

The Making of J.R.R. Tolkien

By Joseph Pearce

The Lord of the Rings has truly become a cultural phenomenon. Throughout the 1990s the book was voted “the greatest work of the twentieth century” in several major opinion polls. Now, in the opening years of the 21st century, the movie adaptation has swept the Oscars. More people than ever are reading the epic saga or watching it at movie theatres. The appetite for Middle-earth appears to be insatiable, so much so that characters such as Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn have become household names.

But what of the man who created these characters? What of the quiet and unassuming Oxford professor and life-long practicing Catholic whose gargantuan imagination brought the world of Middle-earth to life? What of J.R.R. Tolkien, the man behind *The Lord of the Rings*?

Although Peter Jackson, the director of the film adaptation, was gracious enough to state that he owed his Oscar-winning triumph to Tolkien as the imaginative genius who made the films possible, it seems that the author of *The Lord of the Rings* is all too often forgotten amidst the hero-worship of his heroes. Peter Jackson, Liv Tyler, Vigo Mortensen, Elijah Wood, and the rest of the movie cast have basked in Tolkien’s reflected glory for long enough. It is time for them to stand aside and for the author himself to take center stage.

J.R.R. Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa on Jan. 3, 1892 of English parents. Shortly after his third birthday, his mother returned to England, taking Tolkien and his younger brother, Hilary, with her. Her husband, unable to vacate his post as manager of the Bloemfontein branch of the Bank of Africa was forced to remain behind,

intending to follow his wife and children to England as soon as the opportunity arose. In fact, he contracted rheumatic fever and died before he was able to do so. He was buried in the Anglican graveyard at Bloemfontein, 5,000 miles from hearth and home.

Her husband’s death left Mabel Tolkien in straitened circumstances, forcing her to fall back on the charitable assistance of her relatives. In June 1900, she was received into the Catholic Church, a decision that brought down the family’s wrath. Much of the financial assistance was discontinued in an effort to force her to relinquish her newfound faith. Although her conversion had plunged her and her children from a position of poverty to that of penury, she resolutely refused to abandon her religious beliefs in return for material gain. Instead, and in spite of renewed opposition from family members, she began to instruct her sons in the Catholic religion. Four years later, Mabel Tolkien died, apparently from complications arising from diabetes. She had lived 34 trouble-filled years.

Tolkien, orphaned at 12 years old, remained convinced throughout the whole of his life that his mother’s untimely death was caused by the persecution she suffered after becoming a Catholic.

Nine years after her death he wrote, “My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it was not to everybody that

When I think of my mother’s death ... worn out with persecution, poverty, and, largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith, and remember the tiny bedroom she shared with us in rented rooms in a postman’s cottage at Rednal, where she died alone, too ill for viaticum, I find it very hard and bitter, when my children stray away.

As his words illustrate, Tolkien remained a devout Catholic throughout his life and, in spite of the lament for his children’s lukewarmness, three of four remained true to the Faith, one of them, John, becoming a Jesuit priest.

Tolkien’s own faith was, as he himself confessed, the most important influence upon his work. “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision,” he would write in 1953.

Following Mabel Tolkien’s death, Father Francis Morgan of the Birmingham Oratory became legal guardian to Tolkien and his brother. He became a surrogate father to the two orphaned boys so that Tolkien would describe him later as “a guardian who had been a father to me, more than most real fathers.”

In June 1915, he achieved First Class Honors in English Language and Literature from Oxford University, the first significant milestone on his brilliant aca-

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God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith.” In old age he contrasted his mother’s sacrifices with the complacency of some of his own children towards the faith they had inherited from her:

demical career at Oxford as a philologist and expert in Anglo-Saxon. He would later refer to his academic vocation as one of the “significant facts, which *have* some relation” to his work, stating that his academic pursuits had affected his “taste in languages” and that this was “obviously a large ingredient in *The Lord of the Rings*.”

On March 22, 1916 Tolkien married his childhood sweetheart, Edith Bratt, and two months later left for what he described as the “carnage” and the “animal horror” of the Battle of the Somme, surely one of the most brutal bloodbaths in human history. Although Tolkien was at pains to insist that his war experience was not a major influence upon *The Lord of the Rings*, and

embrace of Christianity in 1931. Furthermore, Tolkien’s influential presence is patently perceptible in much of Lewis’s finest work, particularly in *Till We Have Faces*, the space trilogy, and the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Tolkien began work in earnest on *The Lord of the Rings* during the dark years of the Second World War, and there is perhaps an element of irony that the war

Tolkien was still working on *The Lord of the Rings* when the world lurched uncertainly from World War to Cold War and, as such, there is more than a hint of Orwellian chill in the air of Middle-earth. It is, for instance, intriguing that the *palantir* stones, the seeing stones employed by Sauron, the Dark Lord, to broadcast propaganda and sow the seeds of despair amongst his enemies, are uncannily similar in their mode of employment to the latest technology in mass communications media. It is even more intriguing once one realizes that *palantir* translates from the elvish as *television!*

More perceptive than most, Tolkien had prophesied the future of globalization as early as 1943, opining about the likely triumph of Mammon over Marx in a letter to his son.

I wonder (if we survive this war) if there will be any niche, even of suffering, left for reactionary back numbers like me (and you). The bigger things get the smaller and duller or flatter the globe gets. It is going to be all one blasted little provincial suburb. When they have introduced American sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass production throughout the Near East, Middle East, Far East, U.S.S.R., the Pampas, el Gran Chaco, the Danubian basin, Equatorial Africa, Hither Further and Inner Mumbo-land, Gondhwana-land, Lhasa, and the villages of darkest Berkshire, how happy we shall be. At any rate it ought to cut down travel. There will be nowhere to go. So people will (I opine) go all the faster But seriously: I do find this Americo-cosmopolitanism very terrifying.

Perhaps it is more than a little encouraging that a work by a self-confessed “reactionary back number” should emerge as the most popular and influential work of literature of the 20th century, continuing to win converts to its wisdom and charm 50 years after it was first published. Tolkien was certainly

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although some critics have indeed over-emphasized its influence, there is little doubt that his experience of the “animal horror” darkened his vision to such an extent that the shadow of the First World War always lingers, vulture-like, over his work. In particular, he retained a horror of the new weapons of mass destruction, crafted by sin-stained minds, with which men now killed each other with blood-lustful abandon. Machine guns and mustard gas became a metaphor for the mindless application of new technology, the triumph of the machine over humanity.

In the years between the two world wars Tolkien befriended other like-minded academics, most notably C.S. Lewis, with whom he formed probably the most important literary relationship of the 20th century. Lewis was “a great encourager” of Tolkien’s embryonic efforts at myth creation, and Tolkien confessed on one occasion that he might never have finished *The Lord of the Rings* if Lewis had not been there to cajole him to continue. Similarly there is little doubt that Tolkien was the greatest single influence on Lewis’s own literary oeuvre. Tolkien’s philosophy of myth, by which Tolkien explained the deep-rooted relationship between God’s Creation and human “sub-creation,” constituted the final *coup de grace* in Lewis’s

in which Tolkien did not fight is more potently present in his magnum opus than the war in which he did. It is indeed no coincidence that Sauron has been thought to represent Josef Stalin, who was described by Tolkien in 1943 as “that bloodthirsty old murderer,” and Mordor, by implication, to represent the Soviet Union. Similarly, Saruman has been said to represent Hitler, and Isengard, with its racially charged emblem of the White Hand, to represent the Third Reich. “I have spent most of my life ... studying Germanic matters,” Tolkien wrote to one of his sons in 1941, adding that he knew “better than most what is the truth about this ‘Nordic’ nonsense.” The result was that he had “in this War a burning private grudge ... against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler” adding with considerable significance considering Hitler’s personification as Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings* that Hitler’s ideology was the result of “demonic inspiration and impetus.” In this light, Saruman’s scoffing dismissal of the difference between white and black, i.e. good and evil, declaring himself no longer Saruman the White but Saruman the many-colored, is a clear allusion to the Nietzschean boast that the “wise” must go “beyond good and evil,” a boast that lay, and lied, at the cankered heart of the Third Reich.

bemused and pleasantly surprised by the phenomenal international success of *The Lord of the Rings*, and he never came to terms with the fame it brought him. In retirement he shied away from the publicity that the bestseller status of his books brought him, guarding his and his wife's privacy from the encroachments of fandom.

In 1969, when Tolkien was 77 years old and living in sedate retirement on England's south coast, he received a letter from his publisher's daughter asking him, as part of a school project, "What is the purpose of life?" His reply serves to illustrate that his priorities in life were a faithful reflection of the priorities that are all-pervasive in his books. In his life, as in his work, the most important things were "fundamentally religious and Catholic":

So it may be said that the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks. To do as we say in the 'Gloria in Excelsis': *Laudamus te, benedicamus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.* We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendour.

And in moments of exaltation we may call on all created things to join in our chorus, speaking on their behalf, as is done in Psalm 148, and in The Song of the Three Children in Daniel II. PRAISE THE LORD ... all mountains and hills, all orchards and forests, all things that creep and birds on the wing. ■

Joseph Pearce is author of Tolkien: Man and Myth and editor of Tolkien: A Celebration. He is Writer in Residence of Ave Maria University in Naples, Fla. and is editor of the Saint Austin Review (StAR), a trans-Atlantic journal of Christian culture.

BOOKS

[*The American Way: Family and Community in the Shaping of the American Identity*, Allan Carlson, ISI Books, 211 pages]

From the Hearth

By John Zmirak

WHERE DID AMERICA go wrong? How did our country fall under the sway of social mores and patterns of life that would have been unrecognizable to our grandparents and sickening to the Founders? Different answers arise depending on your diagnosis of what exactly was special about the country in the first place. Is the problem the rise of big government? The displacement of European culture as the dominant social force? The suicide of the WASPs? The new "culture of death" that subordinates altruism to hedonism, discarding the moral norms essential to any sustainable society?

To Reagan conservatives, libertarians, and most members of the Old Right, America's wrong turn occurred somewhere in the New Deal, with its unprecedented expansion of government involvement in the everyday conduct of American life. Southern conservatives trace the decline of American liberty to the fall of the Confederacy, arguing that the destruction of real local power to resist the federal government made inevitable the Leviathan state and the degradation of public life into squabbles over the spoils of massive, unjust taxation. (Samuel Francis aptly dubs the outcome "anarcho-tyranny," a situation in which the federal government mandates smoke-free public schools and equal athletic spending for the sexes but dares not control its international borders.)

Catholic traditionalists, who attribute the dissipation of moral certainty to the

heritage of the Enlightenment and the Reformation, go back a little further—for instance, to 1761, which marked the British defeat of the French. And neoconservatives, of course, blame the 1960s, which saw the corruption of the Civil Rights movement as it retreated from its morally grounded demand for equal opportunities and became a permanent force for social revolution through activist government. However justified its original claims, that crusade served as the template for an endless succession of "liberation" movements conducted on the behalf of self-designated victim groups—first spoiled suburban women, then flagrant homosexuals, now illegal immigrants—against the interests and preferences of the normative culture.

There's truth in each of these diagnoses and a broad agreement to disagree once constituted the unspoken code of civility that made it possible for movement conservatism to flourish. The fissures within that coalition, as is well known, broke into schisms with the collapse of communism as a contrary force. Now that we have nothing in particular to oppose—unless you think we can unite the country by chasing the specter of "terrorism," or persecuting a billion-man world religion, Islam—around what rallying point can diversified, secularized Americans unite?

Similar questions have faced thoughtful Americans before, as Allan Carlson shows in *The American Way*—a concise, immensely readable book that examines important episodes in the search for an American self-definition since 1900. At that time, Carlson notes, the country still faced the immense challenge of assimilating tens of millions of immigrants who did not hail from the Northern European, Protestant countries that had settled the 13 colonies. The United States at one point during the Industrial Revolution needed strong backs and thick arms to tame and man a thinly populated continent. But the influx of Italian, Irish, Jewish, and other Eastern European migrants seemed to threaten the common mores that had united the nascent American Republic.