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## Notes

Nancy Martsch

Janet Brennan Croft  
*Rutgers University, NJ*

Edith Crowe  
*San Jose State University Library, CA*

Richard West

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## Notes

### Abstract

# Notes and Letters

## Notes

- Thiepval Ridge and Minas Tirith. Proposes a specific source for certain imagery associated with the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. By Nancy Martsch
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- In Memoriam: Terry Pratchett in *Mythlore*. A listing of Terry Pratchett's appearances in *Mythlore* as the subject of articles. By Janet Brennan Croft
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- In Memoriam: Tom Loback in *Mythlore*. A listing of artist Tom Loback's appearances in *Mythlore* as illustrator or author. By Janet Brennan Croft and Edith Crowe
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## Letters

- Corrects and expands on items in his *Mythcon* Guest of Honor speech ("Where Fantasy Fits") printed in *Mythlore* 33.1 (#125). By Richard West

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of World War I; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields."; World War I in J.R.R. Tolkien; Pratchett, Terry; Loback, Tom



## THIEPVAL RIDGE AND MINAS TIRITH

NANCY MARTSCH

**I**N *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* TOLKIEN DESCRIBES the Dark Lord's forces at work as they lay siege to Minas Tirith, capital city of Gondor:

Busy as ants hurrying orcs were digging, digging lines of deep trenches in a huge ring, just out of bowshot from the walls; and as the trenches were made each was filled with fire, though how it was kindled or fed, by art or devilry, none could see. [...] [G]reat engines [...] began to throw missiles marvellously high, so that they passed right above the battlement and fell thudding within the first circle of the City; and many of them by some secret art burst into flame as they came toppling down. [...] Soon there was great peril of fire behind the wall [...]. (V.4.822)

The Riders of Rohan approach at night:

Merry peered from behind Dernhelm's back. Far away, maybe ten miles or more, there was a great burning, but between it and the Riders lines of fire blazed in a vast crescent, at the nearest point less than a league distant. (V.5.837)

One of the reasons why so many readers respond to *The Lord of the Rings* is the vividness of Tolkien's descriptions, and his accounts of battle are no exception. Like many of his contemporaries, J.R.R. Tolkien was a combat veteran, having served in the Battle of the Somme from June 1916 until being sent back to England with trench fever in October of the same year. C.S. Lewis, also a combat veteran, remarked on the realism of Tolkien's military descriptions: "[Tolkien's] war has the very quality of the war my generation knew. It is all here: the endless, unintelligible movement, the sinister quiet of the front when 'everything is now ready,' the flying civilians, the lively, vivid friendships, the background of something like despair and the merry foreground, and such heaven-sent windfalls as a cache of choice tobacco 'salvaged' from a ruin" (39-40). To this one might add the description of

recovery in the hospital/Houses of Healing, a subject usually passed over in fantasy literature.

Tolkien himself was not fond of critics who search an author's life for his sources. "One of my strongest opinions is that investigation of an author's biography [...] is an entirely vain and false approach to his works" (*Letters* 414). He downplayed associations with the Somme:

*"The Lord of the Rings* was actually begun, as a separate thing, about 1937 [...]. Personally I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding. Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon own something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme. They owe more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans, as in *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains*." (*Letters* 303)

Tom Shippey has suggested that Tolkien may have been reluctant to divulge details of his life because of the then-current fad for applying Freudian psychoanalysis to authors (8-9). Or perhaps he just did not want people prying into his personal life. Or it could be that the War brought back unpleasant memories.

As for the description of the siege of Minas Tirith, incendiaries have been used in warfare since ancient times. All of the technology (save for the Nazgûl's winged mounts) would have been available to the ancient Greeks, as Tolkien would have known from his Classical studies. (The "secret art" causing the missiles to burst into flame need be no more arcane than a lighted fuse, which would leave a fiery trail as it flew through the air.)

However, the description of the siege of Minas Tirith *is* vivid, and a writer, even one so gifted as J.R.R. Tolkien, does not create in a vacuum. An author's experiences, whether read in books or felt in person, influence his writing. So it seems reasonable to assume that some of his war experiences may have found their way into *The Lord of the Rings*.

John Garth, in *Tolkien and the Great War*, has tracked Tolkien's movements while in the army on an almost day-by-day basis. This, combined with other first-person accounts and good maps, enable one to infer what Tolkien might have seen. Using this method I have isolated one assault which might have been a visual influence for the siege of Minas Tirith: an English attack on the Thiepval ridge during the Battle of the Somme. This account comes from the German side, from Hauptmann von Forstner, Reserve Infantry Regiment 15:

[During the night of 6th-7th July] we were stood-to about six times. The terrain from Ovillers to Hardécourt was under drumfire.<sup>1</sup> The fiery battle, fought out under cloudy skies, was grotesquely beautiful. The concentration of fire was quite remarkable; the shells spewed out long red fiery strands constantly. Where had these tens of thousands of shells come from? Not the slightest clue could be discovered; apart, that is, from the spectral flashes lighting up the horizon. (Sheldon 190)

The English attacked the next day.

The German observer was south of Thiepval, and would have seen the shells coming toward his lines; Tolkien was at Bouzincourt about three miles away to the southwest. He would have seen the shells passing by toward a target in the distance. Note that three miles roughly equals one league, the distance Merry was from the outermost ring of fire, and that the action took place at night, under cloud cover, as was the case for Merry. The scene made quite an impression on von Forstner, and it might have made an impression on Tolkien, too.

One does not have to look very hard to find other resemblances between the Somme and *The Lord of the Rings*. Consider, for example, the similarity in layout between the Schwaben Redoubt at the Somme and the Hornburg at Helm's Deep.<sup>2</sup> In both cases fortifications were strung across a river, with a stronghold on a ridge to the attackers' right. The English took the Schwaben Redoubt on the first day of fighting, but the Germans counterattacked that night and drove the English out, with heavy losses. Saruman's forces took the wall (but not the Hornburg) at night and the Rohirrim counterattacked the next morning, driving them out.

Colored flares were used for signaling at the Somme, and Tolkien was a signals officer. Sauron commences his attack on Gondor with a gigantic red flame from Mt. Doom, answered by blue lightning from Minas Morgul: signal flares writ large. Throughout the first months at the Somme (until the arrival of Baron von Richthofen's squadron in October), the Allies enjoyed air superiority over the Germans, flying at will over the German lines, scouting and strafing. The Nazgûl flew over Minas Tirith, crying with fell voices and demoralizing the defenders. Tolkien certainly saw dead soldiers killed in the act of fighting, as did Sam in the orc tower at Cirith Ungol. Martin Gilbert suggested that the description of the corpses in the Dead Marshes reflects

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<sup>1</sup> Drumfire: artillery fire so continuous and heavy that it sounds like a roll of drums.

<sup>2</sup> The Schwaben Redoubt was just north of the town of Thiepval. See my article "Tolkien and World War I" in *Beyond Bree*, November 2006, 2-4. This issue, published to mark the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, notes additional similarities between WWI and the War of the Ring.

soldiers' experiences at the Somme (240). The first use of primitive tanks took place at the Somme. Janet Brennan Croft has likened these tanks to the mechanical dragons used by Morgoth against Gondolin (18). And, in his essay on the presumptive use of gunpowder in Middle-earth, Arti Ponsen has compared the sound of the drums in the deep of Moria to "drumfire" (59-60).

One could go on: the use of mines, the role played by British batmen, cavalry manoeuvres . . . Some of these may be stretching the comparison a bit, and other supposed similarities may be mere coincidence.

But the assault on Thiepval Ridge on the night of July 6-7 seems to have made a strong impression on its observers, and Tolkien was there to see it. Furthermore, of all the attacks witnessed by Tolkien during his time at the front, this night attack is the one which most resembles his description of the siege of Minas Tirith. Might it be possible that Tolkien recalled this scene when writing *The Lord of the Rings*?

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NANCY MARTSCH is the editor of *Beyond Bree*, newsletter of the J.R.R. Tolkien Special Interest Group of American Mensa. Martsch has given talks on Tolkien at various conferences, contributed to the *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* and *The Ring Goes Ever On: Proceedings of the 2005 Tolkien Conference*, and authored *Basic Quenya*, a primer of Elvish.

## IN MEMORIAM: TERRY PRATCHETT IN *MYTHLORE*

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

TERRY PRATCHETT, widely acclaimed author of forty Discworld novels as well as a number of other books, has been the subject of several articles in *Mythlore*. The Discworld novels, in addition to being by turns hilarious, gripping, moving, and thought-provoking, constitute a master-class in the theory, practice, and history of fantasy and mythopoeic literature. He passed away on 12 March 2015.

**Croft, Janet Brennan.** "The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in Discworld and Potterworld." *Mythlore* 27.3/4 (#105/106) (2009): 129–142.

Explores the depiction of gender in education, and how gender issues in education relate to power and agency, in two current young adult fantasy series featuring feisty heroines determined to learn all that they can: Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, and Tiffany Aching, main character of three Discworld novels by Terry Pratchett. Includes a brief appendix on cross-dressing in children's literature.

**Croft, Janet Brennan.** "Nice, Good, or Right: Faces of the Wise Woman in Terry Pratchett's 'Witches' Novels." *Mythlore* 26.3/4 (#101/102) (2008): 151–64.

Examines the moral system that guides the use of magic by the witches of Discworld. Considers the definitions of Nice, Good, and Right under this system, and demonstrates how mature witches strive to do what is Right.

**Lüthi, Daniel.** "Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern Playground of Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels." *Mythlore* 33.1 (#125) (2014): 125–142.

Attempts to discover exactly how Terry Pratchett manages to get away with violating the rules of the fantasy tradition laid out in Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories." Pratchett consistently revels in the absurdity of Discworld as a concept, breaks the fourth wall, and disrupts Tolkien's proviso against satirizing magic itself; and yet the Discworld sails on, imperturbable. Pratchett's concept of narrative imperative is discussed as one of the keys to the success of his invented world.

**Sinclair, Lian.** "Magical Genders: The Gender(s) of Witches in the Historical Imagination of Terry Pratchett's Discworld." *Mythlore* 33.2 (#126) (2015): 5–18.

Fruitfully explores the similarities between Pratchett's theory of narrative causality and the gender theories of Butler and Foucault; all deal with an urge to fit gender performance into an established story. Pratchett's witches engage in a balancing act between the gender expectations of their society and their own quests for agency and power.

## IN MEMORIAM: TOM LOBACK IN *MYTHLORE*

JANET BRENNAN CROFT AND EDITH CROWE

TOM LOBACK WAS A CONTRIBUTOR of Tolkien-related articles and artwork to *Mythlore* and several other magazines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Known for his unique artistic style and his calligraphy in *cirth* and *tengwar*, he also created driftwood sculptures along the Hudson River in Manhattan and sculpted miniature fantasy and Civil War figures. He passed away on 5 March 2015.

### Articles:

**“The Kindreds, Houses, and Population of the Elves during the First Age.”**  
*Mythlore* 14.1 (#51) (1987): 34–38, 56.

A study of the Elves of the First Age, reviewing their social structure (the Great House or Kindred), population, and demographics. Includes detailed charts and estimates of population numbers. (Middle-earth studies.)

**“Orc Hosts, Armies and Legions: A Demographic Study.”** *Mythlore* 16.4 (#62) (1990): 10, 12–16, 26.

Calculates the likely population of Orcs in Middle-earth at various times based on Tolkien’s use of the military terms host, army, and legion. Uses *The Silmarillion* and several volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* to “show a developing concept of Orc military organization and, by inference, an idea of Orc demographics.”

### Artwork:

**“The Thingol Scroll.”** Inscription in *cirth*. *Mythlore* 14.2 (#52) (1987): 42–45.

Eight-panel banner illustration with key on page 45. (Untitled in table of contents.)

**“King Thingol Fights with Boldog.”** Inscription in Sindarin. *Mythlore* 15.2 (#56) (1988): 62. (Untitled in table of contents.)

**“Eärindil and Elwing.”** Inscription in Qenya. *Mythlore* 15.3 (#57) (1989): back cover. (Titled “Eärindil” in table of contents.)

**“The Marriage of Tuor and Idril.”** Quenya text in *tengwar*. *Mythlore* 16.3 (#61) (1990): back cover. (facing page)

**“Tuor Slew Othrod.”** Quenya text in *tengwar*. *Mythlore* 16.4 (#62) (1990): 11.

**“Thus Spake Fëanor.”** Quenya text in *tengwar*. *Mythlore* 17.2 (#64) (1990): 17. (Untitled in table of contents; part of a project by four artists to illustrate the same scene.)







## LETTERS

THANK YOU FOR PUBLISHING MY MYTHCON 45 scholar guest of honor speech in *Mythlore* 125. I can never reread anything I have written without seeing ways I could improve it. Some comments: John Rateliff suggested Thorne Smith as another author of fantasy in the pre-*Lord of the Rings* period whom I might have mentioned: I think of novels like *Topper* (1926). Kristin Thompson noted that there was a lot of fantasy in movies of the period (like *Topper* in 1937). Hank Luttrell, buttressing my complaint that there was no need to change the U.S. title of the first Harry Potter novel, observed that American children were quite capable of understanding what "The Fabulous Philosopher's Stone" was when it featured in a Scrooge McDuck story with that title (written and illustrated by Carl Barks) in *Uncle Scrooge* number 10 (June-August, 1955) from Dell Comics (this story has been reprinted many times). I was ten years old when that comic book came out; it was my own introduction to the legend of the Stone; and indeed I had no trouble with the concept. I thank Douglas Anderson for pointing out that I should have stated more carefully that Lin Carter was not solely responsible for the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series: Betty Ballantine edited that series, selecting titles from suggestions by Lin Carter who served as editorial consultant. Doug also shared an entry from his blog of 25 November 2013 with information from Gordon Van Gelder (owner of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*) about the contracts with C.S. Lewis for his contributions to that magazine: <http://tolkienandfantasy.blogspot.com/2013/11/five-notes-on-cs-lewis.html>. I was also embarrassingly careless in getting my author bio to you. My too-hasty wording that my wife Perri had taught chemistry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison might be taken to imply that she had taught in the Department of Chemistry; I should have said more exactly that she taught Pharmaceutical Chemistry in the School of Pharmacy. The School honored her pretty much all it could at her retirement, but not with emeritus status (which it awards only to professors). She retired with the title, not of Lecturer, but the higher rank of Senior Lecturer. I really should have Perri vet my stuff before I hit "send."

With thanks and best wishes,  
Richard West