John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973), by John Wyatt, 1968

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel (1892–1973), writer and philologist, was born on 3 January 1892 in Bloemfontein, Orange Free State, the elder son of Arthur Reuel Tolkien (1857–1896) and his wife, Mabel (1870–1904), daughter of John Suffield. His father and mother both came from Birmingham, but Arthur Tolkien had left England in 1889, and by 1892 was manager of the Bloemfontein branch of the Bank of Africa.

Early life and education

J. R. R. Tolkien's early life bears witness to continuing emotional distress and insecurity, coupled with precocious and idiosyncratic intellectual development. His mother returned to England on a visit in 1895 with her two sons (Tolkien's younger brother Hilary was born on 17 February 1894), expecting her husband to join them later. But Arthur Tolkien died of rheumatic fever in Bloemfontein on 15 February 1896, leaving only a few hundred pounds in shares as support for his widow. For a time Mabel Tolkien economized by teaching her sons herself, and by setting up home in the hamlet of Sarehole, now part of the King's Heath suburb of Birmingham but at that time still outside the city. When her elder son, aged eight, passed the entrance examination for King Edward's School, Birmingham, then located in the city centre, she was obliged to move into town, living in one rented house after another. Her financial situation was not eased by her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1900, which caused an estrangement from some members of her family; and on 14 November 1904 she too died young, of diabetes, leaving her sons as wards of Father Francis Morgan of the Birmingham Oratory. He arranged for the boys to be boarded, first with a distant relative of theirs and then with an acquaintance of his own. But Tolkien experienced a further painful separation when, at the age of sixteen, he fell in love with a fellow lodger, Edith Bratt (1889–1971), daughter of Frances Bratt, of Wolverhampton, a fatherless girl three years older than himself. When his guardian learned of the relationship, the pair were separated and Tolkien was obliged to promise not to communicate with Edith until he came of age—a promise he kept to the letter.

Meanwhile Tolkien's school-life was unusually happy and successful. He had sympathetic teachers, showed special aptitude for languages, and was introduced, or introduced himself, to Old and Middle English, Old

Norse, and Gothic. He also formed strong friendships with other members of an unofficial school literary society. In December 1910 he won an exhibition to Exeter College, Oxford, and went up to the university in 1911 to read honour moderations in classics. In 1913 he achieved only a second class, largely because of the time he had spent on Germanic languages outside the syllabus, and was allowed to change to the honours school of English, a large part of which was concerned with linguistic and philological study. Tolkien's tutor was Kenneth Sisam (1887–1971), but he was taught also by the Yorkshire philologist Joseph Wright. He found this course of study much more congenial, and achieved a first in his finals in 1915. He had also, just after midnight on his twenty-first birthday, while on vacation from Oxford, written again to Edith Bratt, the pair becoming engaged very soon after.

The war and early academic career

On graduation, however, Tolkien followed his younger brother into the army, being commissioned into the Lancashire Fusiliers. He and Edith were married on 22 March 1916, but in June that year Tolkien was sent to France, to join the 11th battalion of the fusiliers as a signals officer. From July to October his regiment took part in the battle of the Somme, including the fighting in the battle's later stages around the Schwaben redoubt. One of Tolkien's closest friends from school was killed at the very start of the battle, on 1 July, and another late in 1916. Tolkien, however, succumbed to trench fever on 27 October, and was returned to England the following month.

Tolkien remained in poor health for the rest of the war, and was not sent back to France. At the armistice he returned to Oxford, and worked for a time on the staff of the New English Dictionary under Henry Bradley. In 1920 he received the appointment of reader in English language at the University of Leeds, and could perhaps feel that—married, securely employed, with his first son, John, born in November 1917 and his second, Michael, in October 1920—he was experiencing domestic stability for the first time since babyhood. The Tolkien family was completed with the birth of a third son, Christopher, in November 1924, and a daughter, Priscilla, in June 1929.

Tolkien's professional career in the 1920s was also extremely successful. With the encouragement of his head of department at Leeds, George S. Gordon, he built up the language side of the English department until it rivalled literature in popularity with undergraduates. There was a plan, which came to nothing, for him to edit a volume or volumes of *Vorstudien* as part of a revitalization of the Dictionary of National Biography (H. C. G. Matthew, Leslie Stephen and the ‘New Dictionary of National Biography’, 1995, 10). The University of Leeds made him a professor in 1924. In 1925, in collaboration with a junior colleague, E. V. Gordon (1896–1938), he brought out an edition of the Middle English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which opened new fields of study and which remained standard, in revised form, throughout the twentieth century. Also in 1925 Tolkien was elected to the Rawlinson and Bosworth chair of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, defeating his former tutor Kenneth Sisam in a close vote.

After this, Tolkien's academic career in some respects began to lose impetus. He produced a ground-breaking article on the early Middle English work Ancrene wisse in 1929, and his British Academy lecture of 1936, ‘*Beowulf*: the monsters and the critics’, is accepted as a turning point in the study of the poem. However, the Tolkien and Gordon edition of Pearl, intended as a follow-up to their edition of Gawain, appeared in 1953 only under the editorship of E. V. Gordon's widow, Ida L. Gordon (*b.* 1907). Tolkien's own edition of one manuscript of the Ancrene wisse did not appear until 1962, and then without the linguistic apparatus that had been hoped for. His Oxford lectures on Beowulf and the Old English poem Exodus did eventually reach print

as editions, or partial editions, but only posthumously, compiled by others from his notes. He published little academically after 1940. Yet this was not a case of laziness, or lack of inspiration (though Tolkien was aware of such accusations). Rather, his undoubted philological brilliance had been diverted into fiction.

From Beowulf to The Hobbit

With hindsight, one can see that a continuing theme in Tolkien's academic work was the conviction that literature and language are not divisible. The division was both temperamental and structural in many English faculties, but Tolkien remained convinced that, just as early works of literature illuminated the history of the language, so the history of language was a vital part of literature. The two aspects of language and literature were inextricably entwined, and a full appreciation of 'English', in its widest sense, necessitated a consideration of both. In his own mind Tolkien had accordingly been constructing both the story cycle which was to become The Silmarillion, and the imagined languages in which those stories would have been told, Quenya and Sindarin. The cycle was set in a developed form of the world of early Germanic mythology, inhabited by dragons and werewolves, dwarves and heroes, but centred on Tolkien's imagined history of the elves, seen as a race older than and in many respects superior to humanity. Quenya and Sindarin are elvish languages, whose philological relationship complements the complex sequence of tales about their speakers and the humans (and other beings) who interact with them. Tolkien had begun to write the legends and the languages down as early as 1915, in both prose and verse, but little of this work reached print during his lifetime. It did, however, create a setting for the first of Tolkien's works of fiction to be published, The Hobbit (1937).

In this Tolkien invented an entirely new mythological race of 'hobbits' who, like their representative Bilbo Baggins, are solid, respectable, anachronistically English, and, as appears when Bilbo is sent off by the wizard Gandalf to help recover the lost treasure of the dwarves from the dragon Smaug, capable of unsuspected resource. The Hobbit began as an amusement for the Tolkien children, and reached print rather unexpectedly, a typescript of it having been shown to Stanley Unwin by a former pupil of Tolkien's. Once published, however, it was an equally unexpected success. Unwin pressed Tolkien for a sequel.

The Lord of the Rings

Tolkien accordingly, without abandoning hopes for his largely written but unfinished Silmarillion, began work on what was to become The Lord of the Rings. This tale 'grew in the telling', to use his own phrase, both in length and in the age of its intended audience; much of it was read serially, as it was composed, to the Oxford group known as the Inklings, which centred on Tolkien's close friend and colleague C. S. Lewis, whose support and enthusiasm in the years of composition Tolkien found invaluable.

The new work began with the Ring, which in The Hobbit Bilbo had found by accident and used for its gift of invisibility, passing to Bilbo's nephew Frodo, and also being discovered by Gandalf to be the long-lost One Ring, once the foundation of the evil power of Sauron, and with the potential to become so again. The Ring is too dangerous to be used; no possible recipient can be trusted to resist its allure, not even Gandalf; there is nowhere it can be kept safe. Frodo is obliged to take the Ring into the heart of Sauron's own country, Mordor, and there cast it into the Cracks of Doom and destroy it. This anti-quest, undertaken to throw something away, not regain it, is the heart of a story which also gives a complete picture, maps and chronicles included, of Tolkien's imagined Middle-earth and the peoples and languages within it.

The Lord of the Rings eventually appeared in print in three volumes between July 1954 and October 1955. Reaction was sharply divided. Although Tolkien received favourable and perceptive reviews from Lewis and from W. H. Auden, who had attended his Oxford lectures, many reviews were hostile, sometimes bitterly so, a critical response which has remained familiar. However, and in spite of the work's at that time unclassifiable nature, it sold extraordinarily well, as did the much-reissued Hobbit. The latter became an enormously successful children's book, with over thirty million copies sold, while The Lord of the Rings has sold many more. Both have been translated into almost all major European languages. The Lord of the Rings furthermore made a major change in public literary taste, creating a wave of imitations. ‘Heroic fantasy’ remains one of the most commercially successful literary genres and has had a significant impact upon the entertainment industry, from electronic games to movies. Animated versions of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings appeared in the late 1970s, while the film adaptations of the three volumes of The Lord of the Rings, directed by Peter Jackson and released in successive years (2001–3), proved among the most popular motion pictures of all time. All are developments wholly unimagined either by Tolkien or by his early critics.

Later academic career and death

Tolkien's academic career continued largely unaffected by this popular success. In 1945 he moved to the Merton chair of English language and literature at Oxford, holding it until he retired in 1959. He was appointed CBE in 1972, and received honorary doctorates from Liège, Dublin, Nottingham, and Oxford, and honorary fellowships at both Exeter College and Merton College, Oxford. While his minor works of fiction, his translations, his early poems, and some academic essays were now eagerly published or republished, he brought out no further major work. In his later years he was much pursued by admirers. He lived for a time outside Oxford, but after the death of Edith Tolkien on 29 November 1971, he returned to live in rooms provided by Merton College. He died not long after, in Bournemouth, on 2 September 1973, of a chest infection associated with a gastric ulcer. Both Tolkien and his wife were buried at Wolvercote cemetery outside Oxford.

Reputation and achievement

Tolkien's fiction has proved enduringly popular, and has indeed remained the focus of a considerable publishing industry, both in itself and through many marketing ‘spin-offs’. The deep and abiding hostility shown to Tolkien's fiction by many literary critics meanwhile has no doubt several roots, among them refusal to accept the crossing of the language–literature divide, and anger that a professor of language should have succeeded so spectacularly in attracting public attention. A third cause may be the anti-modernism which Tolkien displayed on several levels. Although, or perhaps because, the standard image of the ‘great writer’ between the wars involved dandyism, contempt for the bourgeoisie, and disrespect for convention of all kinds, Tolkien, like his friend C. S. Lewis, made a point of entirely conventional dress and behaviour. Many photographs of him survive, several of them from the later years showing him lighting or smoking his pipe. Tolkien also remained a devout Catholic to the end of his life, going so far as to insist, in a letter of 2 December 1953 to a Jesuit friend, Robert Murray, that although The Lord of the Rings contains no overt reference to Christianity at any point, and very little to religion, it nevertheless remains ‘a fundamentally religious and Catholic work’. His fiction predates but is in close sympathy with the environmentalist concerns of the green movement.

Since Tolkien's death the complex genesis of his fiction has been shown by the eventual publication in 1977 of The Silmarillion, and then of his Unfinished Tales (1980), and the twelve-volume History of Middle-Earth

(1983–96), all edited by Tolkien's third son, Christopher. A volume of his Letters has also appeared (1981), edited by Humphrey Carpenter, while his minor fictions, many of his drawings, paintings, and poems, and some of his academic essays have also been printed, reprinted, and collected in many ways.

It may finally be said that Tolkien did several things which might not have been thought possible. As a late English counterpart to such figures as the German philologist Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) or the Dane Nikolai Grundtvig (1783–1872) he showed the continuing vitality of traditional philology and the way in which it could be made to appeal to a national and international audience. He also created a mythological mediation between the Catholic Christianity in which he was a devout believer and the motifs of pre-Christian Germanic story. He furthermore, in an unheroic or anti-heroic age, succeeded in generating acceptable and inspiring images of heroism, drawing both on the ancient world of literature and the modern one of his own life-experience. His work combines atavism and contemporary relevance in ways which no one could have predicted (and which many continue to deny), but which have proved unforgettable to hundreds of millions of readers.

T. A. Shippey

Sources

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Archives

Bodl. Oxf., maps and MSS · NRA, corresp. and papers · Wheaton College, Illinois, Marion E. Wade Center | BL, letters to Michael Tolkien, Add. MS 71567 · HarperCollins archive · U. Reading, Allen and Unwin archive

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Likenesses

photographs, 1955–1972, Hult. Arch. · Snowdon, vintage bromide print, 1972, NPG · B. Swanwick, pencil and wash drawing, 1966–7, NPG · J. Wyatt, photograph, 1968, NPG [*see illus.*] · P. Chandler, modern bromide print from original negative, 1961, NPG · P. Chandler, C-type colour print, 1961, NPG

Wealth at death

£190,577: probate, 20 Dec 1973, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

T. A. Shippey, 'Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel (1892–1973)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Oct 2006 [http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.helin.uri.edu:80/view/article/31766, accessed 2 Feb 2007]

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/31766

[Previous version of this biography available here: May 2006]

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