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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Hobbit dinner; Holland; The Netherlands; Cees Ouboter; Jo van Rosmalen; Rotterdam; speech; Voorhoeve & Dietrich

Tolkien's Exceptional Visit to Holland: A Reconstruction¹

René van Rossenberg

Abstract: In March 1958 Tolkien was the guest of honour at a "Hobbit Meal" in Rotterdam, Holland. He had never before accepted such an invitation and never did again. By interviewing the organisers and many people who met Tolkien, the visit has been reconstructed, and many, often funny anecdotes have come to light.

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In March 1958 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain paid a state visit to the Netherlands. After her coronation in 1953 she went to a number of states which were considered "friendly nations", and despite the four wars the Dutch and English had waged against each other, the Netherlands were included in the list of the good guys.

On Thursday 27 March the royal party was in Rotterdam. Rotterdam is the largest port in the world, and is situated in the south of Holland, the coastal areas of the Netherlands. The British and Dutch royal families made a tour through the city and paid a visit to a – no doubt – typically Dutch family. After all this the British royal family returned to the royal yacht *Britannia*. With an official banquet on board the *Britannia* that night, the state visit came to an end. Early the next morning, Friday the 28th, the *Britannia* set sail for England. Just outside Dutch territorial waters the royal yacht crossed the path of the *SS Duke of York*, the ferry between Harwich and the Hook of Holland. On board the *Duke of York* was J.R.R. Tolkien; Ronald and Elizabeth, ships that passed in the night . . .

At about half past nine on a dreary, cold morning in March Tolkien stepped on the quay of the Hook of Holland. From the Hook of Holland he took the train to Rotterdam Central Station, where he was met by Cees Ouboter, an employee of the Rotterdam bookseller Voorhoeve & Dietrich. Tolkien would have had no problems in recognising Ouboter, for the man was enthusiastically waving his copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Ouboter handed Tolkien over to Mr. Jo van Rosmalen, head of the publicity department of the Dutch Tolkien publishers Het Spectrum, for Mr. Ouboter had to return to Voorhoeve & Dietrich to go to work.

With this I have mentioned the two principal players (Ouboter and van Rosmalen) and the two institutions responsible for the organisation of this exceptional visit by

Tolkien to Holland: bookseller Voorhoeve & Dietrich and publisher Het Spectrum. Let us pay some attention to them.

Voorhoeve & Dietrich was not just a bookshop. It was the leading bookseller in Rotterdam and in turnover one of the biggest in the Netherlands. They were also an old-fashioned bookshop, with knowledgeable employees who could recommend books to their clients. Among those clients was the intellectual and administrative elite of the city, such as professors from the university, the burgomaster and company executives. Also Voorhoeve & Dietrich was the cultural centre of Rotterdam. For instance, they organized meetings with authors in which they clearly followed the example of the London bookseller Foyles. The authors gave speeches and signed books, usually in the shop itself or in the church next door. Sometimes the meeting took the form of a banquet, a "literary luncheon" as they called it. In all these activities Cees Ouboter was the driving force. He was an erudite, intelligent and well-read man who gave lectures on literature, wrote articles and had a talent for organising.

Het Spectrum was a Catholic publishing house, which overcame the hardships of the Second World War in the fifties by publishing cheap pocketbooks, dictionaries and a range of low-price scientific books. Due to an enthusiastic reviewer, who was a good friend of the chief editor of Het Spectrum, *The Lord of the Rings* came to the attention of the publishing firm. After considerable persuasion, the proprietor of Het Spectrum agreed to publish a Dutch translation of this massive work.

In 1956, only one year after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in Britain, part one of *In de Ban van de Ring* (meaning "Under the Spell of the Ring"), entitled *De Reisgenoten* hit the bookshops. The Dutch translation was the first translation of *The Lord of the Rings* that was published; the next one – the Swedish translation – dates from 1960.

¹ This paper is dedicated to Priscilla Tolkien for it was her enthusiastic reminiscences of her father's visit to Holland, which she told me the first time we met, that gave me the idea to write this paper.

The translator, Max Schuchart, had to work in haste, but made a very good job of it. In fact he received an important award for his translation. It is a pity that some mistakes were made by the publisher; for instance they managed to misspell Tolkien's name on the dust-jacket (J.J.R. instead of J.R.R.).

The Sales Director of Het Spectrum, a gentleman called Costa Yocarini, and his staff went round the Dutch bookshops offering *In de Ban van de Ring* to the booksellers, and they encountered serious problems in selling Tolkien for a number of reasons.

Tolkien was a totally unknown author (*The Hobbit* had not yet been translated into Dutch), writing in a genre we now call fantasy, but which was an unknown entity in the fifties. When Yocarini tried to typeset the novel with sentences like

"a fairy-tale for grown-ups", that did not cut much ice with the sober Dutch booksellers. The 40% first-offer discount appealed more to them. Another problem was that *In de Ban van de Ring* was an expensive book. Its sheer size of well over 500,000 words forced Het Spectrum to publish the novel in three thick volumes. To limit the financial risks, Het Spectrum had decided on a low print-run of 3000 sets (which is relatively large if you compare it with the 3500 British print-run of *The Fellowship of the Ring*) and a de luxe binding and format to make a higher price more acceptable. The result was that each volume had a retail price of 12.50 Dutch guilders, while an average hardback at that time would cost 6.95 Dutch guilders.

Not surprisingly Mr. Yocarini and his colleagues received luke-warm receptions from the booksellers. Even large bookstores would not buy more than five or six, and after some persuasion perhaps ten sets. The big exception was Voorhoeve & Dietrich. When Yocarini came there he was welcomed with open arms. They had been quite successful in selling the original for well over a year, and the whole staff of Voorhoeve & Dietrich, and in particular Cees Ouboter, who simply loved the book, were very pleased that there was now a Dutch translation. The Rotterdam bookshop immediately ordered fifty sets.

But they were the exception and sales did not go that well, for the general public had not discovered Tolkien. Yet Cees Ouboter had an almost missionary zeal to promote Tolkien. For instance he gave to his regular customers a copy of *De Reisgenoten* to take home and read, with the warning that the first fifty pages were a bit dry, but that the story took off after that. If the customer did not like the book, he could give it back free of charge, and otherwise he would have to buy it. This was a clever trick, with hardly any risk for the bookshop. Even the returned well-read copies were no loss, for Voorhoeve & Dietrich supplied all the books for the libraries on board the ships of the Holland-America line. The HAL insisted that all books – even the brand-new ones – had to be re-bound, which gave Voorhoeve & Dietrich an excellent opportunity to sell second-hand books for the full cover-price.

Not surprisingly, Ouboter also got the idea to get Tolkien to Holland for one of Voorhoeve & Dietrich's famous literary luncheons. And to reflect the spirit of the novel the visit should have the form of a banquet, a "Hobbit dinner". In the second half of 1957 he contacted Het Spectrum about the idea. They loved it. Het Spectrum could use a good publicity stunt to boost sales. So, with the blessing of the publisher and the promise of financial support Cees Ouboter wrote Tolkien a letter via Rayner Unwin. In the middle of December, he received Tolkien's reply.

Tolkien explained that his poor health and that of his wife Edith had prevented him from writing sooner. He had been about to decline the invitation for he could not come to Holland in January, as Ouboter apparently had suggested. Yet before Tolkien could answer, Ouboter himself had postponed the date because they could not get the organisation ready for January. In his letter Tolkien could not

Thursday 20 March 1958

Dear Mr Ouboter,

I am sure that you will excuse my stupidity at the present time. My wife's illness in these days when domestic help is often unobtainable, means that I have very little time to attend to my affairs. Things are now settling down a bit, as my wife recovers from the journey back home; and I have been able to read your last letter, and also the programme and foreword of the *Maaktijd* which you sent to me. I see that many of the queries that I made in my letter (to Voorhoeve & Dietrich) of last Tuesday are there answered.

As for the time of my arrival. Allen and Unwin leave today. I have tickets and reservations for the journey London – Rotterdam – Amsterdam (outward beginning 27 March, return

Figure 1. First page of a letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to Cees Ouboter, 20 March 1958. Private collection. Text © The Tolkien Trust, 1995.

give a definite yes or no, but he said: "I should like very much to come; I will do my best to do so."²

He continued by saying that a period between 24 March and 2 April would suit him best. Incidentally, in the second paragraph he mentioned that he was supposed to be visiting Sweden in March "though this is now highly improbable". Perhaps somebody from a Swedish Tolkien society can find out the background to this cancelled visit? After quite some correspondence between Tolkien and Ouboter³ – in which Tolkien showed considerable anxiety about travelling alone – a date was set and confirmed: Friday, 28 March.

I left the story at Rotterdam Central Station, so let us speedily return to Tolkien and the nervous Jo van Rosmalen. Van Rosmalen was nervous, for he was faced with the for him daunting task of entertaining an Oxford don for the whole day, a man whom he had never met before. But, as Mr. van Rosmalen told me when I interviewed him, Tolkien was an amiable man who had a talent for making you feel at ease.

The first thing Jo van Rosmalen did was to take Tolkien to a restaurant, for he assumed that his guest would like a cup of coffee as it was about 11 o'clock. But Tolkien surprised him by ordering "Dutch cold beer". After Tolkien drank about four glasses they continued. Van Rosmalen clearly remembered that the alcohol did not affect Tolkien much. His back was a bit straighter and he walked a bit faster, to the dismay of the chubby van Rosmalen who had difficulties keeping up with Tolkien. Like this, they walked for hours through Rotterdam, for Tolkien wanted to see everything. Most of what he saw he did not like, for the city clearly bore the scars of the Second World War.

On 10 May, 1940, German troops invaded the Netherlands. The Nazis wanted to push through the Netherlands and Belgium to cut off the British Expeditionary Force and attack the French army from two sides. Yet the Dutch army put up a fiercer resistance than expected, and after four days the Germans were bogged down. To force an end to the war in Holland the Luftwaffe extensively bombed Rotterdam and the Germans delivered an ultimatum to the Dutch Military Command: surrender or Utrecht will be next. Faced with such barbarism the Dutch army capitulated.

Before the bombardment Rotterdam looked very much like Amsterdam; a combination of beautiful old buildings, canals and elegant bridges which is so appreciated by the millions of tourists who visit the Netherlands each year. The bombardment completely flattened a large part of the city and cut out the heart of Rotterdam. At the end of the fifties the effects of the bombardment were still visible. There were a lot of open spaces, partially filled with fast and cheaply built and extremely ugly high-rise flats. The town centre looked like a large building site: a lot of office blocks under construction, wide streets and much traffic. None of this appealed to Tolkien. As he wrote to Rayner Unwin on 8 April:

I . . . saw a good deal of the depressing world of

ruined and half-rebuilt Rotterdam. I think it is largely the breach between this comfortless world, with its gigantic and largely dehumanised reconstruction, and the natural and ancestral tastes of the Dutch, that has (as it seems) made them, in R[otterdam] especially, almost intoxicated with *hobbits!*

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 265, No 206)

Tolkien did like the many parks of Rotterdam. He showed great interest in, and knowledge of the vegetation. He knew the Latin and English names and kept on asking van Rosmalen the Dutch names of trees and flowers. If Mr. Rosmalen did not know, Tolkien would translate the Latin or English name into Dutch to see if this would ring a bell with van Rosmalen. Tolkien had, not surprisingly for a philologist, some knowledge of Dutch, a point which he proved again, as well as his sense of humour, during his visit to Voorhoeve & Dietrich.

At about one o'clock Tolkien and van Rosmalen came to the bookshop to have something to eat. Tolkien talked with the staff and with some customers and during his stay he noticed a small Dutch pocketbook by Herbert Pollack entitled *Word slank en blijf gezond*. Tolkien took it from the shelves, wrote his translation of the title, "get slim and stay in trim", on the title-page, signed it and gave it as a present to the fat and by this time no doubt tired and out of breath Jo van Rosmalen. Mind you, Tolkien did not pay for the book . . .

After about an hour and a half, Tolkien asked van Rosmalen to take him to his hotel, for Tolkien wanted to take his usual half-hour midday nap. He requested that van Rosmalen would collect him precisely half an hour later. Van Rosmalen did so and they walked again for two hours through the streets and parks of Rotterdam. At about 5 o'clock van Rosmalen brought Tolkien to the location where the "official" program of the visit, the "Hobbit dinner", would take place.

Let us take another break from the story to tell something about the organization of the visit.

A press release was issued by Voorhoeve & Dietrich, which was also handed out to the customers. Very cleverly the press-release was in English to get the message across that the whole affair would be conducted in that language, and that you would not enjoy it very much if you did not understand English. It stated that the visit was organised on the occasion of the state visit of Queen Elizabeth, but that was a little lie for publicity's sake, for, as mentioned before, Tolkien's visit was first planned for January. Of course Cees Ouboter, who wrote the release, gave some information on Tolkien and his work, for Tolkien was unknown to the general public. To give an impression of what Ouboter wrote here are some quotes:

The hobbits are a race of small, near-human creatures who have not found their place in history.

Their story is known only to Mr. J.R.R. Tolkien, Professor at Oxford University, who has access to

² Letter of J.R.R. Tolkien to C. Ouboter, 19 December 1957.

³ Six letters from Tolkien to Ouboter have been traced, but Ouboter's son remembers clearly that there were eight.

special sources which have enabled him to record their ups and downs in his beautiful books, especially in his trilogy: *The Lord of the Rings* . . .

Antiquarians dare not rank him among the experts of prehistory. But there are more and more enthusiastic people – some even call them zealots – who place him in the foremost ranks of those who have a thorough knowledge of the human soul.

All critics agree that Mr. Tolkien is an excellent story-teller but many a reader wonders what the meaning is of the fascinating story. They are looking for a hidden significance but they are at a loss as to what it might be. People who have a special weakness for the uncanny, as well as those who like adventure or humour, will be satisfied.

Especially to inform the press further Ouboter gave a lecture on *The Lord of the Rings* a week before the visit, as was announced in the last paragraph of the press release. This speech has also been published and is one of the first serious studies on Tolkien which appeared in the Dutch language (Ouboter, 1958). The benefit of Ouboter's trouble is clearly visible in the many newspaper articles on Tolkien which appeared in the local and national press before and after the visit.⁴ What all these articles have in common is a sense of wonder for this "peculiar trilogy" and praise for Tolkien as a story-teller and for his remarkable imagination. But many journalists could hardly disguise the fact that they just did not know what to make of it all. Yet it brought Tolkien and his forthcoming visit to Rotterdam widely under the attention of the public in Holland in general and in Rotterdam in particular.

Publicity was also gained by the glossy invitations (as four-page leaflets) Het Spectrum had printed and which Voorhoeve & Dietrich distributed amongst their regular customers. It contained the program of the evening, the menu, the text of the press-release (but this time in Dutch) and proudly stated on the cover that on the occasion of the visit by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II of Great-Britain a Hobbit dinner ("Hobbit-maaltijd" in Dutch) would take place on Friday, 28 March 1958, from 17.30 hours onwards at the Flevo-restaurant in Rotterdam. In fact the Flevo-restaurant was not a restaurant at all; the Flevo-hall was part of the "Twaalf Provinciën Huis", a multi-functional building. The hall was also used for concerts, exhibitions and even as a cinema. Nobody I spoke to liked the hall, for it was barren, without style or attractiveness, and had no windows. Because it was not a restaurant, they had to use outside caterers. Printed in the invitation leaflet was also the list of the "Ere-Comité", the Committee of Honour. To give more standing to the visit and to get more publicity Voorhoeve & Dietrich and Het Spectrum established a committee of honour. Moreover, protocol demands that there be such a committee. With all its connections in Rotterdam high society, it was no wonder that Voorhoeve & Dietrich could find a number of people of substance to take a place in this committee: the burgomaster of Rotterdam, the alderman responsible for



Figure 2. The invitation to the "Hobbit dinner". Photograph by and © the Royal Library, The Hague.

culture, two representatives of the British embassy and five professors, including Tolkien's friend and colleague from the University of Amsterdam, Professor Piet Harting, constituted the "Ere-Comité".

Normal mortals who wished to attend the "Hobbit-maaltijd" had to make this known by filling out a card and paying Dfl. 7.50. Voorhoeve & Dietrich used this money to pay for the meal and the hall. To complete the financial picture: George Allen & Unwin paid Tolkien's travelling expenses, while Het Spectrum took care of the hotel bill and the additional costs. Tolkien did not get a fee for his troubles. After Voorhoeve & Dietrich had received your card and payment they mailed you your entrance ticket (a dinner-card) and, if you wanted to, Ouboter's introductory speech which was printed as a booklet. There was room for 200 guests, but well over that amount of reservations were made. Although a local, Rotterdam happening, the very first Dutch Tolkien-fans came from all over the country to Rotterdam to meet Tolkien.

⁴ I have tracked down fifteen of such articles, but there are probably a few more.

Now let us return to Tolkien at the "Twaalf Provinciën Huis". At 6 o'clock the guests were asked to take their seats. Once everybody was seated Tolkien and the other special guests entered and took their places at the high table. Cees Baars, managing director of Voorhoeve & Dietrich, opened the proceedings by saying:

Prof. Tolkien, Members of the Committee of Honour, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Speaking on behalf of the organizers I take great pleasure in extending to you a warm welcome at this Hobbit dinner. This festivity – for a dinner is a festivity for every hobbit – is meant as a homage to Professor Tolkien and his creation. I hope – and now I am quoting old Mr. Bilbo – that you will all enjoy yourselves as much as I shall. May I introduce to you all Mr. Sötemann, who will be in the chair this evening.

Guus Sötemann (who later became Professor of Dutch Language and Literature at the University of Utrecht) was the reviewer who had brought *The Lord of the Rings* to the attention of *Het Spectrum*. He had helped in the organization of the visit and as chairman of the evening it was his job to introduce the speakers and to make sure that no speech lasted longer than five minutes. The program for the evening consisted only of speeches: in total nine were given.⁵

The first one was from the well-known Dutch author Hella Haasse. No doubt Tolkien was not very pleased with the fact that she immediately started to talk about the hidden meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory, a theme which recurred several times that evening. Hella Haasse addressed the point as follows:

It seems to me that all great literature is more or less openly allegorically, especially so in times, when one mode of thinking gives way to another, when the world is changing before human eyes, and human experience has not yet found the words to express the full scope of what is happening. Like all great literature your book is mythical and allegorical and at the same time it has all the sounds and colours and scents, all the glow and movement and density of real life on earth.

Like all great literature it can be read many ways, it has many different layers of meaning, ranging from a delightful fairy-tale to a drama of cosmic order. Mr. Tolkien, it seems to me that one of the reasons, perhaps the most important reason, why your book makes such a deep and lasting impression on so many people, is this: that you have been able to make a composition, a structure, out of the broken fragments of reality, and that, within this composition, you have put the figure of the "hero" our time is so badly in need of and never yet has been able to conceive: a hero who in no way resembles the great epic figures of the past, a hero who is literally of small stature, who is at the same time rather comical and endearing, pathetic and yet somebody to be proud of, and even in his moments of doubt and hopelessness full of a definitely awe-

inspiring kind of dignity . . .

For having given us [a] symbol of ourselves, so charged with meaning that it will keep us company through the long hours of our own struggle, and for having given us this symbol in the disguise of a completely absorbing, poetic tale that keeps the reader spellbound from the first to the last word – for this, Mr. Tolkien, I want to thank you with all my heart.

After her spoke the editor of *Het Spectrum*, Daniël de Lange and then, according to the published program, publisher P.H. Bogaard. But he chickened out and left it to poor Jo van Rosmalen to give a speech on his behalf. Van Rosmalen spoke tongue-in-cheek about Tolkien's supposedly Dutch forefathers. "In the year 1480 there lived in Utrecht a man named Rutger Tulleken, also called Tolken. Of course he was of noble descent . . . Professor Tolkien, after five centuries, I give you a hearty welcome home. We are proud of your Dutch origins!" Tolkien's old friend Professor Piet Harting spoke, as well as three customers of Voorhoeve & Dietrich and of course Cees Ouboter. Ouboter's speech was different in the sense that he spoke about the negative criticism he had heard from some of his customers to whom he had given a "free" copy of *In de Ban van de Ring*. "In their opinion your story is too fantastic. They refuse to believe in fairy-tales. Elves were created for children only, to say nothing of orcs and trolls. One customer could not find the Hobbits in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This was such a strong argument against your creation that he returned the books." Others complained about the lack of women, the fact that love and marriage are scarcely mentioned or that the story was too violent. Ouboter classified those who liked *The Lord of the Rings* in two categories: those who liked it as an adventurous and even humorous story and those who wanted to emphasise the message in it. He concluded his speech as follows:

Summarizing my speech, I must admit that I have spoken more about the negative than about the positive reactions to your work. I find the same thing in your book. The power of Evil is more impressive there than that of its opposers. But goodness prevails. And so will your work, the story of the fight of humility and humour in an ever-continuing strife against the seemingly overwhelming Power of Evil. We are grateful to you for writing this story, lest we forget . . .

All the speeches were full of praise, as one could expect of course, without being fawning. As Tolkien later wrote: "In the event they were all in English; and all but one quite sensible (if one deducts the high pitch of the eulogy, which was rather embarrassing)" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 266, No. 206). On the two photographs taken of the high table during Hella Haasse's speech you can clearly see that Tolkien was embarrassed; he rests his weary head on both fists. The one non-sensible speech was given, according to Tolkien, by a "lunatic *psycholog*".⁶ A psychologist, Mr. L. Deen, did

⁵ I have found the text of five of the speeches. Of the sixth there is no text, for the speaker made it up as he went along and never put it down on paper.

⁶ Tolkien meant "psycholoog", which is Dutch for psychologist. This is probably a transcribing mistake.



Figure 3. The Hobbit dinner in progress. The lady standing is Hella Haasse. On her left is sitting chairman Guus Sötemann, Mrs. Sötemann and Tolkien, resting his head in his hands. Next to him is Professor Piet Harting. The tall gentleman in front of Tolkien is Professor Lambers. The gentleman on the far left with the moustache is translator Max Schuchart. Photograph by and © C.M. Tholens.



Figure 4. Another photograph of the Flevo-hall with the Hobbit dinner in progress. Hella Haasse is addressing Tolkien, who is sitting three seats on her left, with his head on his hands. Photograph by and © C.M. Tholens.

address Tolkien, but there is nothing odd about his speech. I give you some sentences from Deen's speech:

I shall take the story as it is, without attempting profound interpretations. Why not leave it to the individual purchaser to enjoy the book and to accept the story as he chooses? Is it not sufficient to enjoy wonderful scenery without trying to discover its meaning?

Professor Tolkien's fascinating story, told in his own magnificent manner takes the reader outside the human and inhuman realities of everyday life, and gives him the reality of a creative fantasy, the privilege of a rich personal imagination . . .

There are many reasons why we should thank Professor Tolkien for his marvellous story, every page of which is full of wonderful scenes, ideas and thoughts. May Professor Tolkien's creatures live long in our hearts.

I assume that Tolkien would have agreed to all this. However, another speaker, a Mr. P.A. Hekstra, said some peculiar things. Mr. Hekstra was a graphologist, which is close enough to psychology for Tolkien to make the mistake. Hekstra was a critic who reviewed books on national radio, and as such was invited to speak. He said about *The Lord of the Rings* that it was "a history of Elves and fairies, earthmen, cobolds and gnomes", and he summarised the novel as follows: "The story deals with brave knights, shrewd gnomes, bloodthirsty mercenaries and powermongers, who at one moment help each other, and the next moment are each others, mortal enemies." No wonder Tolkien said to Mrs. Sötemann, who was sitting next to him: "Either he did not see anything, or did not like what he saw."

The evening was announced as a Hobbit dinner, so food was provided. The intention was that between courses the speeches be given. This proved to be a small disaster, for many speeches were too long, so that the food was cold by the time the speech was finished. Only one person did not wait for the speaker to finish: Tolkien immediately dug in when something was set before him and thus proved that he was a real hobbit.

Nicely decorated menu cards were printed by Het Spectrum. Every course had a Tolkienesque name, such as "Egg-salad à la Barliman Butterbur", "Vegetables of Goldberry" and "Ice and Fruits of Gildor". Some confusion amongst the guests was caused by "Maggotsoup"; people feared the contents of the soup. But to everybody's relief it was of – course – mushroom. Also, meat was served ("Fricandeau à la Gimli") which was a problem, for it was Friday and Tolkien was a Roman Catholic. Catholics are not allowed to eat meat on Friday. But the organizers had thought of that and had asked – and received – dispensation from the diocese of Rotterdam. Sötemann had a little card from the deacon in his pocket, proving that dispensation was given in case Tolkien asked. He did not, and interestingly enough Sötemann said to me that Tolkien did not strike him as a man who would be concerned with a thing like that.

Of course no "Hobbit-maaltijd" could be complete without pipe-smoking. The Dutch tobacco company Van Rossum had

supplied free tobacco in beautiful Delft blue porcelain jars and old-fashioned clay pipes to all the gentlemen present (of course not to the ladies, perish the thought, this is the fifties you know!). In the Flevo-hall hung several posters of Van Rossum's, advertising "Pipe-weed for Hobbits: In three qualities: *Longbottom Leaf*, *Old Toby* and *Southern Star*".

Besides eating, drinking, smoking and listening to all the speeches, Tolkien had to give autographs. A lady told me that she came to the "Hobbit-maaltijd" with her father to get her book autographed, but she did not speak any English. This was no problem for Tolkien; he signed his name and wrote down "Elen síla lúmenn, omentielvo" in Tengwar (which she could not read either, but that's beside the point).

At the end of the banquet came the high point of the evening, the reason why people from all over the Netherlands had come to Rotterdam, the ninth and final speech: Tolkien's speech.

Tolkien surprised his audience by starting with the Dutch greeting "beste luitjes" (dear folks). The speech he gave was a parody of the farewell speech of Bilbo Baggins at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, and it was laced with jokes and small bits in Dutch and Elvish. It went down very well with the Rotterdam audience. Beforehand, Tolkien was afraid that his non-English audience would not understand him, but that fear was unfounded. It was another example of Tolkien's insecurity, his fear not to do justice to the occasion. Professor H. W. Lambers, one of the customers of Voorhoeve & Dietrich who had given a speech, told me that you could clearly notice that Tolkien was a very experienced teacher; he knew how to get a message across, how to address a large non-understanding audience, like a group of students.

It is amusing to notice that there has been some myth-forming around Tolkien's speech. It has been suggested that Tolkien was standing on his chair – like Bilbo did – during his speech. I have interviewed about a dozen people present at the Hobbit dinner and as is the case with eyewitnesses, some said yes, some said no, most did not know. But on the photograph taken of Tolkien while he is addressing the audience you can see that he was not standing on a chair.

Another nice anecdote – and one that did happen – occurred during the question time after Tolkien's speech. A lady argued elaborately that such a large work of literature surely must have a deeper meaning, a message. Are we, for instance, supposed to see the Soviet Union in Mordor, and is Sauron based on Stalin, and is Gandalf the personification of Christian ethics who leads ordinary people (the hobbits) on a crusade against injustice, communism and heresy? In short, my dear professor, what are you trying to say with this novel?

Tolkien had listened thoughtfully to the lady, rose from his chair, walked to the microphone, and said: "Absolutely nothing, madam", and took his chair again.

Tolkien always refuted the opinion that *The Lord of the Rings* was an allegory, yet the question of that lady was understandable. Especially because Tolkien had finished his speech in the following manner:

It is now exactly twenty years since I began in



Figure 5. Tolkien giving autographs. From left to right Mrs. Sötemann, Mr. W.B.P.J. Blokhuis (holding a copy of *De Reisgenoten*), Mr. Cees Baars and Tolkien. Photograph by and © C.M. Tholens.

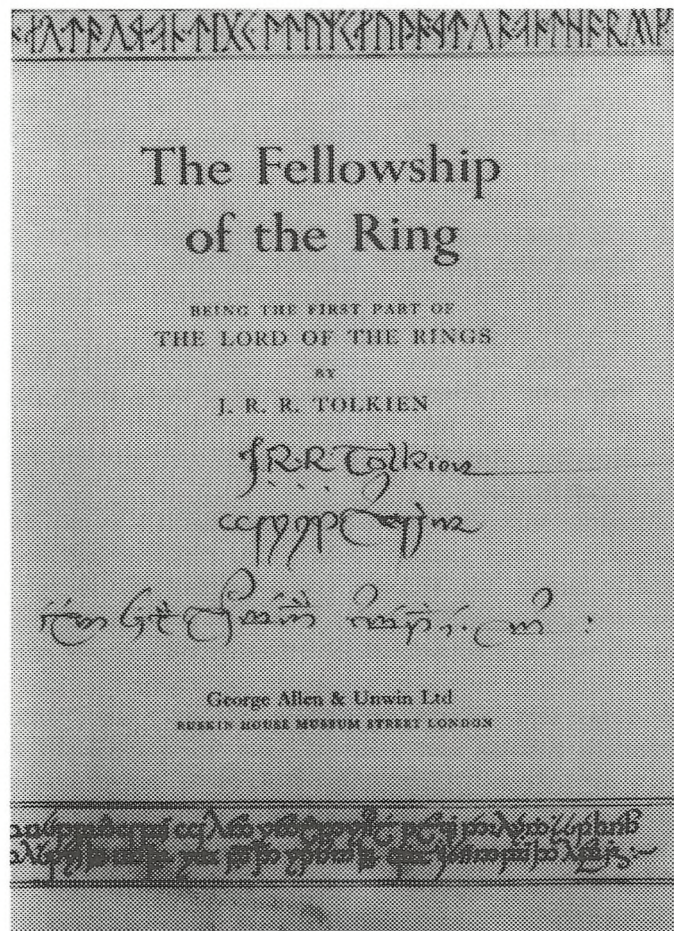


Figure 6. An autograph with inscription by Tolkien given at the Hobbit dinner. Private collection. Text © The Tolkien Trust, 1995.

earnest to complete the history of our revered hobbit-ancestors of the Third Age. I look East, West, North, South, and I do not see Sauron; but I see that Saruman has many descendants. We Hobbits have against them no magic weapons. Yet, my gentlehobbits, I give you this toast: To the Hobbits. May they outlast the Sarumans and see spring again in the trees.

(Carpenter, 1977, pp. 225-226)⁷

Of course his Dutch audience, with the Cold War at a freezing low point, took this as a warning against both expansionist empires: the one of the Soviets and the one of the Americans. Surely Tolkien meant politicians were the descendants of Saruman?

With the question time the “Hobbit-maaltijd” came to an end. Everybody I spoke to had had the best of times and still have fond memories of the occasion. If you ask them how they would describe Tolkien you get remarks like: amiable,

friendly, open, witty, a real hobbit. Not to turn this into a hagiography let me also quote the one negative remark I heard: “He drank too much,” but that too is in true hobbit-fashion.

A few people remained behind in the Flevo-hall to talk some more with Tolkien, among them Professor Lambers.

In his speech Lambers had praised Tolkien for his extremely vivid descriptions of nature and his excellent choice of words. Lambers shared Tolkien’s love for trees; as a child he always wondered what the trees were gossiping about him. This struck a chord with Tolkien, even so much that they made plans for Tolkien to come to Holland again in the course of 1958, this time with Edith, to stay at the Lambers, illness of Tolkien’s wife prevented this. Of his conversation with Tolkien, Lambers clearly remembers that he continued on the question the lady had asked during the question time.

⁷ I would like to thank Mr. Christopher Tolkien for his search of his father’s papers to find the text of the Rotterdam speech. Unfortunately it seems to be lost. Addendum, July 1993: Recently I have found a reel-to-reel tape with Tolkien’s speech on it.



Figure 7. Tolkien giving his speech. Photograph by and © C.M. Tholens.

“Is there really no deeper meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*?”, asked Lambers.

“It’s just a story, it’s just a story”, reacted Tolkien

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passionately.

“Yes, but a story with a message”, continued Lambers, and he argued the moral background of *The Lord of the Rings*. As an example he took that impressive scene on the border of Mordor, when Gollum bends over the sleeping Frodo, torn between Gollum’s love for the Ring and Sméagol’s word of honour to Frodo not to take it. The crucial element in this scene, according to Lambers, is “distrust” which causes Good to act as Evil. Gollum is mollified by the vulnerability of the sleeping hobbit and is at the point of redemption. But Sam, misguided by the love for his master, intervenes and thus prevents the rebirth of Sméagol. Sam’s goodness makes the goodness of Gollum impossible. And Tolkien answered: “I wept when I wrote that.”

Tolkien returned to his hotel, and the next day Piet Harting took him on a sight-seeing trip through The Hague and Amsterdam where he saw, as he wrote later, many beautiful pictures, meaning no doubt that he visited the Rijksmuseum. He spent the night in Amsterdam and on Sunday returned to Oxford.

And so his exceptional visit to Holland came to an end. It was exceptional because it was the first time, and also the last time, that Tolkien had accepted such an invitation. One should not conclude from his abstention from further trips that Tolkien had had an awful time in Holland. He wrote on 2 April to Cees Ouboter:

I still find it hard to believe that all this really happened to me! It was a most marvellous and memorable event . . . I shall not, of course, ever forget the Hobbit-maaltijd, and the graciousness of all to me. The sooner I see your country again the better pleased I shall be. It seems clear to me that (as it suggests in the book) the English hobbits are really the migrant colonists, and their original home-land is “across the sea”.

Of course the Dutch Tolkien-fans always knew that we are the only true hobbits.