

## Praise for *Tolkien's Modern Reading*

"Wonderfully and captivatingly fierce. . . . I found myself engaged without the desire for relief from the opening sentence of the book to the last. Indeed, rarely have I been so immersed in a work as I was in this one. . . . Ordway has achieved something grand. This book is not merely for Tolkien fans, but for anyone curious about modern literature and its vast influence on our culture. . . . *Tolkien's Modern Reading* is not only a serious achievement, it is a thing of immense beauty."

—Bradley J. Birzer, in *Law & Liberty*

"Admirable . . . impressive . . . interesting. . . . Holly Ordway's book deserves a place on any shelf of Tolkien studies, and we will be making grateful use of it to improve our *Tolkien Companion and Guide*."

—Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, in *Too Many Books and Never Enough*

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—Martin Simonson, in the *Journal of Inklings Studies*

"Scholars have been aware of a significant portion of Tolkien's modern reading in scattered bits and pieces. Ordway's work is a cumulative case argument where she brings together all of these threads and presents them as a comprehensive picture of Tolkien's reading habits. That is what differentiates her work and makes it especially valuable."

—Zak Schmoll, in *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review*

"Ordway shows a cultural and contextual understanding of a man who is entirely English . . . which is not always the case in American writers. . . . She has entered into Tolkien's own real-world drama, and revealed keen insights into his creative literary background. . . . *Tolkien's Modern Reading* should be on the bookshelf of any serious Tolkien reader."

—Michael Halsall, in *The Portal: The Monthly Review of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham*

“Engrossing. . . . A sheer delight. . . . Presents an enlightening new view of the way Tolkien carried himself personally and professionally. *Tolkien’s Modern Reading* is simply one of the most serious, yet most enjoyable works of scholarship dedicated to this famed Hobbit-like man in recent years. It is a necessary inclusion in anyone’s Tolkien collection.”

—*The University Bookman*

“There is much to savor in Ordway’s book. . . . I myself was particularly grateful for Ordway’s close attention to William Morris. . . . To learn that Tolkien’s imperial Orcs depend far more on Morris’ Romans and Huns than peoples any further south than the Mediterranean is a refreshment and historiographical delight, as is Ordway’s commendable contrast of Tolkien’s Wild Men with the unambiguously racist portrayals of Australian aborigines in books like Alexander Macdonald’s *The Lost Explorers*. . . . I could easily go on, so rich is the dragon’s hoard of authors and references. . . . Ordway’s book is massively well-researched and engagingly written.”

—*Athwart Magazine*

“Dr. Ordway’s new book is a major contribution to Tolkien studies – meticulously researched, carefully organized, and written in clear, pleasing prose. Sometimes readers of Tolkien scholarship may begin to feel ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’ But Holly’s book is indeed new, as well as refreshing, and insightful.”

—**David C. Downing**, co-director of the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, in *Off The Shelf*

“Opens up a whole new avenue of scholarship. . . . A worthy addition to the myriad books and articles about Tolkien and his Middle-earth legendarium. And while it is a work of scholarship, it is also readable, entertaining and illuminating.”

—*National Catholic Register*

“Solid . . . brilliant . . . valuable. . . . The extent of Ordway’s research is impressive. . . . What she has written is a great work of synthesis.”

—**David Bratman**, in *Kalimac’s Corner*

“Dr. Ordway has combed carefully through expected and unexpected sources. . . . Even Tolkienists not especially interested in Tolkien’s attention to modern literature should read the book’s final chapter on the misleading influence of the Carpenter biography and on an element of playacting in the Professor’s self-presentation. . . . When I finished reading it, I put the book down, rose to my feet, and applauded Dr. Ordway’s achievement.”

—**Dale Nelson**, in *Beyond Bree*

*Tolkien's Modern Reading:  
Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages*

HOLLY ORDWAY



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To Michael Ward

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La Crosse, Wisconsin

October 21, 2020

Feast of the Ordination of St. Dunstan



J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973)



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## Prelude

“**T**HAT’S THE INGLESANT HOUSE,” HIS MOTHER HAD SAID WHEN she stood with him on this spot back in the summer of 1904, her last summer. “The house where *John Inglesant* was written.” But Ronald hadn’t then read that celebrated novel and knew nothing about it or its author. He had now remedied the omission. Five years had passed since his mother’s death, exactly five years (“five summers with the length of five long winters” he whispered to himself). He had read a lot of books, an awful lot of books, since that terrible day. At the Oratory the priests said he read too much. He glanced along the road to his left, admiring for the umpteenth time the dome of Birmingham’s newest church, just visible against the pre-dawn November sky. He would still make it in time to serve at Mass for Fr. Francis. But how could you read too much? he asked himself, returning his gaze to the Inglesant house. He recalled how his mother had held the handle of the garden gate on that summer’s afternoon, a playful look in her eye, as if suggesting they should knock on the front door and demand to be shown round. He hadn’t risen to her dare. He touched the gate now, ruminatively. The house was silent, asleep amid the gloom – yes, the encircling gloom – its inhabitants like the holy souls in purgatory, still waiting for morning. Too much for what, for whom?

*John Inglesant*, as it turned out, was a florid, sprawling, philosophical romance set in the English Civil War. A young man fights on the Royalist side, travels widely in Italy, struggles between loyalty to Anglicanism and the call of Rome, and finally learns to forgive the wretch who killed his brother. It was not quite like anything else Ronald had read. Take a sensational plot by Rider Haggard, fill it with gallant heroes from Herbert Hayens, mix in historical color à la William Morris, garnish with *The Hound of Heaven*’s religious fervor, and you’d still only have a rough approximation. There was nothing else even by the same author that could have prepared him for what he found in the novel, or not that was worth reading. Henry Shorthouse was in essence a one-book wonder, like Emily Brontë with *Wuthering Heights*, like Anna Sewell with *Black Beauty*. Shorthouse had written *John Inglesant* painstakingly, passionately, by the light of an old oil lamp, over the course of ten years in that front parlor just a few feet away. “There he is, still scribbling,” Mrs. Warner would say to herself each night, from her door opposite, as she let the cat out. She had told young Ronald many times about her nocturnal glimpses of the great man. Just seeing the novel being written was a claim to fame.

Ronald nodded to Mrs. Warner now in the thinning gloom as she got herself through her front gate at number 19 and made a start for the Oratory. He would easily beat her to the seven o’clock Mass. She would have to stump all the way round past The Plough and Harrow and out onto the main road, whereas he could just slip in through the side door of the cellar and so up to the sacristy. He was an old hand now as an acolyte

and knew precisely how long it would take to prepare the altar, and he'd be even quicker today without his little brother getting in the way. Hilary was laid up in bed, back in the top room they shared at Mrs. Faulkner's. What was it this time? Whooping cough again? Scarlet fever? Chicken pox? And today of all days. St. Hilary, pray for him!

Ronald shivered in the early air. Perhaps he had caught something himself. He looked weak and white as a ghost: tense of face, narrow-shouldered, a scrawny seventeen-year-old not yet begun to fill out. But for all his pallor he was strong enough and tough on the rugby pitch, daring, even reckless in his tackles, his body exulting in the sprints and impacts, a welcome relief from the life he lived behind his high forehead, all words and worlds, words that made worlds.

He sighed and noticed his breath. What was he going to *do* with his life? The imminent scholarship exam at Corpus Christi College reared up in his mind yet again. Oxford! He simply *must* get into Oxford! And 'Corpus Christi' – the Body of Christ: what could be better? But he had little hope; somehow something wasn't quite right about it. He shook his head deeper into his scarf.

A light suddenly showed behind the curtain of an upstairs room in the house before him. Who lived there now, he wondered? The *Inglesant* author had died the year before his mother, and all the local papers loudly lamented his demise. For if Henry Shorthouse was highly regarded on the national stage, he was virtually deified in Birmingham. But did he really deserve such attention? Ronald's mother had once pointed out a strange little man exiting St John's, Ladywood, whom he had eyed with a curiosity that was two parts admiration, three parts suspicion. A small, fabulously bewhiskered businessman with something of the renaissance count about his costume – was he a poseur or merely eccentric? He was Anglican, of course – the high church kind, despite his Quaker roots, a votary of the Oxford Movement, yet unable to bring himself to embrace the final lunacy of Romanism. How ironic that his house should have stood, should still stand, in the shadow of Newman's Oratory! So close and yet so far . . .

His novel was such a palpable hit that Shorthouse had even found himself discussing it with Prime Minister Gladstone in Downing Street, and Lord Acton had called *John Inglesant* the most thoughtful and suggestive novel since *Middlemarch*. There's glory for you! He was lionized, fêted, venerated – a nice change, no doubt, from the family firm and that dull career in chemical manufacturing he'd made do with till then. Goodbye, vitriol; hello, soft soap! Even the occasional American reader was brought to his door, earnestly voicing enthusiasm. Or so said Ronald's old maths teacher at King Edward's School, Mr. Levett. "My dear Levett, I dedicate this volume to you," Shorthouse had written, upon the novel's release in 1881, "that I may have an opportunity of calling myself your friend."

Friendship, fame, fortune, freedom . . . all flowing from *fiction*. Real things could come, somehow, from imaginings, and the Inglesant house embodied them all. Here it stood – curtains still closed, chimneys unsmoking, one lamp now showing downstairs – almost on his *own* doorstep; he could see its roof from the attic window at Mrs.

Faulkner's. A mere four hundred yards separated his cramped, decayed lodgings there in Duchess Road from this temple of fame: Number 6, Beaufort Road, where the great work first saw the light of day. So close. . . . He shook his head, bumping his fist on the gate-post. Something was not as it should be. He glanced to his left again. There, at the end of the road stood the real temple. It was time – oops, it was past time – to get to Mass. Corpus Christi beckoned.

As the tall, pale, wiry boy hastened to the Oratory, his mind began to churn. Modern literature could be so strange, exciting, debatable. For what was Shorthouse's novel really about? Its title was a nod to St. George, the Patron Saint of England (the *Ingle sant*), but its story suggested that Englishmen shunned popery if they were wise. Yet St. George had been adopted as the national saint when England was still a Catholic realm, 'Mary's Dowry,' on good terms with the rest of the Church. It didn't make sense. Where were the modern novelists who understood the old religion and the soul of the country, yet could also tell an epic tale that gripped the reader and wouldn't let go? MacDonald was too dreamy; Kipling too gung-ho; Conan Doyle too cut-and-dried. Who among them would ever be able to write a true mythology for England, for the world?

Loosening his scarf, Ronald strode across the Plough and Harrow Road, let himself carefully into the damp cellar, then hopped up the steps to the sacristy where he found Fr. Francis waiting, tapping his thumb against the thurible stand. He had done all the preparations himself.

"No Hilary?"

"Ill. Again. Plague, I think. Or cholera."

"Sorry to hear it. And what a day for it, too. Five years on . . ."

"Yes. I know. Sorry I'm late, Father."

A prayer. Ronald rings the bell, takes a dip of holy water from the stoup, pausing to wet the fingers of his guardian in turn, as the two cross themselves and process to the side altar.

"Introibo ad altare Dei," says the priest.

But Ronald's mind is on Greek, not Latin. That epigraph to *Inglesant* – how did it run? Something from the First Epistle of St. John:

Ἀγαπητοί, νῦν τέκνα Θεοῦ ἐσμεν, καὶ οὐπω ἐφανερώθη τί ἐσόμεθα . . .

*"Beloved, we are God's children now: it does not yet appear what we shall be."*



## Tolkien the Medievalist

### *Turning Over a New Leaf*

**J**OHAN RONALD REUEL TOLKIEN WAS BORN A VICTORIAN, AT THE HEIGHT of British hope and glory, when the Empire covered one quarter of the globe, that Empire upon which the sun never set. He died in the reign of Victoria's great-great-granddaughter, Elizabeth, whose coronation he watched on television, the Empire now a thing of the past.

Men of his vintage saw more change than any other generation in human history: an observation so often made that it has become a commonplace. But this commonplace is true and worth restating as we assess Tolkien's modern reading and the role it played in his personal formation and creative sense. For that very word 'modern' – and its cognates, *modernity*, *modernist*, *modernize* – took on new connotations and new significance during his lifetime. At his birth, public transport went little faster than the speed of a trotting horse; by his death, supersonic flight was the modern reality. The British army still conducted cavalry charges when he was born in 1892; it possessed a nuclear arsenal when he died in 1973. He witnessed the rise of brutalism in architecture, of atonalism in music, of logical positivism in philosophy. He saw massive changes in attitudes to marriage, divorce, and the role of women. The Catholic liturgy he grew up on was transformed by the Second Vatican Council. The very coins in his pocket were different after decimalization of the pound sterling. He came into being alongside *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; he passed away as Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* was released.

And during these years and decades, as young John Ronald grew into manhood and maturity, stretching his imaginative muscles . . . slowly but surely, Middle-earth was coming into existence.

J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium – of which *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* form only a part – was the work of a lifetime. What inspired its creation? What was the soil that nourished the imagination of its author? How did Middle-earth come to be?

The most common and widely accepted answer has been that Tolkien was fundamentally rooted and grounded in the past, partaking only minimally of the modern world, and that we should therefore look to medieval literature for an understanding of his literary creations.

Many of the earliest readers thought so. Consider the words of praise on the dust-jacket of the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*: "He has instilled elements of Norse, Teutonic and Celtic myth to make a strange but coherent world of his own"; "One takes it completely seriously: as seriously as Malory"; "If Ariosto rivalled it in invention (in fact he does not) he would still lack its heroic seriousness."<sup>1</sup> Early reviewers concurred. Its genre, W.H. Auden declared, was "the Heroic Quest"; one writer affirmed that in the depths of Middle-earth "we hear Snorri Sturluson and Beowulf, the sagas and the Nibelungenlied," and another described it as "perhaps the last literary masterpiece of the Middle Ages."<sup>2</sup>

Yet here we find something puzzling. This apparently thoroughgoing medieval work has gone on to have enduring popularity, both in its own right as a piece of literature and also as adapted into a critically and commercially successful trilogy of feature films. Not only that, both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* have an international reach, finding huge readerships well beyond the Anglophone world. They have been translated into several dozen languages, including Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Russian, Thai, and Turkish. The popularity of Tolkien's posthumously published tales from the legendarium is also astonishing: twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, featuring drafts and revisions of the published works, and unfinished writings in various stages of completion, were released not as academic titles for a niche audience but by a mainstream publisher. Not only are these volumes of seemingly specialist interest still in print, but the stand-alone books drawn from this body of material (such as *The Children of Húrin* and *The Fall of Gondolin*) have become best-sellers in their own right, reviewed in major newspapers. This abiding, global popularity seems to require explanation; it is not quite what one would expect of works produced in the Western European medieval tradition by an author who deliberately isolated himself from the modern world.\*

Can we really suppose that Middle-earth is simply a rehash of the Middle Ages? How many people read Malory these days? Who has even heard of Ariosto? Do people take *Beowulf* to the beach? Indeed, once we press beyond immediate reactions to the work and canvass more considered responses, we find that the picture quickly becomes much more complex. Two contributors to an early critical study of *The Lord of the Rings* described the novel as "anomalous" and "genreless."<sup>3</sup> The label that reviewers first reached for – "medieval" – soon showed itself to be not precisely germane.

Nonetheless, the popular image of Tolkien presents him as averse to modernity, firmly (and by his own choice) stuck in the past. Didn't he think even Shakespeare was too modern? This is the point of view taken, for instance, by the BBC radio drama *Tolkien in Love* (2017), in which the Tolkien character says that "everything after 1066

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\* For instance, *The Lord of the Rings* ranked #1 in both the 1997 Waterstones Book of the Century poll and the BBC's 2007 "The Big Read" poll for "the nation's best-loved novel," was included in *The Telegraph's* "100 novels everyone should read" in 2014, and was a finalist in the 2018 PBS "Great American Read" poll. In the first week of its release, *The Fall of Gondolin* (2018) was the #1 bestseller on the *New York Times* hardcover fiction list.



should be excised from schools.” The Dome Karukoski biopic (2019) likewise implies that Tolkien’s interests were thoroughly pre-modern. It is routinely assumed by cultural commentators that Tolkien was a “backward-looking person”<sup>4\*</sup> and that he valued nothing beyond the boundaries of his professional interest in medieval literature. We need not bother, therefore, to consider his modern reading; it must have been minimal, something he dismissed as worthless, just as he rejected anything that smacked of the modern day.

After all, wasn’t he an arch-conservative? Witness his curmudgeonly attitude to the twentieth century in which he regrettably found himself: he opposed the abandonment of liturgical Latin; objected to “Americo-cosmopolitanism”; described gasoline-powered chainsaws as “one of the greatest horrors of our age”; and deplored the “present design of destroying Oxford in order to accommodate motor-cars.”<sup>5</sup> Clyde Kilby recalled, “One day while sitting in the back yard of Tolkien’s house a loud motorcycle came by and totally interrupted our conversation. Tolkien said ‘That is an Orc.’”<sup>6</sup> All these stances and statements contribute to the popular impression that he had little knowledge of or taste for anything more up-to-date than Chaucer. Although he wasn’t actually responsible for the quip “Literature stops in 1100; after that there’s only books,” it has often been attributed to him because it is so clearly the reactionary sort of the thing he might have said. Clearly. Clearly.

The idea that Tolkien was immune to influence by his contemporaries is another part of this standard picture. His great friend C.S. Lewis famously remarked, “as for anyone influencing Tolkien, you might as well (to adapt the White King) try to influence a bandersnatch.”<sup>7</sup> Tom Shippey remarks that “When it comes to modern writers, Tolkien was notoriously beyond influence.”<sup>8</sup> John D. Rateliff says that Tolkien’s response to suggestions of influence was to “steadfastly deny any post-medieval source.”<sup>9</sup> (Whether he in fact *did* habitually deny post-medieval sources, as is generally taken for granted, is a question to which we will attend in the next chapter.)

Early scholarship on Tolkien’s work reinforced this image of him as an isolated, medieval-focused writer. Humphrey Carpenter’s account of Tolkien’s creative life, as presented in his 1977 biography (the only one as yet to be authorized by the Tolkien family), along with his 1978 group study of the Inklings, seemed definitive, and has had a powerful impact for many years – tending to squelch further study of Tolkien’s modern reading. We will have more to say about Carpenter’s work shortly. For now let us quote his highly inaccurate statement: “the major names in twentieth-century writing meant little or nothing to [Tolkien]. He read very little modern fiction, and took no serious notice of it.”<sup>10</sup>

According to the general consensus, then, Tolkien was clearly, notoriously, steadfastly medieval – but was he?

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\* Annika Röttinger observes that it is a “common cliché” to view Tolkien as an “anti-modern traditionalist who conservatively defends himself against any kind of industrial progress and therefore flees from reality” (“The Great War in Middle-earth,” 64).

❧ **“He read very little modern fiction, and took no serious notice of it”?**

It is true, as Tom Shippey argues in his magisterial *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*, that the power of Tolkien's writing “almost self-evidently had something to do with his job”<sup>11</sup> \* – that job being, of course, his work as a philologist, specializing in medieval language and literature. Jane Chance notes that “Where Tolkien turned to find the stuff and fabric of this ‘mythology for England’ was clearly the medieval world he knew so well from his scholarly studies.”<sup>12</sup> In making these points, Chance and Shippey, and the other critics whom they represent in this approach, are correct in what they assert but, I believe, mistaken in what, by omission, they appear to deny. As Verlyn Flieger recognizes, there is a very common tendency to conflate Tolkien's medieval scholarship with his creative work: “Because we know that Tolkien was a scholar of medieval literature and language . . . we assume that he must necessarily have written his fiction in the same mode in which he studied and taught. We are partly right.”<sup>13</sup>

*We are partly right.* Flieger defines the situation nicely. Middle-earth evidently owes much to the Middle Ages, and Tolkien's deep and broad debts to medieval source material in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Silmarillion* have been amply and rightly acknowledged by scholars. Yes, Tolkien was, above all things, a medievalist. That is obvious, and it cannot be gainsaid, but it does not follow that he had no interest in literature beyond the Middle Ages. Too many critics have stopped with his medieval interests, making scant attempt to trace his engagement with subsequent literature – or they have merely noted it, assuming that it must be an exception to the rule and not worth more than a passing mention.

It is the aim of this book to provide a fresh view, and to correct the critical imbalance that has affected Tolkien scholarship. His modern reading was both more far-reaching than people have realized, and more significant for his creative imagination† than has been assumed. If we recognize this, our understanding of and appreciation for Middle-earth – and of Tolkien himself – will be enriched.

Tolkien said of *The Lord of the Rings* that such a story “grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps.”<sup>14</sup>

*Out of all that has been read.* As we will discover, Tolkien read a great deal of modern literature, and in a variety of different genres, including children's stories, historical

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\* Nevertheless Shippey later noted that scholarly perspectives in this area had certain blind spots. He observed that one of the areas not adequately addressed in Tolkien criticism is “the influences on him of writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so often now deeply unfashionable, forgotten and out of print” (“Guest Editorial: An Encyclopedia of Ignorance,” 3).

† ‘Imagination’ is often taken as synonymous with ‘creativity.’ However, Tolkien also used his imagination in his scholarship, literary criticism, and teaching, albeit in different modes and in different ways. By using the phrase ‘creative imagination,’ I am referring to his imagination as it operated in his reception and production of fictional literature and visual art.

fiction, fantastic romances, adventure, science fiction, detective stories, literary fiction, and poetry. He did so throughout his life, from childhood and youth (where he favored authors such as Edith Nesbit, Francis Thompson, and William Morris), up until right before his death (when we find him enjoying Sterling Lanier, Dylan Thomas, and Mark Twain). From the care with which he recorded his opinions it is evident that he engaged modern literature with his critical faculties in gear. This was not just holiday reading, undertaken to fill up tedious train journeys or as a distraction while recovering from illness. No, he read thoughtfully, discerningly, and receptively. To be sure, the other elements of his fertile 'leaf-mould' – principally his medieval reading, but also the study of languages, his personal friendships with the Inklings and other formative experiences, especially in the Great War – occupy a more important place in his creative imagination. My argument in this book is that they are not the *only* materials upon which he drew. Tolkien knew modern literature, and was oriented toward the modern world, to a greater degree than we have hitherto realized.\* Acknowledging this aspect of his creative process will enhance our ability to interpret and enjoy his work.

Let me not be misunderstood: I shall not be arguing that his modern reading is *more* important than his medieval reading, nor even that it is *equally* important. Given his professional work as well as his personal interests, his modern reading is undoubtedly a relatively minor element in the total picture. But it is present and should not be overlooked.

As we will see in this study, the modern writers whose work was important to Tolkien included not only still-famous names such as Beatrix Potter and C.S. Lewis, but figures who will be only dimly known to many readers: Lord Dunsany, Herbert Hayens, E.H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, Wilfred Childe, Roy Campbell. Some of the authors whom Tolkien read were best-sellers at the time, but who now has heard of J.H. Shorthouse? Yet Shorthouse's novel *John Inglesant* was widely read, admired, and discussed in Tolkien's day and may have had an important influence on *The Lord of the Rings* (as we will discuss in chapter 10). Shorthouse and others are no longer household names, but they were once very much in fashion, and Tolkien knew their works well. The fact that today they have largely disappeared from the public consciousness, and even the consciousness of literary critics by and large, means that it takes strenuous mental effort to recapture his perspective.

However, before we start to make that strenuous effort, we should first ask an important preliminary question, so that we may survey the whole situation with fresh eyes. How did this oversimplification of Tolkien as nostalgic and un-influenceable become so firmly embedded in the popular and scholarly view? Four points are worth considering.

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\* By his 'modern reading' I principally mean his reading of *literature* pure and simple (see chapter 2). But I also mean, as a peripheral consideration, his 'reading' of contemporary culture more generally: what he made of visual art, of modern technology, of changes in the role of women, of the daily news, and so forth. These matters, though they are not at all my main concern, will be glanced at *en route* since they are adjacent to the path I am pursuing: his reading of modern fiction, poetry, and drama.

## ❧ “It’s a challenge to try and tarnish”: Carpenter on Tolkien

First, certain statements by Humphrey Carpenter, in his life of Tolkien and in his group biography of the Inklings, have profoundly shaped views on Tolkien’s attitudes. Carpenter, as we noted above, summed up Tolkien’s reading with the terse statement: “He read very little modern fiction, and took no serious notice of it.”<sup>15</sup> Since Carpenter is to date the only biographer to have enjoyed unfettered access to the Tolkien papers, naturally his opinion carries weight. However, before we place any great trust in this verdict, we would do well to investigate Carpenter and see what claim he has to being an objective and unbiased reporter.\*

Carpenter freely confessed that he brought certain very strong preconceptions to his project. In a revealing interview, he admits:

The first biography I did in book form was the life of Tolkien, and I thought, here is this rather comic Oxford academic – the stereotype absent-minded professor – who would be lecturing on Beowulf with a parcel of fish from the fishmongers sticking out of his pocket. And the first draft of the book was written very much in that mode, treating him as slightly slapstick. At least it began that way. But as the book went on, I realized he wasn’t like this at all. He had had a very strange childhood. His mother had died early (his father was already dead) and he was brought up by a Roman Catholic priest – an unlikely parent-figure. Consequently he acquired certain uptight Pauline moral values. And my caricature of the Oxford academic clashed with his [sic], and I never resolved it properly.<sup>16</sup>

By Carpenter’s own admission, then, he began this, his first ever formal biography, in a “slapstick” mode.† He came to realize, however, that the “caricature” he was drawing had to be complexified by his discovery that Tolkien had experienced a “strange” childhood and had thereby acquired “uptight” values. Finally, he “never resolved” the two perspectives.

And it was not only the biographer himself who had mixed feelings about the work. Carpenter reveals that the first draft of his book was “deemed unacceptable by the Tolkien family.”<sup>17</sup> Rayner Unwin, whose firm published the *Biography*, confirms that Tolkien’s son, Christopher, “carefully and critically tore Humphrey’s draft to pieces”;

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\* Humphrey William Bouverie Carpenter was born in 1946 and grew up at Keble College, Oxford, where his father was Warden from 1939–1955 before being appointed Bishop of Oxford. Carpenter was educated at the Dragon School in Oxford and read English at Keble, after which he went into a career as a radio broadcaster and biographer. He died in 2005.

† Carpenter wrote the book in under two years, even though he was faced with a huge amount of material in a very disorganized state. Considering that Carpenter was not an experienced researcher or biographer – this was his debut – it seems a remarkably short time to devote to the whole process.

Carpenter then “retreated to his bedroom for a week or two and re-wrote the whole book which, in its revised form, Christopher approved and it was given to us to publish.”<sup>18</sup>

It seems almost incredible that Carpenter would have been able to address such a thorough critique in a mere fortnight, and in fact he said later, “What I’d actually done was castrated the book, cut out everything which was likely to be contentious.”<sup>19</sup> A revision that omitted the most egregious passages would indeed have been feasible to complete in just a week or two – but Carpenter didn’t have the time, even if he had the inclination, to address more subtle flaws of interpretation or misrepresentation.\*

Carpenter also admitted that he had convinced the Tolkien family to appoint him official biographer by “charm” and by playing on their fears: “I went to them one by one and said, ‘Look, I don’t know much about writing biography, but I did know your father a little, and I know Oxford, I know the milieu in which he operated, and I think if you don’t get somebody who has those advantages, you’ll probably find a worse biographer coming along.’”<sup>20</sup> Better the devil you know . . .

There is a certain roguish honesty in these disclosures, and they comport with Carpenter’s own self-image as someone who knows ‘the establishment’ from the inside but is not part of it. Indeed, he saw himself as somewhat anti-establishment: “I am always looking for idols to demolish, because I’m that sort of person,” he said. “Upsetting the loyal fans is one of my main aims. I’ve always explained this aggression to myself by saying that around each figure there’s an absurd cult of admirers, people who want the great person to remain untarnished. And it’s a challenge to try and tarnish them.”<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, Carpenter reveals a dismissive attitude regarding Tolkien’s academic work with the back-handed compliment: “Tolkien was probably the greatest scholar of Anglo-Saxon who ever lived; but it’s a dead subject, having been replaced by structuralism.”<sup>22</sup> In Carpenter’s mind, then, Tolkien’s professional career was wasted on an irrelevant and out-of-date topic, and it was his duty as an iconoclast aggressively to expose his subject’s feet of clay. He came not to praise Tolkien, but to bury him, an approach that is more or less summed up in the title of his 1992 BBC radio play: “In a Hole in the Ground, There Lived a Tolkien.”†

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\* For instance, Carpenter describes Tolkien’s guardian, Fr. Francis Morgan, as “not a man of great intellect” and “not a clever man” (*Biography* 34, 52) but offers no evidence or explanation for this judgment. Fr. Francis had in fact been Cardinal Newman’s personal secretary – hardly a role for a dullard – and José Manuel Ferrández Bru points out that his “room full of books attests to his obvious love of reading and knowledge” (*“Uncle Curro”: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Spanish Connection*, 57–58). Fr. Francis was also bilingual; the teenaged Tolkien attempted to teach himself Spanish with some of his books (*Letters*, 213).

† Carpenter wrote this radio play for the centenary of Tolkien’s birth, and it undoubtedly added to the popular image of Tolkien as a silly, fastidious figure who was stuck in the past. Douglas A. Anderson explains that in the play, “Tolkien was portrayed with unceasing absurdity, as an irredeemably absent-minded professor who wanders around Leeds randomly shouting out strange terms like ‘smakkabagms’ . . . [Carpenter] had by this time forgotten virtually everything about Tolkien he had ever known, save for a few representative phrases and some facts that could be woven together into a caricature” (“Obituary,” 222).

With all these facts in mind, we would be wise to approach Carpenter's judgments with caution. And I am not the first to raise such doubts about his reliability. Hammond and Scull note that the *Biography*, useful as it is, has "problems of emphasis or interpretation." Nicole M. duPlessis has carefully analyzed Carpenter's biases regarding Tolkien's marriage.<sup>23</sup>

The deficiencies in the *Biography* have been, until recently, difficult to detect, let alone challenge or correct. Omission of information, and interpretation in the guise of reportage, can sometimes have a stronger and more persistent distorting effect than outright error. When it comes to Tolkien's taste for and interest in contemporary literature, Carpenter's bold claim that "he read very little modern fiction, and took no serious notice of it" needs to be approached with extreme circumspection.

### **Letters in the shadow of the *Biography***

Second, this mistaken 'conventional wisdom' about Tolkien was able to take a firmer hold because for years Carpenter had effectively cornered the market in Tolkien scholarship. Not only had he written the first biography (1977) and the first major study of the Inklings (1978), he was also responsible for the publication of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981). Admittedly, this project was undertaken "with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien," but that very phrasing (which appears on the front cover of the book) – a most unusual way of describing editorial collaboration – suggests an uneasy relationship. The awkward phraseology indicates that something of a strain had developed between Carpenter and the Tolkien family, after his biography draft was "deemed unacceptable" and hastily revised.\*

The volume of letters undoubtedly reflects something of Carpenter's unsympathetic attitude toward his subject.† Both in his selection of letters and in his editing of them we can observe an agenda at work that serves to make Tolkien seem impatient, defensive, and uninterested in anything modern.

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\* In the introduction, Carpenter says he made "the initial selection" of letters, upon which Christopher commented, and that the book in its final form "reflects my own taste and judgement rather more than his" (*Letters* 3). Interestingly, the first edition of the *Letters* has on the cover, spine, and title page, "Selected and edited by Humphrey Carpenter," while later editions have only Tolkien's name on the spine and only "Edited by Humphrey Carpenter" on the cover, leaving it to the title page to inform the reader that this is "A selection edited by Humphrey Carpenter." These small adjustments have tended to obscure Carpenter's dominant role in preparing the *Letters*.

† For instance, Carpenter's index omits the Virgin Mary, despite a number of references to her by Tolkien, including an extended passage on the Assumption, which is lumped under 'Tolkien, character and interests, Catholicism.' The index includes names of other people who are only mentioned in passing, not just recipients of letters, so this omission reflects Carpenter's lack of interest, not a standard editorial rule. The problem illustrated here is not the lack of shared belief – Tolkien studies has top-notch scholars who are not Catholics, or Christians of any kind – but rather the way that Carpenter handles material that touches on matters of central importance to his biographical subject. The revised edition of the *Letters* has an expanded index (created by Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull) that gives a full entry to the Virgin Mary.

For instance, the extract presented from a 1958 letter to Deborah Webster begins baldly with Tolkien saying, “I do not like giving facts about myself . . .” After nonetheless giving various details about himself, he concludes abruptly with “I hope that is enough to go on with.”<sup>24</sup> Although the extract itself contains interesting details, the tone appears brusque, even irritated, as if Tolkien only reluctantly discloses personal information. A different perspective appears when we consult the full text of his remarks.<sup>25</sup> His reply in fact begins by thanking Webster for her letter and a book of prayers that she had sent him, and noting that he wished she had visited Oxford during the summer, when he would have been more likely to be able to meet with her in person. He then writes, “But I do not like giving ‘facts’ about myself other than ‘dry’ ones . . .”<sup>26</sup> The word ‘But’ (omitted by Carpenter without ellipsis) after the friendly opening gives his autobiographical reticence an apologetic rather than curmudgeonly flavor. He signs off “with gratitude for appreciation”<sup>27</sup> – again, omitted in the *Letters*. The warm tone indicates that he is not at all bothered by her inquiry, but feels complimented by her interest and is happy to respond. Carpenter’s subtle nips and tucks present us with a different face: less friendly, more forbidding.

Another example of tendentious editing appears when Carpenter presents long extracts from a letter in which Tolkien criticizes a proposed cinematic treatment of *The Lord of the Rings*. Carpenter omits the passage in which Tolkien discusses a recent film version of Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* – a passage that shows Tolkien’s interest in and knowledge about both cinema (still then a cutting-edge new medium) and the modern literature that could be adapted for it.<sup>28</sup> From the picture Carpenter provides, the reader could be forgiven for assuming that Tolkien had little or no exposure to film versions of contemporary fiction and that he had a reactionary objection to his own work being given the silver-screen treatment.

Possibly because of the conditioning effects of Carpenter’s editorializing, readers of the *Letters* have tended to pay more attention to Tolkien’s negative statements about his reading than his positive ones. For instance, in a review of the volume, J.I.M. Stewart comes away with the impression that Tolkien was a reader of limited sympathies:

About other people’s books he says little, and that little is commonly unfavourable. . . . [He] admits with some complacency to “not being specially well read in modern English.” . . . there is a certain quirkiness in all this reiteration of a theme (“I seldom find any modern books that hold my attention” . . . “Certainly I have not been nourished by English literature”) which knits with similarly persistent quirkinesses in other fields to an effect that is not exactly that of breadth of view.<sup>29</sup>

Stewart highlights Tolkien’s negative remarks about modern authors such as Browning, Graves, and Sayers, but curiously makes no mention whatsoever of his praise for Joyce Gard, Kenneth Grahame, David Lindsay, and so on. Why such one-sidedness? It would



seem that the popular idea of Tolkien as the arch-medievalist, uninterested in modern literature, had already set in sufficiently that Stewart could cherry-pick those bits from the *Letters* that supported this image without noticing his bias in doing so. An amusing side note to his derisive remarks about these supposedly narrow tastes is that Tolkien had read at least one of Stewart's own mystery novels, published under his *nom de plume* Michael Innes.<sup>30</sup>

We must also keep firmly in mind the fact that Tolkien wrote many more letters than are included in the volume. Carpenter noted that he had "to sift through literally thousands of letters. I mean thousands," and that Tolkien was "one of the last great letter-writers in the great English tradition of letter-writers"<sup>31</sup> – so we must be aware that what he presents is only a small portion of the total correspondence, not a comprehensive 'collected letters.' Out of the "thousands," Carpenter presents a mere 354, most of which are incomplete.\*

### The mythical Tollewis

We just noted Tolkien's discussion of *King Solomon's Mines* and its recent cinematic treatment. He may well have gone to see the movie with his friend C.S. Lewis; at any rate, in giving his view of the film, Tolkien reports that he shares some of Lewis's objections to it. Tolkien and Lewis were colleagues and friends, a friendship that was especially close during the 1930s, and they had a common outlook on many things, including this particular movie. But they definitely did not see eye-to-eye about everything or live identical sorts of lives. Tolkien was Catholic, Lewis was Anglican; Tolkien was married and a father of four, Lewis was a bachelor for all but three years of his life; Tolkien played rugby and squash enthusiastically, Lewis was uninterested in sport. And we could go on. We make these observations to highlight a third distorting influence on the popular image of Tolkien's attitude toward the modern world: namely, the tendency to conflate him with his fellow Inklings, making a composite figure whom we could call 'Tollewis' along the lines of the famous description of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc as the 'Chesterbelloc.'

For instance, Carpenter pictures Tolkien sitting at the breakfast table, where he "glances at the newspaper, but only in the most cursory fashion. He, like his friend C.S.

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\* In his introduction to the *Letters*, Carpenter claims that the "selection has been made with an eye to demonstrating the huge range of Tolkien's mind and interests" (1). However, it is notable that the volume includes not a single letter to Tolkien's brother Hilary, nor to his granddaughter Joanna, nor to his student and family friend Simonne d'Ardenne, nor to his colleague E.V. Gordon, to name just four examples of correspondence that would have shed light on Tolkien in both personal and professional contexts. We know that Tolkien did write to these people: see *The One Ring.net* (<http://www.theonering.net/torwp/2010/11/16/40512-tolkien-estate-comments-on-book-cancellation/>) for reference to letters quoted in a planned biography of Hilary Tolkien; see Joanna Tolkien, "Joanna Tolkien speaks at the Tolkien Society Annual Dinner," for reference to letters she received; and see TCG:C for reference to letters to d'Ardenne and Gordon. Surely some of these, or ones like them, were among the letters to which Carpenter had access.



Lewis, regards ‘news’ as on the whole trivial and fit to be ignored. . . . However, both men enjoy the crossword.”<sup>32</sup> The imagined scene is extremely close to a description of Lewis that appears in the first biography of him,<sup>33</sup> where Lewis is described (accurately) as someone who didn’t read newspapers and derided journalism as “mostly not true.”<sup>34</sup> It seems likely that Carpenter, on seeing this account of Lewis – in which Tolkien is never mentioned – simply assumed that such a dismissive attitude to the news was equally true of his friend, and attached it to the subject of his own biography, even down to the breakfast table setting. But as we will see later in this chapter, Tolkien did read the newspapers and followed current events closely. He was attuned to the modern world in ways his friend was not.

Michael Ward cautions against this tendency toward an unreflective pairing-off of Lewis and Tolkien: it is important to recognize, he argues, that each “was a unique individual and not one half of a pair of conjoined twins. . . . The two men must be allowed to attempt different things in different ways.”<sup>35</sup> The point applies equally well to their attitudes toward modern reading. It was Lewis, not Tolkien, who declared, “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.” Now, Tolkien may in fact not have demurred much from the basic point Lewis was making – about the importance of escaping the prejudices of one’s time – but, still, it was not Tolkien but Lewis who bothered to pontificate on the matter in public and lay down a rule about it. It was not Tolkien but Lewis who highlighted the need to oppose “chronological snobbery” (the unreflective assumption that the values of one’s own day are superior to those of the past). It was not Tolkien but Lewis, or one side of Lewis, who was described (by their mutual friend Owen Barfield) as a “*laudator temporis acti* [praiser of times past].”<sup>36</sup> Lewis and Tolkien did have a great deal in common, but what can be said about one is not automatically applicable to the other. We must weigh the evidence and allow Tolkien’s own preferences, interests, and habits of mind to emerge unshadowed by what we know of his friend. It is not equally true of them both that they were fighting a constant rearguard campaign against whatever smacked of the modern age.

#### “A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot abide in his age”

Fourth and finally, the image of Tolkien as irredeemably anti-modern has been shaped by a too-frequent disregard of context and chronology.

He certainly did have a generally negative view of industrialization, but we must remember his historical context. A man who fought in the First World War and who had two sons fighting in the Second, who experienced such air-pollution in Leeds that “chemicals in the air rotted the curtains within six months,”<sup>37</sup> and who was living in Oxford during the destructive imposition of the ring-road (and the obliteration of the historic neighborhood of St Ebbe’s),<sup>38</sup> may be allowed to make the occasional biting comment about modernity as symbolized by machines, industrialization, and

urbanization. For all that, his views on technology were surprisingly nuanced, as we shall see in chapter 9.\*

Furthermore, Tolkien lived a long life, and some of the interviews and letters in which he speaks dismissively of modern authors come from his later years. Hammond and Scull point out that "Tolkien's thoughts sometimes changed with the years and his memories varied, so that a comment at one moment may be contradicted by another written at a different time."<sup>39</sup> Critics have not always been as attentive as they ought to have been to the chronology of his opinions.† Carpenter, for instance, on occasion draws general conclusions about Tolkien's preferences or attitudes (such as his alleged dislike of France) that may in actuality have reflected only a certain period in his life, or even a certain mood.‡ Moreover, Carpenter's decision to weight his selection of the *Letters* toward Tolkien's later years, when he was dealing with a steady stream of fan mail about *The Lord of the Rings*, means that his earlier years are comparatively under-represented, and we see relatively little of his imaginative formation. Such a focus is subtly conducive to a caricatured view of Tolkien as a man of narrow tastes and limited interests.

As an elderly man, Tolkien does seem to have had a reduced appreciation of different types of reading. This is, no doubt, due partly to the natural contraction of tastes and habits of mind in old age and partly to the fact that, after the success of *The Lord of the*

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\* It is interesting in this regard that Donald Swann remarked in 1968 that Tolkien "shone forth to me as the forerunner of the conservationists. . . . he foresaw the era in which we now live, when the 'age of technology' is about to be balanced by a more Franciscan attitude, and the extinction of an animal species now hurts young people as much as, earlier, the introduction of a new brand of motorbike pleased them" (foreword to *The Road Goes Ever On*, viii).

† For instance, in the *Biography* Carpenter quotes, as evidence of Tolkien's lack of interest in modern literature, a line from a letter to Edith: "I so rarely read a novel, as you know" (77). However, Carpenter gives no indication of date. The time when Tolkien was most likely to write to Edith was before their marriage, when he was finishing his degree at Oxford – and would have little time for leisure reading in any genre from any period, ancient, medieval, or modern. In any case, Tolkien was a man of precise vocabulary. The category of 'novel' is usually associated with literary realism, and typically excludes romances, thrillers, detective fiction, fantasy, and science fiction, all of which Tolkien did read. Even when Tolkien was still a student at Oxford, we know that he was enjoying historical romances (such as by William Morris: see chapter 5), not to mention contemporary poetry (such as by Francis Thompson: see chapter 10). Though it would be accurate to say that, in his student days, he "rarely" read works that he considered to be novels, it would not be accurate to generalize from this remark that he seldom read contemporary literature of any kind whatsoever, either then or at other periods of his life.

‡ John Garth suggests that Carpenter, in asserting Tolkien's 'Gallophobia,' "pays too much attention to mischievous hyperbole (as he does regarding Tolkien's views on Shakespeare and Wagner)." Garth points out that "Tolkien's knowledge of French extended to the niceties of dialectal Eastern Walloon pronunciation . . . [and] he felt a lingering attachment towards the region of France in which he served. In 1945 he wrote, 'I can see clearly now in my mind's eye the old trenches and the squalid houses and the long roads of Artois, and I would visit them again if I could'" (TGW, 189). See also Verlyn Flieger, "Tolkien's French Connection," in *There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale*.

*Rings*, Tolkien found himself subject to what we might call ‘death by a thousand lit. crits.’ Everyone seemed to have an idea about what gave rise to his masterpiece and often these ideas were not only inaccurate, but wildly inaccurate. As a result, Tolkien’s curmudgeonly streak seems to have increased and, late in life, according to his friend George Sayer, he was “not inclined to admit to the influence on him of any other writers at all”<sup>40</sup> – the key word in Sayer’s description being “admit.” Tolkien was a bit of a contrarian to begin with, likely to disclaim the idea of being influenced simply because such a thing had been suggested. (We will return to this point in chapter 12.) Furthermore, after years of answering fan mail full of questions about Middle-earth, he seems to have begun to think of his writings as something he had discovered, rather than made. Insofar as he came to consider *The Lord of the Rings* in this way, he would naturally tend less often to recollect (and talk about) the influences on its creation, whether or not those influences happened to be modern. Thus, we cannot securely judge his attitudes as a young and middle-aged man, when he was writing the main part of his legendarium, by those he developed late in life.

### “I take a strong interest in what is going on”

We have seen, then, four reasons why this faulty popular image of Tolkien has taken hold, all of them traceable, in some measure, to Humphrey Carpenter.\* But once we allow Tolkien to be more than a Carpenter caricature, and admit the possibility of a genuinely three-dimensional figure, we find that he confounds easy reduction to the cartoon image of a dusty bookworm in an ivory tower, out of touch with the present, and nostalgic for times before the Norman Conquest.

We must always bear in mind that Tolkien was an unusually complex man. In this connection, Clyde Kilby’s perspective is of interest. Kilby, who spent a summer assisting (or attempting to assist) Tolkien with the preparation of the *Silmarillion* for publication, remarked: “I felt that Tolkien was like an iceberg, something to be reckoned with above water in both its brilliance and mass and yet with much more below the surface.”<sup>41</sup> Tolkien’s personality has a certain quality of elusiveness. What one observed on the surface, or at any particular moment, was true, but it was not the whole story.

His attitude toward the news, for instance, helps alert us to the unexpected dimensions of his personality. He read the newspaper every day, and to an interviewer who seemed surprised that Tolkien followed the news at all, he replied that indeed he subscribed to *three* newspapers, adding: “I take a strong interest in what is going on, both in

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\* Carpenter’s work is certainly readable, but whether it is also accurate is another matter, and in this study I have relied very little on either his *Biography* or *The Inklings*. I have occasionally cited material that he quotes from Tolkien’s letters or diaries, though without relying on his interpretation of it. A few times I draw on Carpenter for otherwise unsourced data; in these instances, the fact that the information relates to Tolkien’s engagement with modernity and thus runs counter to Carpenter’s overall presentation of him, suggests its reliability.

the university and in the country and in the world.”<sup>42</sup> \* In 1949, he co-signed a letter to the London *Times* to protest the Soviet-inspired arrest of Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary – an instance of his very up-to-the-minute concern about violations of religious freedom.<sup>43</sup> His interest in international events is mentioned several times in the diary of Warren Lewis, C.S. Lewis’s brother and a friend of Tolkien’s. In 1946, for example, Warren recalls a group lunch with Tolkien where they “argued the morality of the Nuremburg trials,” and another at which they discussed “the moral aspect of atomic bombing and total war in general.” A few years later, he recalled a gathering with “Tollers very confidential and ‘in the know’ about the details of the Communist plot.”<sup>44</sup> We would not expect any of this from someone stuck in the past, uninterested in the modern world.†

Tolkien strongly disliked the heedless expansion of roads and industry, but he was not against technology *per se*; he learned to drive (again, unlike Lewis) and bought a car as early as 1932.<sup>45</sup> Later recollections of Tolkien referred to him as someone who did not drive a car, but this was a feature of his later years, and is not uncommon among elderly people, and particularly not in Oxford and southern England, where buses, trains, and taxis are widely available.

Much has been made of the supposed narrowness of his social circle (the male-only Inklings) and of his professional world (Oxford colleges only began to go coeducational the year after his death). But Tolkien, unlike some of the other Inklings, was married for over fifty years; Lewis once irritably called him “the most married man I know.”<sup>46</sup> Tolkien made a point of spending time with his wife, daughter, and granddaughters as well as with his brother, sons, and grandsons.<sup>47</sup> It is also worth noting his inclusion, in the 1927 ‘Father Christmas letter,’ not only of his wife Edith (which is to be expected), but also of her cousin Jennie, and their current au pair Aslaug: they all feature among the “dear people” to whom the letter is addressed.<sup>48</sup> He even found time to correspond with the eleven-year-old granddaughter of his next-door neighbors in Headington, providing a thoughtful assessment of her poetry.‡ His daughter Priscilla mentioned his “many

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\* Scull and Hammond identify two of the three as *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, with the third probably a local paper, which I suspect would have been *The Oxford Times*. They add, “For some period at least he took the *Sunday Times*” (TCG:RG, 1062). Commenting on the archaeological remains in the Old Forest that Frodo and company stumble upon, John Garth opines that Tolkien’s “immediate spur was [Mortimer] Wheeler’s Maiden Castle reports in *The Times*, small literary masterpieces filling two long columns annually from 1935 to 1938. No one interested in British antiquity would have missed them – least of all Tolkien, who had provided a learned appendix to Wheeler’s report on a previous dig” (*The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 139). He was probably also a subscriber to *The Catholic Herald*; he wrote a letter to the editor (regarding place-name origins) which was published in the 23 February 1945 issue (TCG:RG, 306). *The Herald* was in those days a weekly newspaper, now a monthly magazine.

† Lewis, however, could be astonishingly ill-informed about current events. His brother recalls a conversation about Yugoslavia, in which, he says, “I thought J[ack] very stupid . . . before I found out that he was under the impression that Tito [the Yugoslavian dictator] was the King of Greece!” (BF, 236).

‡ As she recalled, “Perhaps what I take most from Tolkien’s mentoring is the utter absence of condescension, the empathy of a writer for another would-be writer, however wet behind the ears:

years of friendship with Dorothy Everett,” his colleague on the English Faculty, as being among the reasons she chose Lady Margaret Hall as her Oxford college;<sup>49</sup> Everett and several other women colleagues were also members of a literary and social club, “The Cave,” which Tolkien co-founded in the 1930s.<sup>50</sup> \* Another member of “The Cave” was Elaine Griffiths, whom Tolkien called “my very old friend.”<sup>51</sup> He stayed in touch with Margaret Wiseman, the sister of his fellow T.C.B.S. member Christopher Wiseman; it was a “carefully thought out plan” that his granddaughter Joanna would attend Oulton Abbey School, as that was where Margaret (now a Benedictine nun) was headmistress.<sup>52</sup> He had many female students and not a few female academic collaborators in his decades as a teacher, both at Leeds and at Oxford.<sup>53</sup> † Moreover, he read many women writers throughout his life, and took their work seriously, as we will see later in this book. To mention just one example now (and a rather surprising example to boot), Tolkien favorably quoted Simone de Beauvoir, an existentialist and feminist writer, indicating that they shared some ideas on death, a key theme of *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>54</sup> Insofar as the increase in ‘mixed’ settings, women’s education, and professional success for women represented an effect of modernity, we see Tolkien not resisting but happily accepting and encouraging it.

As for the effects of modernity in the Church, he was emphatic about the value of one of the major changes in ecclesial practice during his lifetime: the recommendation for frequent communion.<sup>55</sup> With regard to the abandonment of liturgical Latin and the reconfiguring of the Mass, Tolkien remarked that he approved of the reform of the liturgy “in the abstract,” although he confessed to feeling “a little dislocated and even a little sad at my age to know that the ceremonies and modes so long familiar and deeply associated with the season will never be heard again!”<sup>56</sup> ‡ Given both the extent and the abruptness of the shift from the Tridentine Mass to the Novus Ordo, it would be startling if Tolkien had not felt disconcerted by the change; what is most notable is that he distinguishes his own emotional reaction from his approval of the reform in principle.

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‘I feel sympathy with [your poems], because you seem to be moved by colour, and by day’s ending, twilight, evening. . . . I shall of course always be pleased (and indeed honoured) to see anything you write or publish’” (Paula Coston, “Tolkien on writing . . . and me,” 14).

\* Carpenter, in his brief mention of the club, names only male members (*Inklings* 56n2) and later biographers have generally followed him (see, for instance, Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship*, 175–176 and Colin Duriez, *The Oxford Inklings*, 104).

† Another instance of Tolkien’s support for women in academia can be observed in the fact that he helped two of his female students from Leeds to gain employment at the Oxford English Dictionary, providing special lexicography training for one (Monica Dawn) and a recommendation for another (Stella Mills) (Peter Gilliver, *The Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 391, 397–398).

‡ George Sayer thought that Tolkien “found little or nothing wrong with the pre-Vatican II Church” (“Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien,” 13), but Tolkien’s forthright observations to his son Michael about the disagreeable aspects of Mass attendance, from a “snuffling or gabbling priest” to ill-behaved laity (*Letters*, 339), refer to his pre-conciliar experience.

### **Interpreter of tradition: Tolkien the modernizer**

We must, then, give up the assumption that Tolkien was utterly backward-looking and therefore uninterested in and uninfluenced by the contemporary world. Yes, it is true that Tolkien was a man profoundly shaped by his work in medieval literature and language – but not to the exclusion of everything else. Furthermore, we should recall that Tolkien's reputation rests not only on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* but on something seemingly very different: his single-handed rescue of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* from critical disdain. Today, when *Beowulf* is a standard text in many literature courses, with numerous translations, including one by Seamus Heaney, it can be difficult to realize that before Tolkien's 1936 lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," the poem was valued only as a source of linguistic and historical data. Tolkien changed all that and brought *Beowulf* as a work of literary art into the place of honor where it resides today. His academic victory may at first seem irrelevant to our task in this study, but we should attend to how Tolkien achieved it. Peter Milward describes Tolkien's writings on *Beowulf* in this way:

Here was indeed the work not of a mere academic scholar, disinterring the bones of the long dead past, but of an imaginative critic, reviving those bones and breathing into them the spirit of life. . . . [Tolkien was] gifted with the ability to enter into the spirit of the old poem and to interpret it to his twentieth-century readers.<sup>57</sup>

Tolkien could *interpret* the medieval world for his modern readers. An interpreter must know both cultures, the old and the new. Someone who dwelt wholly in the past might well understand the poem better than anyone else, but he would not be able to share that understanding with others. Tolkien could and did communicate his insights, which suggests that he had a deeper knowledge of the modern world – even as he critiqued it – than has been recognized to date.

Tolkien greatly valued tradition, to be sure, but 'tradition' means literally 'a handing on,' passing the baton from past to present; a successful traditionalist must know both where he has come from and where he presently stands. Tolkien readily conceded that "no one of us can really invent or 'create' in a void, we can only reconstruct and perhaps impress a personal pattern on 'ancestral' material."<sup>58</sup> The ancestral material of medieval language and literature was of central importance to his creative process, but he also deliberately interwove the old and the new. For instance, in commenting on his interest in developing his own mythology, Tolkien remarked, "That's what I always wanted to do – mythological things like Greek or Norse myths; I tried to improve on them and modernize them – to modernize them is to make them credible."<sup>59</sup> This is a most extraordinary statement, for here we find Tolkien using "modernize" in a favorable way. It does not fit the popular image of him as an arch-medieval, anti-modern

figure – but it *does* fit with the more well-rounded view that we find when we consider his modern reading.

### A superabundance of interests: Tolkien as a reader

Tolkien, throughout his life, read a great deal of modern literature, in a surprisingly wide range of genres. We know this for a fact. We know it chiefly from his letters, but also from references in his nonfiction writings, and from interviews that he gave and other conversations that were recorded by friends and acquaintances over the years. It is one of those pieces of data that has largely been overlooked while scholars focus on other aspects of the critical terrain, but in truth, it comports with what we know of his personality and his omnivorous mind.

For Tolkien was a person whose interests can be neither easily delimited nor neatly categorized. C.S. Lewis commented that “[Tolkien] is the most unmanageable man (in conversation) I’ve ever met. He will talk to you alright: but the subject of his remarks will be whatever happens to be interesting him at the moment, which might be anything from M.E. [Middle English] words to Oxford politics.”<sup>60</sup> Clyde Kilby recalled that “He would go sixty miles an hour with a subject from apples to elephants. . . . He didn’t mention the Beatles, but just about everything else came into Tolkien’s conversation.”<sup>61</sup> \* A former student remembered walks with him in the Merton College garden, discussing subjects such as “college farms in East Anglia; pigs and their personalities; garden summerhouses; Wulfstan the Eleventh Century homilist; the birds and beasts of battle, as a set piece in Germanic verse; the influence of Hegel on *The Hobbit*, etc.”<sup>62</sup>

With so many different interests, both professional and personal, Tolkien’s reading on any one subject would very probably have seemed to himself to be somewhat limited, especially in comparison with his intense professional absorption in philological studies. As Lewis remarked, Tolkien “had been inside language”<sup>63</sup> and any other area of reading would probably feel shallow to him next to that. He was therefore more likely to understate, than to overstate, the extent and depth of his modern reading.

For instance, in a 1967 interview with Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, he is quoted as saying, “I don’t read much now, not even fairy-stories”; on the surface, it underscores the limits of his reading. However, in a letter to the Plimmers making corrections to the draft of this interview he goes on to remark, “I read quite a lot – or more truly, try to

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\* He may not have spoken of them to Kilby, but Tolkien did, in fact, know of the Beatles, and disliked them (See TCG:C, 777). He enjoyed other forms of popular music, however. For instance, he was such a great admirer of the popular comic singing duo Flanders and Swann that he invited them to Merton College to do a mini-concert (Marco di Noia, “Best wishes from Thorin and Company! – Following Tolkien’s trails in Oxford,” 23). He also actively collaborated with Donald Swann in producing *The Road Goes Ever On*, a song-cycle of Tolkien’s poems set to music. Swann recalled with pleasure his meetings with Tolkien and Edith, and his relief at discovering that “the piano, instead of being the last instrument you would expect to see in Middle-Earth, had some close connection with Tolkien’s imagination” (foreword to *The Road Goes Ever On*, vi–vii).



read many books (notably so-called Science Fiction and Fantasy). But I seldom find any modern books that hold my attention."<sup>64</sup>

Here we find an amplification that, remarkably, completely reverses his meaning: from "I don't read much now" to "I read quite a lot"! His scrupulous and somewhat idiosyncratic attention to accuracy leads him to claim as properly 'read' only those books that held his attention all the way through. Far from indicating a distance from or indifference toward modern literature, Tolkien's comment reveals that he read extensively in modern fiction – but had such exactingly high standards and peculiar preferences that relatively few books suited his tastes. This is the mark of a man who is interested in and engaged with modern fiction, not one who finds it irrelevant or insignificant.

Tolkien was in fact an avid reader – a point charmingly attested to by one of his linguistic doodlings in *Qenya*, which translates as, "I've spent over a hundred pounds on books this year but I do not regret it at all." This was in the late 1920s; Tolkien's £100 would be the equivalent of over £6,000 (\$8,000) today!<sup>65</sup> We know that he ran up a huge tab at Blackwell's Bookshop in Oxford.\* (See figure 1.) Considering that Tolkien had access to Oxford's university and college libraries for academic resources,<sup>66</sup> his purchases undoubtedly included titles for personal reading as well as for scholarly pursuits. In 1937, he visited the *Sunday Times* book fair in London, and wished he could have stayed longer; in 1962, he managed, despite a busy schedule, to attend the World Book Fair in London.<sup>67</sup>

He also used the Oxford Union Library, at least while an undergraduate. The Union is the university's student debating society; its library focuses on politics, biography, and modern history, and members are allowed to make requests for new titles in an official "Librarian's Suggestion Book." Works of fiction requested in the period of Tolkien's undergraduate career and soon after included books by authors such as M.R. James, John Buchan, Rudyard Kipling, R.H. Benson, Max Beerbohm, and E.C. Bentley.<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately for our purposes, Tolkien did not make any requests in the surviving Suggestion Books, but we do know that he used the library, as a year after joining the Union he had racked up a substantial fine for overdue books.<sup>69</sup> Later in life, he was also a patron of the Oxford City Library.<sup>70</sup> †

Bearing in mind his wide range of interests, as well as his regular library use and book-buying habits, it should come as less of a surprise that Tolkien read many works of modern fiction, including both genre fiction and examples of more literary or experimental styles which might otherwise seem outside of his range of interests.

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\* It was such a large tab that Basil Blackwell offered to accept Tolkien's translation of *Pearl* as partial payment (TCG:C, 272). Blackwell's Bookshop does sell academic titles but is not specifically a university bookstore; Tolkien's purchases undoubtedly included books to read for pleasure.

† His favorable view of public libraries in general can be seen in a talk that he gave at the opening of a new library, at which he remarked, "The wealth of books to be found here is food for the mind, and everyone knows that for the stomach to go without food for a long time is bad, but for the mind to go without food is even worse." Quoted in "Deddington's New Library Opened by Mrs. L. Hichens – Prof. Tolkien's Whimsical Talk," *Banbury Advertiser*, 19 Dec. 1956, 5.



Indeed, we should note the sheer diversity of Tolkien's leisure reading. He enjoyed science fiction and fantasy and kept up to date with it, reading, for instance, T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* soon after its publication.<sup>71</sup> Historical fiction, not unexpectedly, was a genre he enjoyed; for instance, he praised the works of Mary Renault.<sup>72</sup> (See figure 37.) Tolkien's grandson Michael recollects that "he read detective fiction for relaxation" and "went out of his way to praise Agatha Christie."<sup>73</sup> (See figure 35.) He enjoyed the fiction of G.K. Chesterton, but not in the ways one might predict, disliking the detective stories featuring Father Brown, the Catholic priest, but greatly enjoying antic works such as *The Flying Inn*.<sup>74</sup> (See figure 13.)

Perhaps more unexpectedly, Tolkien read and enjoyed a wide range of literary fiction of a distinctly modern flavor. He read "all of Sinclair Lewis,"<sup>75</sup> the American realistic novelist, which he presumably would not have done if he had found the novels unappealing. (See figure 32.) He so enjoyed P.H. Newby's *The Picnic at Sakkara*, a satirical comedy set in modern-day Egypt, that he lost sleep so he could go on reading it.<sup>76\*</sup> Some of his reactions might seem typical of a crusty medievalist reading modern literature, as when he describes William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* as "dreary stuff."<sup>77</sup> In 1966, Tolkien remarked to an interviewer, "I suppose I'm a reactionary. The present mainstream of contemporary literature is so boring, isn't it? I'm offering a pleasant change of diet."<sup>78†</sup> But even this casual remark was not one of reflexive cantankerousness. His reference to "mainstream" means he is not making a judgment of all contemporary literature, and it was precisely because he had continued to read widely in contemporary literature that he was able to assess it and find it too monotonous, seeing that a "change of diet" was called for. As we will see, his creative imagination was stimulated by influence-by-opposition, such that his familiarity with a wide and varied range of modern literature, even (perhaps especially) when it provoked him, contributed to the development of his own, alternate literary vision.

### "The background of my imagination": Tolkien as a writer

Not only did Tolkien read modern literature with interest, but on various occasions he openly acknowledged the ways in which it shaped his creative imagination. For instance, he recalled that George MacDonald and Andrew Lang composed "the books which most affected the background of my imagination since childhood," and specifically named MacDonald as an influence on his goblins and orcs.<sup>79</sup> (See figure 8.)

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\* In this he shared the view of the literati of the day, for Evelyn Waugh praised Newby's book as "subtle and very funny" and J.B. Priestley called it "brilliantly done" (endorsements on the cover of *The Picnic at Sakkara* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955]).

† Given that this was in the midst of the 'Swinging Sixties,' one can also perhaps detect a note of mischievous relish in Tolkien's self-description. The work of this 'reactionary' was at that very time being enthusiastically embraced on American college campuses by the long-haired students of the Flower Power generation, and the Beatles wanted to make a film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, starring themselves (TCG:RG, 23).

He singled out E.A. Wyke-Smith's book *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* as something of a source-book for his invention of the hobbits and recalled that the 'wargs' scene in *The Hobbit* was "in part derived" from a story by S.R. Crockett.<sup>80</sup> (See figures 3 and 11.) In another letter, Tolkien says that the Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon in *The Lord of the Rings* owe a debt to the imagination of William Morris.<sup>81</sup> (See figure 18.) What precisely Tolkien meant by this comparison is a subject of some disagreement, and we will return to this issue in chapter 7, but it is plain that he is registering a debt to a modern author, William Morris – who must be distinguished, by the way, from that other William Morris (later Lord Nuffield), whom he blamed for contributing to Oxford's modern ills.\*

More generally, Tolkien pointed out to the science fiction and fantasy writer Gene Wolfe that names and words in *The Lord of the Rings* could be considered either from the point of view of "their etymology within the story" or in reference to "the sources from which I, as an author, derived them."<sup>82</sup> Given that Wolfe was a fellow author, Tolkien may have felt free to disclose to him, more readily than to random enthusiasts who sent him fan letters, that he did draw on outside sources for material.† He doesn't specify whether those sources are ancient, medieval, or modern, but we should not be surprised if they come from all three periods.

For Tolkien was indeed shaped by his modern reading (we shall define 'modern' in chapter 2). The 'leaf-mould' of his creative imagination was supplied with material by numerous authors, some now forgotten, others still known today, including H.G. Wells, James Joyce, E.R. Eddison, W.H. Auden, and P.G. Wodehouse. Tolkien was influenced by these writers both wittingly and – which is perhaps even more significant – unwittingly, by the very fact of reading their works in the first place and belonging to the same cultural milieu in which they appeared. Even where he rejected what he found in such writings, he was still a creature of his age, since to reject something is to be influenced by it.

Just as Tolkien's experience in the First World War shaped much of what appears in *The Lord of the Rings*,<sup>83</sup> albeit refracted through the prism of his mediievally inflected imagination, the same can be said, so I will argue, about his experience of modern literature.

## Conclusion

The picture of Tolkien as fundamentally backward-looking, happily living in total rejection of the modern world, must be abandoned. Though a great medievalist, Tolkien was not merely an antiquarian, and Middle-earth is indebted to more than just the Middle Ages. Indeed, for all his love of medieval writers, Tolkien was chary of being numbered

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\* William Morris, 1st Viscount Nuffield, was the manufacturer of some of the earliest automobiles in Britain. The expansion of his motor-car factories in Oxford had a significant effect on the character of the city (see TCG:C, 239).

† As Bond West points out, Tolkien could be reticent: "It does seem that a lot of things influenced him that he preferred not to acknowledge" ("Wisdom and Etymology in *The Lord of the Rings*").

among their ranks and did not admire their works uncritically. Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, in their interview with Tolkien, noted that

He dislikes being bracketed with epic-writers of the past. C. S. Lewis once declared that Ariosto could not rival Tolkien. To us Tolkien said, "I don't know Ariosto and I'd loathe him if I did." He has also been likened to Malory, Spenser, Cervantes, Dante. He rejects them all.<sup>84</sup>

He rejected the bracketing partly because he disliked or did not know the authors concerned and partly because of innate humility about being measured against some of the greatest names of the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

In another interview, Daphne Castell asked a question that seemed certain to provoke an explosive reaction: "I asked him what he thought of Naomi Mitchison's description of his work as 'glorified science fiction.' He said he supposed it was valid, if she means that the pleasure of 'wonder' is also produced by good science fiction, and that this pleasure must be one of the aims of the author."<sup>85</sup> Tolkien's mild reaction suggests that he was entirely content to have his novel described as a form of science fiction. Thus, on the one hand, Tolkien – who spent a lifetime doing painstaking work on poems such as *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – shows no particular interest in being classed among the medieval epic-writers, yet on the other hand is unruffled about being compared to science-fiction writers: a complex and unexpected response.

And indeed Tolkien was a complex man – brilliant, playful, learned, idiosyncratic, contrarian. Rayner Unwin looked back on a long friendship and recalled the many-faceted nature of both Tolkien's conversation and his personality: "He wore his learning very lightly and could be talked to on any subject . . . the origin of some place-name, a rare flower spotted in a nearby meadow, the barbarity of French cooking, or a crux that seemed to undermine the very order of his cosmogony."<sup>86</sup> When asked to write a memorial essay on Tolkien, Simonne d'Ardenne, who had known him for many years, first as a student and later as a colleague and friend, said that "Tolkien's personality was so rich, so diverse, so vast and so elusive, that I was quite at a loss to choose which aspect of it to study."<sup>87</sup> His grandson recalled that Tolkien "had the ability to carry on several conversations at once, debating the merits of a recipe, exploding wrong theories about a place name, telling anecdotes about an eccentric character and under his breath trying to solve a linguistic matter that had arisen unnoticed by anyone else."<sup>88</sup>

Like the man himself, Tolkien's creative work is richly complex, as the scholarship of the last few decades has shown. As we consider the materials upon which he drew to create his imaginative world, we must not forget the vast – almost impossibly vast – scope of that project: "I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story." The task Tolkien had set for himself was "to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own," adding that "it is a wonderful thing to be told that I have succeeded."<sup>89</sup>

Could such a task as composing a new mythology for England even have been envisioned with the idea of using only medieval materials? Would Tolkien's wide-ranging interests have been satisfied with reading only pre-Chaucerian works? It seems unlikely, even on the face of it and even before we turn to the evidence that will comprise the rest of this study. We ought, in fact, to *expect* a good deal of involvement with modern literature, given his omnivorous mind. His Olympian literary ambition could not have been achieved to his satisfaction by the simple recapitulation of medieval stories, however skillfully it was done. And his lively and capacious imagination, though deeply nourished by the old tales, sought out new ones as well.

Tolkien loved trees from his earliest days and loved to talk of his life's work as a 'Tree of Tales.' His fundamentally autobiographical story "Leaf by Niggle" features a painter who, inspired by a single leaf, envisions a masterpiece, a tree which becomes more complex and elaborate as he paints it, though he is never able to finish it in his lifetime – but which he discovers, after death, to be truly real and alive, and which, in his time in purgatory, he can further develop and refine. Tolkien brought into being countless leaves of his own, but he also perused innumerable leaves created by other writers, and his repeated use of the image of 'leaf-mould' as the material nourishing his creativity will be important for us to keep in mind as we make our way through the following chapters. Many and varied leaves from the woods and forests of British and American literature became part of that mulch: page after page, volume after volume, layer upon layer, eventually breaking down into the brown, fertile compost that (though unremarkable and easily overlooked in itself) provided him with the nutrients that he could draw up into new stories. It is our task in this study to look at the pages of the more modern trees that we know him to have surveyed and discern what contribution they may have made to his creative imagination.