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A Brief Guide to J.R.R. Tolkien

Written by Nigel Cawthorne

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A BRIEF GUIDE TO J. R. R. TOLKIEN

The Unauthorized Guide
to the Author of *The Hobbit*
and *The Lord of the Rings*

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INTRODUCTION: THE MAN AND THE MYTH

The Lord of the Rings was the must-read trilogy of 1960s' counterculture that has now reached a vast new audience through the cinema. But it was written by a middle-aged Oxford don, a veteran of the First World War – very much a pillar of the establishment. An authority on Anglo-Saxon, Middle English and Chaucer, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a gentle, blue-eyed man who dressed in tweeds, smoked a pipe, liked to take walks and rode an old bicycle. He could hardly be more different from his readers.

Tolkien did not come from Middle-earth but, rather, Middle England, though he was, in fact, born in South Africa. Returning to England at the age of four, he settled in the Midlands. His mother then died when he was twelve. The ward of a Catholic priest, he went up to Oxford to study Classics, but switched his course to English Language and Literature. After graduating with first-class honours, he joined the Lancashire Fusiliers and saw action in the First Battle of the Somme in 1916, an experience that coloured the huge battles that take place in Middle-earth. He developed a secret code to

get around military censorship to communicate with his wife. By 1918, most of his friends were dead.

After the war, he went to work at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, researching the history and etymology of words of Germanic origin beginning with the letter W. As Professor of English at Leeds University, he produced *A Middle English Vocabulary* and a definitive edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with fellow philologist E. V. Gordon, both works becoming academic standards. He also translated the Middle-English poems *Sir Gawain, Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo*. In 1925, he returned to Oxford as Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke College, where he came to academic prominence for his lecture on the epic poem *Beowulf*, which has been widely reprinted. In 1945, he moved to Merton College to become Professor of English Language and Literature.

He began to write *The Hobbit* in the late 1920s to relieve the boredom of marking exam papers, telling the story to his four children. Fellow don and author C.S. Lewis suggested that he submit it for publication to Allen & Unwin. It was accepted and published in 1937, with the American edition winning the *New York Herald Tribune* prize as best children's book the following year.

In 1938, Tolkien began *The Lord of the Rings* to illustrate a lecture on fairy tales. It took fourteen years to complete and is filled with verbal jokes, strange alphabets, names from the Norse, Anglo-Saxon and Welsh. For its story, it calls on the legend of *The Ring of the Nibelung* and the early Scandinavian classic *The Elder Edda*, among other works of folklore. When *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the fifties, it was damned by the critics. The London *Observer* called it 'sheer escapist literature . . . dull, ill-written and

whimsical' and expressed the wish that Tolkien's work would soon pass into 'merciful oblivion'.

Tolkien did not see what was wrong with escapism in a world full of factories, bombs and machine-guns. He said: 'Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? . . . If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!'

Other prisoners of reality seized the opportunity. In the United States, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in hardback was a Book-of-the-Month Club Selection and the paperback sold a quarter of a million copies in ten months. By the late sixties, fan clubs were sprouting up all over America and members of the cult – many of them students – decorated their walls with the maps of Middle-earth. Now, courtesy of the movies, these hippies and other baby boomers are introducing *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* to their grandchildren.

After retiring from academia in 1959, Tolkien resumed writing *The Silmarillion*, which he had begun years before and underpinned his other work. His aim, he said, was to create a mythology for England, though he scored his greatest success in the US. Indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* has been translated into at least thirty-eight languages.

The Silmarillion was published after his death in 1973. Since then Tolkien's son Christopher has mined his father's papers for other work showing the staggering scope of his father's imagination. Professor Tolkien had spent his life creating an alternative reality where every element has its own history and chronology, words and names have their own etymology, and mythology and reality live side-by-side.

The Lord of the Rings and *The Hobbit* are the third and fourth bestselling novels of all time, after Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. In a 1999 poll of amazon.com customers, *The Lord of the Rings* was judged to be their 'book of the century'. A survey conducted in Britain by the BBC in 2003 found that *The Lord of the Rings* was the nation's best-loved book. The following year the same was found to be the case in both Germany and Australia. In 2008, *The Times* ranked Tolkien sixth on its list of 'The fifty greatest British writers since 1945'. Meanwhile *The Lord of the Rings* movies broke box-office records in the US, despite the irony of the last and biggest grossing of the trilogy being called *The Return of the King*. As a result, in 2009, *Forbes* magazine listed J.R.R. Tolkien as their fifth highest-earning dead celebrity, immediately behind Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson. With the new *Hobbit* movies coming out, Tolkien shows no sign of slipping down the rankings any time soon.

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Bloomsbury, May 2012
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I

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST AS A YOUNG HOBBIT

There is nothing remotely remarkable about the background of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. His father, Arthur, was a bank clerk from Birmingham who went out to the Orange Free State, South Africa, to manage a branch in the capital Bloemfontein. His mother, Mabel Suffield, was the daughter of a family of shopkeepers in Birmingham. Arthur was thirteen years her senior. When he proposed to the eighteen-year-old Mabel, her parents did not approve. Arthur went out to South Africa on his own; Mabel followed when she was twenty-one.

The couple married in Cape Town Cathedral, before moving up to Bloemfontein, then little more than a shanty town of a few hundred ramshackle buildings. Life was tough. The English immigrants were shunned by the Afrikaners,

descendants of earlier Dutch settlers. The Boer War was just eight years away. Nine months after the wedding, the couple's first son, John, was born on 3 January 1892. His father wanted to maintain the family tradition and give him the biblical name Reuel. His mother favoured the more prosaic middle name Ronald. So he got both. However, in his family, he was always called Ronald.

In his first summer, the infant Tolkien underwent an experience that had a resonance in his fiction. He was bitten by a tarantula, but his quick-witted African nanny found the bite and sucked out the venom. Menacing spiders appear both in *The Hobbit*, *The Two Towers*, the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Ronald recovered, but he remained a sickly child, suffering from a chest condition and skin complaint made worse by the heat and dust.

Ronald soon had a younger brother, Hilary. His mother took the two boys on a vacation to Cape Town, then went back to England for a visit. The Boers' leader Paul Kruger was now threatening rebellion against the British and she was advised not to return. But back in Bloemfontein Arthur fell ill with rheumatic fever. Mabel quickly made plans to return to South Africa with the boys to nurse him. Although he was just four, Ronald dictated a letter to his father, telling him how much he missed him. It was never sent. A telegram arrived saying that his father had suffered a severe haemorrhage. The next day he was dead.

Arthur Tolkien had invested his money in a mining company. Dividends gave Mabel thirty shillings a week – £1.50, worth less than £90 (\$144) today. This was scarcely enough to live on, but her brother-in-law helped out. Mabel and the boys moved out of the grimy industrial city of

Birmingham into a small cottage in the hamlet of Sarehole, in Warwickshire, which was surrounded by woods and fields. For the children, it was idyllic. Free to roam the countryside, it became their own fantasy land. A local farmer became an evil wizard; a miller the 'White Ogre' because he was always covered in flour – and he later became Sandyman, the miller in Hobbiton.

With his mother's encouragement, Ronald became an avid reader. Among his influential early reading was *The Red Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang, a Scottish academic who collected fairy tales. He was particularly taken with 'The Story of Sigurd' and Fafnir, the son of a dwarf-king who is turned into a dragon, which was originally written in Old Norse. Meanwhile Ronald's mother taught him French and the rudiments of Latin, though there was nothing she could do to make him take any interest in music.

Ronald was nine when they moved back into Birmingham. He had won a place at the prestigious King Edward's School. At the same time, the widowed Mabel sought consolation in the Catholic Church, causing a rift with her staunchly Protestant family. Her brother-in-law cut off her allowance and they were forced to move to a dark, pokey house that was due for demolition. Later they moved to a house by a railway line a few streets from Mabel's parents. But the boys could not visit their grandparents if they were accompanied by their mother. Their Auntie Jane had to take them instead.

They moved again, this time so that Mabel could be near Birmingham Oratory, which had been founded in 1849 by the famous Catholic convert John Henry Newman. They grew close to the family priest, the pipe-smoking Father Francis Xavier Morgan. However, the house was in a dangerous area and the boys were not allowed out once it

grew dark. The boys went to an overcrowded local school while their mother worked on getting them scholarships so they could attend King Edward's. But then she was hospitalized with diabetes, at that time an untreatable condition. Hilary moved in with his grandparents, while Ronald was sent to Hove on the south coast to live with Auntie Jane and her husband.

When Mabel's condition alleviated slightly, the family were reunited in the two rooms of a tiny cottage, lodgings Father Francis had found for them. Owned by Oratory, the cottage was back out in the Worcestershire countryside at Rednal. There, with their young cousins Mary and Marjorie Incledon, the two Tolkien boys returned to their rural fantasy land, making up words in a language they called 'Animalic'. Later Ronald and Mary invented a more sophisticated language they called 'Nevosh', or the 'New Nonsense', even chanting limericks in it.

The boys had another blissful bucolic summer before, that autumn, their mother died. She was thirty-four. Tolkien blamed her family. He believed that their rejection of her because of her conversion to Catholicism had contributed to her decline. From that time on, he was a devout Catholic. The experience also left him a life-long depressive.

The two boys moved in with their Aunt Beatrice. She had a large house in the Edgbaston district of Birmingham but, recently widowed, she was emotionally cold. She barely spoke to the boys and Ronald was shocked to find her burning their mother's papers. However, there was always Father Francis to turn to. Mabel had appointed him their guardian shortly before she died. In the mornings, they would serve as altar boys at mass and breakfast with him afterwards.

Ronald was doing well at school. Now eleven, he excelled at languages. As well as learning modern French and German, he began learning classical Greek and, through Chaucer, Middle English, later starting on ancient Finnish and Norse. Then, with his close friend Christopher Wiseman, he moved on to the study of Anglo-Saxon and *Beowulf*. Books were already central to his life. Together they rummaged around in the remoter corners of the school library and a Cornish bookshop nearby. Ronald spent what money he could scrape together buying German books on philology – broadly, the love of words. The word alone had him enamoured. This would have led him to the etymology of his own rather unusual surname. His father's family traced their origins to Lower Saxony, the original home of the Anglo-Saxons, and the name Tolkien is thought to derive from the German word *tollkühn*, meaning daredevil or, more pejoratively, reckless or foolhardy. However, a German writer has suggested that it is more likely that the name derives from the village of Tolkynen in East Prussia, now Tolkiny, Poland. The name of the village comes from Old Prussian.

The study rarely stopped. Most of the school holidays were spent revising for exams, though Ronald and Hilary would spend Easter at the Oratory and Father Francis would take them on a short holiday each summer, usually to Lyme Regis in Dorset (now Devon). More books were to be found in Father Francis's room, many in Spanish, and Ronald began work on a new made-up language, 'Naffarin'.

As they were not happy with the forbidding Aunt Beatrice, Father Francis rented them a room in the home of a local wine merchant whose wife threw musical evenings for the Oratory fathers once a week. The couple had another

lodger, nineteen-year-old Edith Bratt. She too had lost her mother; illegitimate, she had never known her father. Together Edith and Ronald would cycle out into the countryside and while away the time talking in the shade of an oak tree. This went on, clandestinely, for nearly three years. But then Father Francis discovered what was happening and put his foot down. The Oxbridge entrance exams were looming. Ronald must concentrate on his books. He must have no more contact with Edith until he was of age, some three years away. She was sent to other lodgings forty miles away in Cheltenham. Not only did Tolkien lose the girl he loved, he then failed the entrance exam.

After a miserable Christmas, Ronald managed to meet up with Edith secretly out in the countryside. After exchanging gifts, they promised to be true. Father Francis heard of it and, in future, forbade them even to exchange letters. Otherwise, he would not fund Ronald through college.

Tolkien now had no alternative but to throw himself into his schoolwork. His social life, such as it was, was confined to other boys from school. Tolkien and three friends – Wiseman, Robert Gilson and Geoffrey Bache Smith – formed the T.C.B.S. This stood for Tea Club, Barrovian Society, after Barrow's Stores where they often took their afternoon tea. Over a cup they would read *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and discuss mythology and ancient languages.

Sitting the Oxbridge entrance exam again in 1910, Tolkien passed this time. Though he failed to win a scholarship, he was awarded an exhibition, which gave him just £60 a year – worth £3,500 (\$5,600) today. With a small bursary from King Edward's School and an allowance from Father Francis, Tolkien had just enough to survive for three years studying