in the family, was a keen pupil.[16] She taught him a great deal of botany, and she awakened in her son the enjoyment of the look and feel of plants. Young Tolkien liked to draw landscapes and trees, but his favourite lessons were those concerning languages, and his mother taught him the rudiments of Latin very early.[17] He could read by the age of four, and could write fluently soon afterwards. His mother allowed him to read many books. He disliked Treasure Island and The Pied Piper, and thought Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll was amusing but disturbing. He liked stories about "Red Indians" and the fantasy works by George MacDonald.[11] In addition, the "Fairy Books" of Andrew Lang were particularly important to him and their influence is apparent in some of his later writings.[18]

Tolkien attended King Edward's School, Birmingham and, while a student there, helped "line the route" for the coronation parade of King George V, being posted just outside the gates of Buckingham Palace.[19] He later attended St. Philip's School.

Mabel Tolkien was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1900 despite vehement protests by her Baptist family,[20] who then stopped all financial assistance to her. She died of acute complications of diabetes in 1904, when Tolkien was 12, at Fern Cottage in Rednal, which they were then renting. Mabel Tolkien was then about 34 years of age, about as long as a person with diabetes mellitus type 1 could live with no treatment—insulin would not be discovered until two decades later. For the rest of his own life Tolkien felt that his mother had become a martyr for her faith, which had a profound effect on his own Catholic beliefs.[21]

Prior to her death, Mabel Tolkien had assigned the guardianship of her sons to Fr. Francis Xavier Morgan of the Birmingham Oratory, who was assigned to bring them up as good Catholics. Tolkien grew up in the Edgbaston area of Birmingham. He lived there in the shadow of Perrott's Folly and the Victorian tower of Edgbaston Waterworks, which may have influenced the images of the dark towers within his works. Another strong influence was the romantic medievalist paintings of Edward Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has a large and world-renowned collection of works and had put it on free public display from around 1908.

**Youth**

In 1911, while they were at King Edward's School, Birmingham, Tolkien and three friends, Rob Gilson, Geoffrey Smith and Christopher Wiseman, formed a semi-secret society which they called "the T.C.B.S.", the initials standing for "Tea Club and Barrovian Society", alluding to their fondness for drinking tea in Barrow's Stores near the school and, illicitly, in the school library.[22] After leaving school, the members stayed in touch, and in December 1914, they held a "Council" in London, at Wiseman's home. For Tolkien, the result of this meeting was a strong dedication to writing poetry.

In the summer of 1911, Tolkien went on holiday in Switzerland, a trip that he recollects vividly in a 1968 letter,[19] noting that Bilbo's journey across the Misty Mountains ("including the glissade down the slithering stones into the pine woods") is directly based on his adventures as their party of 12 hiked from Interlaken to Lauterbrunnen, and on to camp in the moraines beyond Mürren. Fifty-seven years later, Tolkien remembered his regret at leaving the view of the eternal snows of Jungfrau and Silberhorn ("the Silvertine (Celebdil) of my dreams"). They went across the Kleine Scheidegg on to Grindelwald and across the Grosse Scheidegg to Meiringen. They continued across the Grimsel Pass and through the upper Valais to Brig, and on to the Aletsch glacier and Zermatt.[23]

In October of the same year, Tolkien began studying at Exeter College, one of the constituent colleges of the University of Oxford. He initially studied Classics but changed to English Language, graduating in 1915.

**Courtship and marriage**

At the age of 16, Tolkien met Edith Mary Bratt, who was three years older, when J.R.R. and Hilary Tolkien moved into the same boarding house. According to Humphrey Carpenter:

Edith and Ronald took to frequenting Birmingham teashops, especially one which had a balcony overlooking the pavement. There they would sit and throw sugarlumps into the hats of passers-by, moving to the next table when the sugar bowl was empty. ...With two people of their personalities and in their position, romance was bound to flourish. Both were orphans in need of affection, and they found that they could give it to each other. During the summer of 1909, they decided that they were in love.[24]

His guardian, Father Francis Morgan, viewing Edith as a distraction from Tolkien's school work and horrified that his young charge was seriously involved with a Protestant girl, prohibited him from meeting, talking, or even corresponding with her until he was twenty-one. He obeyed this prohibition to the letter,[25] with one notable early exception which made Father Morgan threaten to cut short his University career if he did not stop.[26]

On the evening of his twenty-first birthday, Tolkien wrote to Edith a declaration of his love and asked her to marry him. Edith replied saying that she had already agreed to marry another man, but that she had done so because she had believed Tolkien had forgotten her. The two met up and beneath a railway viaduct renewed their love; Edith returned her engagement ring and announced that she was marrying Tolkien instead.[27] Following their engagement Edith converted to Catholicism at Tolkien's insistence.[28] They were formally engaged in Birmingham, in January 1913, and married in Warwick, England, at Saint Mary Immaculate Catholic Church on 22 March 1916.[29]

**World War I**

Tolkien in 1916, wearing his British Army uniform (from Carpenter's Biography)

The United Kingdom was then engaged in fighting World War I, and Tolkien volunteered for military service and was commissioned in the British Army as a Second Lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers.[30] He trained with the 13th (Reserve) Battalion on Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, for eleven months. He was then transferred to the 11th (Service) Battalion with the British Expeditionary Force, arriving in France on 4 June 1916.[31] He later wrote:

Junior officers were being killed off, a dozen a minute. Parting from my wife then ... it was like a death.[32]

Tolkien served as a signals officer during the Battle of the Somme, participating in the Battle of Thiepval Ridge. He came down with trench fever, a disease carried by the lice which were so very plentiful in No Man's Land, on 27 October 1916. According to the memoirs of the Reverend Mervyn S. Evers, Anglican chaplain to the Lancashire Fusilliers:

On one occasion I spent the night with the Brigade Machine Gun Officer and the Signals Officer in one of the captured German dugouts ... We dossed down for the night in the hops of getting some sleep, but it was not to be. We no sooner laid down than hoards of lice got up. So we went round to the medical officer, who was also in the dugout with his equipment, and he gave us some ointment which he assured us would keep the little brutes away. We anointed ourselves all over with the stuff and again lay down in great hopes, but it was not to be, because instead of discouraging them it seemed to act like a kind of ors d'oeuvre and the little beggars went at their feast with renewed vigor.[33]

Tolkien was invalided to England on 8 November 1916.[34] Many of his dearest friends, including Gilson and Smith of the T.C.B.S., were killed in the war. In later years, Tolkien indignantly declared that those who searched his works for parallels to the Second World War were entirely mistaken:

One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.[35]

The weak and emaciated Tolkien spent the remainder of the war alternating between hospitals and garrison duties, being deemed medically unfit for general service.[36][37] It was at this time Edith bore their first son, John Francis Reuel Tolkien.

**Homefront**

During his recovery in a cottage in Great Haywood, Staffordshire, England, he began to work on what he called The Book of Lost Tales, beginning with The Fall of Gondolin. Throughout 1917 and 1918 his illness kept recurring, but he had recovered enough to do home service at various camps, and was promoted to lieutenant.

When he was stationed at Kingston upon Hull, he and Edith went walking in the woods at nearby Roos, and Edith began to dance for him in a clearing among the flowering hemlock:

We walked in a wood where hemlock was growing, a sea of white flowers.[38]

This incident inspired the account of the meeting of Beren and Lúthien, and Tolkien often referred to Edith as "my Lúthien."[39]

**Academic and writing career**

Tolkien's first civilian job after World War I was at the Oxford English Dictionary, where he worked mainly on the history and etymology of words of Germanic origin beginning with the letter W.[40] In 1920 he took up a post as Reader in English language at the University of Leeds, and in 1924 was made a professor there. While at Leeds he produced A Middle English Vocabulary and, (with E. V. Gordon), a definitive edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, both becoming academic standard works for many decades. In 1925 he returned to Oxford as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, with a fellowship at Pembroke College.

During his time at Pembroke, Tolkien wrote The Hobbit and the first two volumes of The Lord of the Rings, largely at 20 Northmoor Road in North Oxford, where a blue plaque was placed in 2002. He also published a philological essay in 1932 on the name 'Nodens', following Sir Mortimer Wheeler's unearthing of a Roman Asclepieion at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire, in 1928.[41]

Of Tolkien's academic publications, the 1936 lecture "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics" had a lasting influence on Beowulf research.[42] Lewis E. Nicholson said that the article Tolkien wrote about Beowulf is "widely recognized as a turning point in Beowulfian criticism", noting that Tolkien established the primacy of the poetic nature of the work as opposed to the purely linguistic elements.[43] At the time, the consensus of scholarship deprecated Beowulf for dealing with childish battles with monsters rather than realistic tribal warfare; Tolkien argued that the author of Beowulf was addressing human destiny in general, not as limited by particular tribal politics, and therefore the monsters were essential to the poem.[44] Where Beowulf does deal with specific tribal struggles, as at Finnsburg, Tolkien argued firmly against reading in fantastic elements.[45] In the essay, Tolkien also revealed how highly he regarded Beowulf: "Beowulf is among my most valued sources," and this influence can be seen in The Lord of the Rings.[46]

In 1945, Tolkien moved to Merton College, Oxford, becoming the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, in which post he remained until his retirement in 1959. Tolkien completed The Lord of the Rings in 1948, close to a decade after the first sketches.

**Family**

The last known photograph of Tolkien, taken 9 August 1973, next to one of his favourite trees (a European Black Pine) in the Botanic Garden, Oxford

The Tolkiens had four children: John Francis Reuel (17 November 1917 – 22 January 2003), Michael Hilary Reuel (22 October 1920 – 27 February 1984), Christopher John Reuel (born 21 November 1924) and Priscilla Mary Anne Reuel (born 18 June 1929). Tolkien was very devoted to his children and sent them illustrated letters from Father Christmas when they were young. There were more characters added each year, such as the Polar Bear, Father Christmas' helper, the Snow Man, the gardener, Ilbereth the elf, his secretary, and various other minor characters. The major characters would relate tales of Father Christmas' battles against goblins who rode on bats and the various pranks committed by the Polar Bear.

**Friendships**

C.S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis, whom Tolkien first met at Oxford, was perhaps his closest friend and colleague, although their relationship cooled later in their lives. They had a shared affection for good talk, laughter and beer, and in May 1927 Tolkien enrolled Lewis in the Coalbiters club, which read Icelandic sagas in the original Old Norse, and, as Carpenter notes, 'a long and complex friendship had begun.' It was Tolkien (and Hugh Dyson) who helped C.S. Lewis return to Christianity, and Tolkien was accustomed to read aloud passages from The Silmarillion, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings to Lewis' strong approval and encouragement at the Inklings—often meeting in Lewis' big Magdalen sitting-room—and in private.

It was the arrival of Charles Williams, who worked for the Oxford University Press, that changed the relationship between Tolkien and Lewis. Lewis' enthusiasm shifted almost imperceptibly from Tolkien to Williams, especially during the writing of Lewis' third novel That Hideous Strength.

Tolkien had for a long time been extremely bothered by what he perceived as Lewis's Anti-Catholicism. In a letter to his son Christopher, he declared:

... hatred of our Church is after all the only real foundation of the C[hurch] of E[ngland]—so deep laid that it remains when all the superstructure seems removed (C.S.L. for example reveres the Blessed Sacrament and admires nuns!). Yet if a Lutheran is put in jail he is up in arms; but if Catholic priests are slaughtered—he disbelieves it (and I daresay really thinks they asked for it).[47]

Lewis' growing reputation as a Christian apologist and his return to the Anglican fold also annoyed Tolkien, who had a deep resentment of the Church of England. By the mid-forties, Tolkien felt that Lewis was receiving a good deal "too much publicity for his or any of our tastes".[48]

Tolkien and Lewis might have grown closer during their days at Headington but this was prevented by Lewis' marriage to Joy Davidman. Tolkien felt that Lewis expected his friends to pay court to her, even though as a bachelor in the thirties, he had often ignored the fact that his friends had wives to go home to. Tolkien also may have felt jealous about a woman's intrusion into their close friendship, just as Edith Tolkien had felt jealous of Lewis' intrusion into her marriage.[citation needed] It did not help matters that Lewis did not initially tell Tolkien about his marriage to Davidman or that when Tolkien finally did find out, he also discovered that Lewis had married a divorcee, which was offensive to Tolkien's Catholic beliefs. He later described himself as extremely bother by Lewis' "strange marriage".[citation needed]

The cessation of Tolkien's frequent meetings with Lewis in the 1950s marked the end of the 'clubbable' chapter in Tolkien's life, which started with the T.C.B.S. at school and ended with the Inklings at Oxford.

His friendship with Lewis was nevertheless renewed to some degree in later years. As Tolkien was to comment in a letter to Priscilla after Lewis' death in November, 1963:

So far I have felt the normal feelings of a man of my age - like an old tree that is losing all its leaves one by one: this feels like an axe-blow near the roots.[49]

**W.H. Auden**

W. H. Auden was also a frequent correspondent and long-time friend of Tolkien's, initiated by Auden's fascination with The Lord of the Rings: Auden was among the most prominent early critics to praise the work. Tolkien wrote in a 1971 letter:

I am […] very deeply in Auden's debt in recent years. His support of me and interest in my work has been one of my chief encouragements. He gave me very good reviews, notices and letters from the beginning when it was by no means a popular thing to do. He was, in fact, sneered at for it.[50]

**Retirement and old age**

During his life in retirement, from 1959 up to his death in 1973, Tolkien received steadily increasing public attention and literary fame. The sale of his books was so profitable that he regretted he had not chosen early retirement.[17] While at first he wrote enthusiastic answers to reader inquiries, he became more and more suspicious of emerging Tolkien fandom, especially among the hippie movement in the United States.[51] In a 1972 letter he deplores having become a cult-figure, but admits that:

... even the nose of a very modest idol [...] cannot remain entirely untickled by the sweet smell of incense![52]

Fan attention became so intense that Tolkien had to take his phone number out of the public directory[53] and eventually he and Edith moved to Bournemouth on the south coast.

Tolkien was awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace on 28 March 1972.

**Death**

Edith Tolkien died on 29 November 1971, at the age of 82.[54] Tolkien had the name Lúthien engraved on the stone at Wolvercote Cemetery, Oxford.