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J.R.R. Tolkien

The Making of a Legend

Written by Colin Duriez

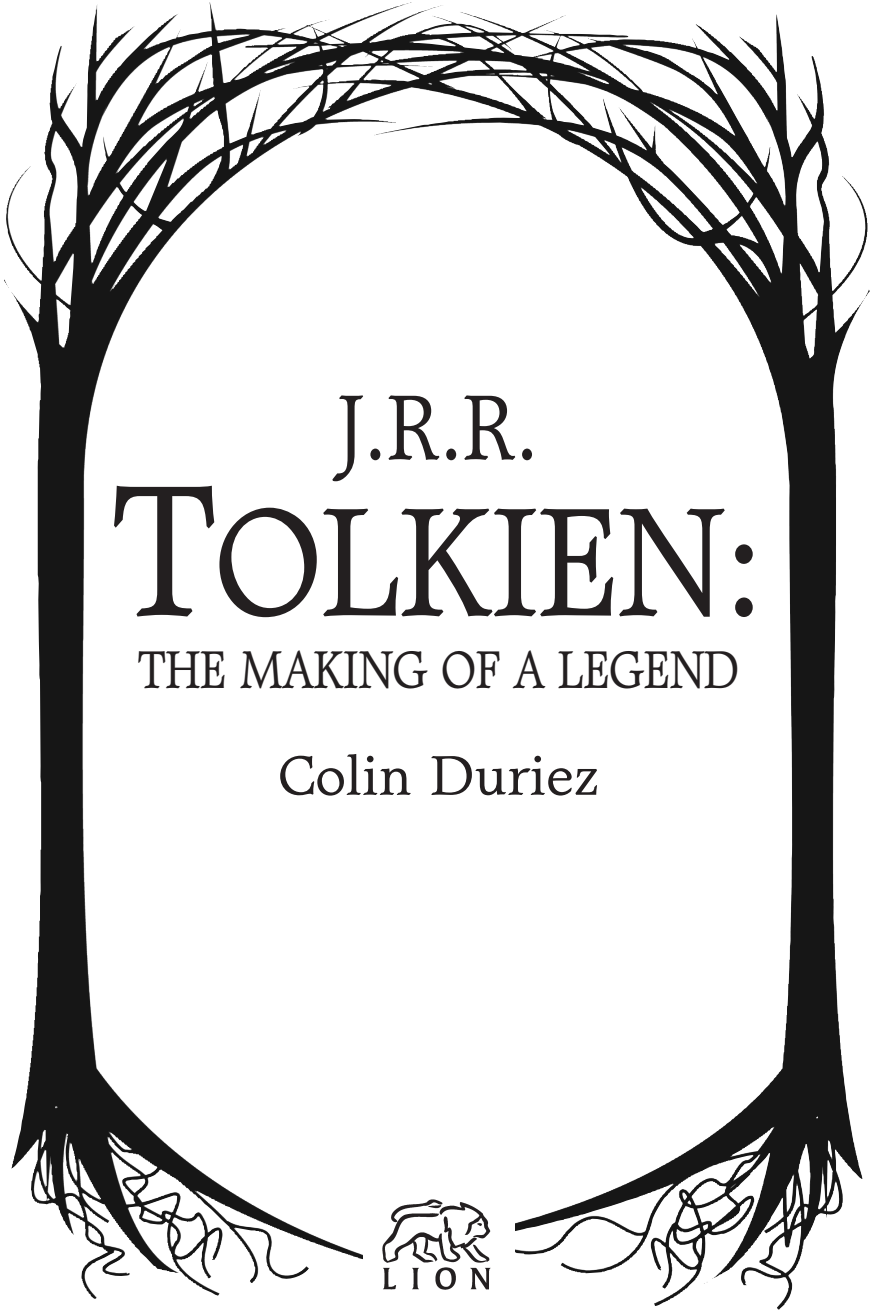
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J.R.R. TOLKIEN:
THE MAKING OF A LEGEND

To
Abigail Perriss
Max Hopson Ferris
and
Poppy Webb



J.R.R. TOLKIEN:

THE MAKING OF A LEGEND

Colin Duriez

LION

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Foreword

There it was in the bookshop. A book called *The Hobbit* with a cover picture of a dragon soaring, an arrow embedded in his breast. I picked it up and opened it – the runes and end paper maps were intriguing. Quickly I bought the book and was soon following Bilbo's adventures as he made his way towards The Lonely Mountain. The author's name I recognized as a close friend of C.S. Lewis, an author I had recently discovered. I was reading his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, at the time.

The next time I visited the library, I looked under "T". The three red cloth-bound volumes stood out. In great excitement I opened them. *The Fellowship of the Ring* had much more about Hobbits. I borrowed it, the first of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, and began another stage of discovery.

Today, it is difficult to imagine a world without J.R.R. Tolkien's stories of Middle-earth and Elves, Wizards, and Hobbits. His is a household name from Tunbridge Wells to Toronto, Kyoto to Cape Town. Long before the successful movies, the books of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* had a global popularity. Their devoted readers included plumbers and postgraduate students, IT specialists and rich merchant bankers, car mechanics and teachers, pensioners and children. The Tolkien phenomenon began within the cultural upheavals of the sixties and created an unprecedented demand for fantasy and otherworldly stories like the Harry Potter series, the Twilight series, and others that fill large sections of bookstores around the planet.

Who was the man who became a legend? Where did the stories and underlying mythology of Middle-earth come from? This is the story of an intensely private, brilliant, and eccentric professor in a specialist university discipline whose imagination was in touch with our basic hunger for stories that, like all stories that have stood out and survived over the ages, nourish the spirit. When he sought to get *The Lord of the Rings* – the fruit of a dozen or so years of writing – into print, he had difficulty in settling on a publisher. When he did, his publisher, though enthusiastic, treated the work as a loss-making venture, little realizing the wealth it would create both for the company and its author. Tolkien's own life was hit hard as an orphan suffering financial hardship. His guardian for three years forbad him to even communicate with the woman with whom he fell in love. After his brilliance was eventually recognized at Oxford, he was traumatized by his service in the Battle of the Somme in the First World War.

That is only part of the story of J.R.R. Tolkien. Behind the depths and richness of *The Lord of the Rings* is over fifty years of creation accompanying the languages, history, peoples, and geography of Middle-earth, with a consistent mythology and body of legends inspired by a formidable knowledge of early northwest European history and culture. Tolkien only became a legend by making a legend that has gripped the imagination of an astonishing variety of people throughout the world.

There are a couple of technical necessities I need to point out. One is that I have kept to Tolkien's own pluralization of "Dwarf" as "Dwarves" when referring to such characters in his stories. As has become the custom when writing about Tolkien, the second is the necessity of distinguishing

The Silmarillion published in 1977 (four years after Tolkien's death) from the vast number of unfinished drafts of stories, annals, lexicons, and accounts of the development of Elvish languages that Tolkien left upon his death. This vast repository is indicated as "The Silmarillion", because it was drafted as a particular part of the imagined history of Middle-earth that concerned the precious gems called the Silmarils, or relates to that period as its past or its future. *The Silmarillion* of 1977 is a concise and authoritative version drawn from the extant material, and edited by Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien.

I must acknowledge at least some of my debts to others in writing this biography. Over the years I have witnessed an astonishing outpouring of high-quality scholarship on J.R.R. Tolkien, some of which has been particularly helpful in creating a biography. The late Humphrey Carpenter's official biography of 1977 is still indispensible, even now that so much more of Tolkien's writings are available, not least because of his access to private documents and his ability to make sense of a universe of unfinished writings, diaries in code, and contradictory opinions. To him I must at least add the names of John Garth, Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, Brian Sibley, Bob Blackham, Douglas A. Anderson, Matthew Dickerson, Michael Drout, Tom Shippey, Colin Manlove, Dimitra Fimi, Verlyn Fliegar, Corey Olsen, John Rateliff, Walter Hooper, the late Clyde S. Kilby, and A.N. Wilson. While many of their works are not biographical, these have provided insights, hard facts, and inspiration. Though my book is not intended for scholars but for ordinary readers wishing to explore the life of Tolkien and how it relates to his stories of Middle-earth, the wisdom from those I've mentioned, and many others, is a necessary

background. My thanks are also due to The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois and the Bodleian Library, Oxford, with its J.R.R. Tolkien special collection, for their unique resources. Thanks to Paulist Press for allowing me to adapt some material from my book, *Tolkien and C.S, Lewis: The Gift of Friendship.* I must also thank my indefatigable and encouraging editor and friend, Alison Hull, Kirsten Etheridge, Leisa Nugent, and other helpful staff at Lion Hudson. Thanks also to my wife, Cindy Zudys, not only for the support of encouragement, but also for her hard work in keeping money coming in during tough times. My final debt is to fans large and small, some no doubt with hairy feet and perhaps pointed ears, whom I've met from many countries. Their love of Tolkien's work is infectious, and their knowledge often terrifying, especially when it comes to questions at the end of a talk. I'm immensely glad that when I gave my very first talk to The Tolkien Society, and the serious questions were winding down, my reply to the query "Do Balrogs have wings?" was "I don't know". If I had said yes or no, the debate would still be going on, and I expect I wouldn't have had time to write books.

Colin Duriez,
Keswick, Cumbria, April 2012

1

"I am in fact a Hobbit…"

There was turmoil in the Tolkien household. Baby Ronald had disappeared. It was usual for the infant to be resting in the cool of the house throughout the middle hours of the day. There were grounds for many fears, not least of prowling beasts such as jackals or wolves who might wander into the town from the dust of the desolate expanse of grassland that opened nearby beyond the houses.

The Tolkiens treated their two black servants, a maid and a young man called Izaak, fairly. Mabel Tolkien disliked many settlers' attitudes to the natives in the Orange Free State, and though considerably upset, seems to have accepted Izaak's simple explanation that he had carried off Ronald to his village to proudly demonstrate a white baby. Later, when he had his own son, Izaak named him, in appreciation of the Tolkiens, "Izaak Mr Tolkien Victor" – "Victor" added to honour Queen Victoria.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, to give the infant his full name[1], had been born on 3 January 1892 in Bloemfontein, southern Africa, the first son of English citizens Arthur Reuel and Mabel Tolkien. The parents were from Birmingham, in the

Midlands, and Mabel Suffield, as she then was, had sailed to Cape Town to marry Arthur, a banker who had preceded her to Africa to seek better prospects in the mineral-rich country. The Bank of Africa had promoted him to be their manager in Bloemfontein, at the heart of the Orange Free State, around 700 miles from Cape Town; discoveries of gold and diamonds had expanded the banking business there. Mabel Suffield left England in March 1891. The wedding ceremony took place the following month in Cape Town Anglican Cathedral.

In Bloemfontein the family lived "over the bank in Maitland Street: beyond were the dusty, treeless plains of the veldt". Mabel described her firstborn in a letter home to her mother-in-law: "Baby does look such a fairy when he's *very* much dressed-up in white frills and white shoes. When he's very much *un*dressed I think he looks more of an elf still." That baby would grow to become a brilliant scholar and storyteller who, decades later, reintroduced marvellous and formidable Elves of European folklore and legend to new generations of rapt readers. They were far from the saccharine, dainty fairies of his Victorian childhood. However, Mabel never was to know of her son's global celebrity.

The scare over baby Ronald's disappearance was only one of Mabel's worries about her infant, whom she saw as delicate. There was an occasion, of which Ronald carried dim memories in later life, when as a toddler he ran though long, dry grass in their large garden and disturbed a tarantula spider (they can be the size of a man's hand), which bit its venom into him. Crying, he ran into the house, where his nurse calmly sucked out the poison. Ronald remembered running and crying, but nothing of the huge spider. It may however have been the seed of many references to giant

spiders in his stories, not least Ungoliant, the ancient creature who gobbled up the light of the world in the earliest age of Middle-earth, and of course her descendant Shelob, whom the Hobbits Frodo and Sam encountered on their perilous way into the dark land of Mordor, the realm of the Dark Lord, Sauron.

Even deeper than these dangers to Ronald, however, was the worry of the child's health in the oppressive heat of much of the year, and from the dust swept from the windy veldt. As Mabel's concern deepened, she became increasingly anxious about Arthur's lack of interest in returning to England at some stage. To her it was obvious that he was reluctant even to have a break in England, though leave was due to him. Unlike Mabel, Arthur was in his element in Africa as he faced the tough challenges of building his bank's client base in the harsh environment of the Boer heartland, with its general antipathy to the British. His wife felt fear when she read what Arthur wrote to his father in Birmingham one day: "I think I shall do well in this country and do not think I should settle down well in England again for a permanency." Then Mabel found herself also having to put off thoughts of a visit home: she was pregnant with their second son, Hilary, born 17 February 1894.

Hilary turned out to be sturdier than his older brother, who became increasingly sickly in that harsh climate. It became evident to the couple that the relentless heat was damaging Ronald's health. Mabel was desperate. In November of 1894, she took baby Hilary and Ronald to the cooler air of the coast, hundreds of miles away near Cape Town. Years later Ronald could summon up dim memories of the endless train journey and a broad sandy shore. In a BBC radio interview

he once said: "I can remember bathing in the Indian Ocean when I was not quite two."[2] Upon the return of Mabel and the children to Bloemfontein later that month, Arthur made arrangements for their journey to England. He would follow later, he said. Ronald's last memory of his father was a vivid image of him painting "A.R. Tolkien" on their cabin trunk as Mabel and the boys prepared to leave – a trunk Ronald kept and treasured in later years. In one unfinished story written almost half a century later, "The Notion Club Papers", he gave himself the fictional name of "John Arthurson".

While Arthur remained, absorbed in his work responsibilities, Mabel and the children sailed for England at the beginning of April 1895. The three, at first, stayed with Mabel's parents and one of her sisters, Jane, in their small family house in Ashfield Road, King's Heath, Birmingham. Ronald was confused by the change and sometimes expected to see the verandah of his home in Bloemfontein protruding from the Suffield home. Many years later he recalled: "I can still remember going down the road in Birmingham and wondering what had happened to the big gallery, what happened to the balcony." Also novel and strange was seeing for the first time a real Christmas tree after the "barren, arid heat".

During this visit, when the three were about to return to southern Africa, Arthur was taken ill with rheumatic fever and then unexpectedly died after severe haemorrhaging. He was only 39. A few days after his death on 15 February 1896, he was buried in the Anglican graveyard in Bloemfontein. His passing closed the chapter of the Tolkiens' life in southern Africa. It meant however that they were not caught up in the upheaval of the Boer War that happened relatively soon after (1899–1902).

Mabel was now a single parent, with very limited means. Soon the three moved to Sarehole, in the more healthy countryside. Their new home, 5 Gracewell, was a smart and good-sized semi-detached cottage almost opposite the pond side of Sarehole Mill, then about a mile south of the city of Birmingham. Though so near to the metropolis, they were, in fact, in the very heart of rural Worcestershire. With only horses and carts, it was "long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green" (to use words from Tolkien's *The Hobbit* describing The Shire in Middle-earth). Mabel, a highly talented and resourceful woman, educated her boys until they entered formal schooling. Amongst other things, Mabel taught Ronald to read, and later introduced him to calligraphy, drawing, Latin, French, piano (unsuccessfully), and botany.

The quiet Worcestershire village (which later became part of Warwickshire through boundary changes) was soon, for Ronald, his heart-home, associated with memories of the mother he was so soon to lose: "The Shire is very like the kind of world in which I first became aware of things.… If your first Christmas tree is a wilting eucalyptus and if you're normally troubled by heat and sand – then… just at the age when imagination is opening out, suddenly [to] find yourself in a quiet Warwickshire village, I think it engenders a particular love of what you might call central Midlands English countryside, based on good water stones and elm trees and small quiet rivers and so on, and of course rustic people about."[3] The "rustic" local children derided their long hair (the custom for middle-class little boys).

Sarehole Mill made a particular impression on Ronald's imagination: "There was an old mill that really did grind corn

with two millers, a great big pond with swans on it, a sandpit, a wonderful dell with flowers, a few old-fashioned village houses and, further away, a stream with another mill."[4] Sarehole Mill was an old brick mill with a tall chimney. Though it was powered by a steam engine, a stream still ran under its great wheel. The mill, with its frightening miller's son, made a deep impression on Ronald's and also Hilary's imaginations.

Ronald and his younger brother nicknamed the terrifying miller's son "The White Ogre". Hilary remembered a farmer, nicknamed "The Black Ogre", who terrorized the local children. (He once chased Ronald for picking mushrooms.) In a letter much later Tolkien speaks of the old miller and his son bringing terror and wonder to him as a little child. In another letter he wrote of living for his early years "in 'The Shire' in a pre-mechanical age". He added that he was a Hobbit in fact, though not in size. Like Hobbits he relished gardens, trees, and farmlands that were not mechanized. He too smoked a pipe and liked his food plain. In the drab mid-twentieth-century when the popularity of his stories exploded, he dared to wear ornamental waistcoats. He was fond of mushrooms fresh from the field and liked expressing his very basic sense of humour, which some found tiresome. He also recorded that as an adult, he went to bed late and, if he could, got up late. Like Hobbits, he travelled little. In *The Lord of the Rings* he wrote of a mill in Hobbiton, located on the Water, which was torn down and replaced by a brick building that polluted both the air and water. There is a resemblance between the view up the rural lane in which the family lived in Sarehole, with the Mill to the right, and a detailed illustration Tolkien made of Hobbiton for *The Hobbit,* the forerunner to his *The Lord of the Rings.*

Sarehole Mill survived the brick tsunami of Birmingham's urban spread and is now preserved as a visitor's centre. Visitors are able to catch a glimpse of Tolkien's childhood world and an important historical monument of the industrial revolution that changed the world. The large, deep pond that Ronald and Hilary knew so well is there, and the mill buildings, with their large chimney, are still recognizable from those lost days. Nearby, in recognition of Tolkien, is The Shire Country Park, and Moseley Bog, possibly inspiration for the Old Forest on the edge of The Shire in *The Lord of the Rings.*

It may have been around this time in Sarehole when another important feature of Ronald's teeming imagination was born: his recurring dream of a great flood, a green wave surging across the lands. Eventually, after a long gestation, this part of his memory was incorporated into the same imagined world in which The Shire was a part – Middle-earth. The dream became Tolkien's fictional account of the destruction of Númenor, his own version of the ancient story of the drowned land of Atlantis.

In 1900, five years after leaving Africa, Ronald entered King Edward's School, Birmingham's top grammar school, then located near New Street Station, in the city centre. His fees were paid by an uncle. Its buildings (now demolished) bore the mark of its architect, Sir Charles Barry, who also designed the current Houses of Parliament in London. At this time Mabel Tolkien, along with her sister May, was received into the Roman Catholic Church, despite painful opposition from her Unitarian father and Tolkien in-laws, who were Baptist. They cut off financial support to the single mother, resulting in a deepening poverty. Mother and sons moved

from their rural setting to just inside the city, to Moseley, to be somewhat nearer to The Birmingham Oratory in Edgbaston. Founded by Cardinal Newman in the 1850s, this had become Mabel's spiritual home after trying other more local Roman Catholic churches. The visionary John Henry Newman (1801–90) had done much to revitalize Roman Catholicism, bringing his Oxford learning, imagination, and independence into the life of that Church. Moseley was on the tram route to the city centre, making it easier for Ronald to commute to school.

The next year they had to move again, to a nearby terrace close by King's Heath station. Behind their new home was a railway embankment, full of wild flowers and grasses (another love of Ronald's). By now he was about nine years of age, and his brother, Hilary, around seven. They were becoming used to the squeal of coal wagons being shunted in the coal yard a short way up the railway tracks. Trains came from the mining valleys of South Wales over a hundred miles away, dragging coal wagons for Birmingham's thriving industries. Ronald noticed the names on the sides of the wagons: Welsh places like *Blaen-Rhondda, Maerdy, Nantyglo,* and *Tredegar*.

In the BBC interview in 1971, mentioned earlier, Tolkien revealed something of the significance of this encounter with Welsh place names. In many ways, this boyhood experience marks the birth of the tales of his invented world of Middle-earth, a world of Hobbits, Elves, and darker beings like goblins and dragons. In that interview Tolkien explained his fascination: "Welsh has always attracted me by its style and sound more than any other; even though I first only saw it on coal trucks, I always wanted to know what it was about." He went on to say that his stories almost always began with a