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Letters

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Rhona Beare, Darrell Schweitzer, Paula DiSante, Jan Long, Peter H. Berube, Arden Smith, and David Doughan

LETTERS

Readers' Letters are an important form of feedback and exchange, an opportunity to comment on past issues and to raise questions for others' comments. Each letter that is printed extends the writer's subscription by an additional issue. **Please send your letters directly to the Editor:**

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Rhona Beare

Callaghan, Australia

[On:] the Centenary issue of *Mythlore*: [particularly like the Tributes to Tolkien and the picture of Manwë. I am studying *Sauron Defeated*. If anyone wants to check whether Ramer's method of time travel and space travel would work, let them look up Psychometry and Telesthesia, which are related to clairvoyance. According to Colin Wilson's *Mysteries*, Ingo Swann could project himself to a distant place, and describe many features of the planet Mercury before the spacecraft *Mariner* arrived there and verified his observations. For traveling to a legendary world such as Arthur's Camelot, see L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, *The Intrepid Enchanter* (fiction, but the only incredible thing in it is the syllogismobile).

Sauron Defeated gives us Adunaic. Do other readers agree that on p. 251 *Urid yakalubim* = the two suns, they have fallen = the sun and moon have fallen? (But on p. 428 the dual form of sun is *uriyat*.) Besides masculine and feminine and neuter, Adunaic has common for parent, teacher, and other words that may refer to men and women. Tolkien seems not to have made up his mind whether dog, horse, crow, ought to be neuter or common, when no stress is laid on the sex of the animal. Bitch, of course, is feminine, stallion is masculine, but on p. 426 we are told that dog and horse are neuter, on pp. 434-5 and on p. 438 dog, horse and crow are common, not neuter.

I am rereading *The Lost Road* because Arundel Lowdham's time-travel is a new version of Albion Errol's. Tolkien thought of writing (about Errol, *Lost Road*, p. 77) "A Norse story of ship-burial (Vinland)." I think I have discovered the plot of this story. Errol would become Albin son of Ansuin, a Norse settler in Greenland, a friend of Eric the Red. With Eric's son, Leif, he would sail to Norway in 999 A.D. King Olaf Tryggvason would persuade them both to be baptised and to sail to Greenland to spread Christianity there; but a storm would blow them off course to Newfoundland and Leif would discover Vinland, which is Wineland the Good. They would send Albin to report progress to Olaf. But in 1000 A.D. Olaf was defeated in a sea battle (his ship *The Long Serpent* is mentioned in *Sauron Defeated* p. 460). To avoid capture,

Olaf dived overboard. He was wounded, but an expert swimmer, and there was a friendly ship which had not taken part in the fight and immediately sailed away. It was widely rumored at the time that Olaf had swum to the ship. Probably Albin and his son Otwin (= Audoin) were on board, and helped the wounded man, but were not sure whether he was Olaf. When the ship reached Vinland, where Albin disembarked, Olaf's sister-in-law, Astrid, his good friend and owner of the ship, sailed off with Olaf to an unknown destination. This would be an Arthurian departure, a ship burial like that of King Sheave, because we do not know where they went or whether Olaf died of his wound. Since Olaf spread Christianity in Norway, Iceland, and Greenland, he is considered as a culture hero like Sheave (= Sheaf). I have put together the relevant chapters of the sagas and inserted Albin and the eagles of the Lords of the West. The conversions to Christianity are very superficial because Olaf remained a Viking hero even after his baptism, and so did Leif and Albin remain half-pagan.

Darrell Schweitzer

Strafford, PA

I must confess that, after being merely taken aback, my reaction to William Senior's suspiciously sweeping statement that "It could be reasonably said that no serious modern fantasy would be possible without Tolkien's accomplishment" was a purely selfish one: well, what about mine? Not that I expect Mr. Senior to have ever read a word of my fiction, nor is he required to admire it if he has, but I think I have within my own creative experience at least a theoretical model for serious fantasy work which displays virtually no influence of Tolkien, or any of the Inklings, for that matter.

I came to Tolkien just a little bit too late, in my early twenties. I had been writing for a while, achieving very minor publication in magazines like *Weirdbook*, *Holme Lord*, and *Fantasy and Terror*. I even "sold" a story to one of Lin Carter's Ballantine Adult Fantasy anthologies when I was nineteen — for a book that never appeared. My influence was already in place: Lord Dunsany first of all, then, in varying degrees, William Morris, Clark Ashton Smith, Roger Zelazny, Lovecraft (for theme, but not style or even directly, subject matter), James Branch Cabell, and somewhat about this time, Borges. Possible the difference between me and many other fantasy writers of my generation was that *The Lord of the Rings* was by no means the first fantasy I read. It was not a vast explosion of enlightenment, but a massive and admirable example of a type of literature I was already familiar with. More importantly, it contained very little I, as writer, could use. At the begin-

ning of your career, influence is a matter of pilfering, more or less deliberately. Tolkien wrote sweeping epics. I was writing miniatures. Technique, structure, subject-matter, etc., were all so different that I did my pilfering elsewhere. There is a big difference between what a writer admires and what a writer is influenced by. I admire George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain, *Moby Dick*, the light verse of Stoddard King, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Raymond Chandler, much of Heinlein, etc., etc., and I don't see any of these as influences beyond the conceptual vocabulary. So I think I can, far more reasonably than Mr. Senior, claim to be a fantasist who exhibits no influence of Tolkien at all.

But to move on to writers who are more generally acknowledged as important, if there is Tolkien influence in Tanith Lee, I haven't seen it, and then there is always Michael Moorcock, who despises Tolkien, yet some of his works, *Gloriana*, or the very early Elric stories at least, are undeniably serious and significant.

L. Sprague de Camp shows no Tolkien influence. Yes, he writes humor and satire, but humor and satire can be very serious matters indeed. In that direction one can point to T.H. White, and (both satirical and heroic) Fritz Leiber. No Tolkien influence, and yet somehow, all these managed to do magnificent work in fantasy.

Tolkien clearly did cleave the century in two, and you could argue that de Camp, Leiber, and certainly White are pre-Tolkien, at least in the formative influences. But let's look at more modern examples: Ellen Kushner's *Swordpoint* and *Thomas the Rhymer*, probably Gene Wolfe, Geoff Ryman, Robert Holdstock (*Mythago Wood*), M. John Harrison's Viriconium series (though Harrison, like Moorcock, is classified as hostile to Tolkien rather than merely indifferent and you could argue he is reacting against Tolkien, which could be a profound influence indeed), and Michael Shea.

I admit I had to do a bit of mental digging to come up with this list. It would be unfair to bring in South American fantasy at this point, though something like *The Wandering Unicorn* (Manuel Mujica Lainez) is certainly a recent, masterful fantasy which shows no sign of being influenced by Tolkien. I wouldn't deny that for Anglo-American fantasy, Tolkien has become a consensus view, that writers who are not in his mold are in a distinct minority, for better or for worse. But they do exist. Other visions are possible. I am sure that somewhere out there is a really fine, contemporary fantasist who has never even read Tolkien.

All of which is merely a cautionary tale in the folly of making sweeping statements. No, it cannot be "reasonably said" that no "serious" modern fantasy would have been possible without Tolkien.

What could be reasonably said is that no seriously commercial fantasy would have been possible without Tolkien, for it was the success of the paperback of *The Lord of the Rings* which created the fantasy label and publishing

category. Suddenly "fantasy" became a commodity like "mystery" or "science fiction" or "western" or "romance" which could be discussed at sales meetings, pitched to the chains by sales representatives, given its own shelf space and niche in publishing catalogues. The influence was at first beneficial — it brought us the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series — then baleful, from *The Sword of Shannara* onward. There are indeed many writers like Terry Brooks, Dennis McKiernan, and Piers Anthony who owe their careers entirely to the success of Tolkien paperbacks. Whether the more admirable writers would have succeeded without Tolkien is harder to say. On one hand, they might have faced a publishing industry with no idea of what fantasy was. On the other, they face an industry with very low, cynical expectations of cloned trilogies and reworked role-playing games. As in the pre-Tolkien era, much of the best fantasy still appears either as "mainstream literature" or as children's books.

Paula DiSante

Glendale, CA

I wanted to say how wonderful the tributes were in the Centenary issue. Some made me laugh, some made me ponder, and one (Lynn Maudlin's) brought tears to my eyes. But one of the most memorable I hesitate to call merely a tribute. I would call it, rather, the best short essay on Tolkien that I have ever read. It is from the pen of Alexei Kondratiev, and it is so dead-on perfect in regard to the *raison d'être* behind Tolkien's work that it should be required reading for anyone who studies Tolkien's writings, even in the most casual manner. Beautiful!

Jan Long

Wauwatosa, WI

The unidentified person in the banquet photo on p. 33 (upper right hand) in *Mythlore* 70 is Rayner Unwin. I distinctly remember seeing Mr. Unwin seated between Priscilla Tolkien and Christina Scull. A man as remarkable as he is should not go unnoticed — especially by our society!

[My strong regrets for not getting this one detail cleared up before publication. The photo pages were finished very close to the deadline, with very little time to clear this up. In the dim light of the hall — I read my banquet address by aid of candle light — it was difficult to see clearly who was at the other end of the long table. A good picture of Rayner Unwin is on page 32 of the last issue. I had a very pleasant conversation with this outstanding man, and am glad to see this cleared up. —CG]

Peter H. Berube

St. Johnsbury, VT

In his most interesting article comparing the Shire to medieval Iceland, Mr. Stoddard omits an important similarity: both countries are divided into four farthings (or *fjardhings*).

Iceland's *fjardhings* (usually translated "quarters") were primarily judicial districts; if geography recapitulates history, we would have to conclude that all the Tooks, Chubbs, Bracegirdles, etc., were originally priest-chieftains or *godhi*.

Yorkshire is similarly divided into three *thridhings*; hence our word "riding" for an electoral district (North

Thridding having become North Riding over the years).

Senator John McClaughry, who ran for Governor of Vermont on the Republican ticket, is joint author of a book called *The Vermont Papers*. This book calls for a radical restructuring of Vermont government as a federation of shires. Smaller and more powerful than our present moribund counties, the shires would be governed by moots presided over by reeves. If McClaughry won, Mr. Stoddard might have soon been able to study shire government *in vivo!* Although McClaughry quotes *The Lord of the Rings* with approval, it does not seem to be a major inspiration of his thinking. Still, so far as I know, these are the first stirrings of a direct influence upon electoral politics and may presage greater things to come.

Most of us upon first reading *The Lord of the Rings* realized at once that here was a most important political event as well. Mythology has consequences beyond the merely literary. We should remember that Tolkien was born into a culture about to become the dominant one on the planet, despite having subsisted for a thousand years without a mythology of its own. He undertook nothing less than to supply the missing mythology.

On another subject. I do not remember to have seen in print any reference to *Gongu-Hrofl's Saga* as a source for Tolkien, yet this saga would repay the attention of a determined critic. There is a translation by Hermann Pallson and Paul Edwards. This is one of the "lying sagas," meaning that it was never regarded as anything but fictional. The hero seems to have no relation to William the Conqueror's more-or-less historical ancestor of the same name.

The saga contains an intelligent horse, remotely descended from Bucephalus and perhaps ancestral to Falaro. The confrontation between the wonder-working dwarf Mondul and the witch king Grim Aesir is strongly reminiscent of the battle between Merry and the Ringwraith on the Pelennor Fields. In addition, the whole mock-scholarly tone of the anonymous author recounting his absurd story puts me in mind of Farmer Giles of Ham.

Arden Smith

Berkeley, CA

At long last I've had the opportunity to read the Tolkien Centenary issue, and it was great to see (finally!) an updated bibliography of Tolkien translations (*Mythlore* 69, pp. 61-69). I'm glad that I was able to contribute to it. I could make several comments about it, but I will limit myself to a couple major ones. First of all the column that I write for *Vinyar Tengwar* is entitled "Transitions in Translations," not "Tolkien in Translation," the focus of the column being on the strange things that can happen to Tolkien's words when they go through the translation process. Secondly, M. Bielominsky (not "Bielominky" as it appears in the bibliography) and Mikhaila Belomiyn's 'koho are, of course, one and the same person, the differences in the forms being due not only to different methods of transliteration, but also to different grammat-

ical cases: the former is in the nominative, used as a citation form, whereas the latter is in the genitive, thus indicating the "by" of authorship.

While I'm on the subject of translations, has anybody ever seen the Armenian *Hobbit*? An Armenian *Fellowship of the Ring* was also supposedly published in 1989, a fact of which I was unaware when I sent my updates for the bibliography. There are entries for both in the Soviet national bibliography, but the titles are given in Russian. I would dearly love to know what the titles are in Armenian—in the Armenian alphabet, please! (I find transliterations of Armenian into Latin letters more difficult to deal with.) Of, course, if anyone could get actual copies of these books, I would be eternally grateful. [*Mythlore's editor would be equally grateful for the information and copies!*—GG]

Moving from the alphabet of Mt. Ararat to the alphabet of Amon Gwareth, I was of course thrilled to see the Gondolinic Runes in "Quenti Lambarðillion" (*Mythlore* 69, pp. 20-25). Since I knew that Carl Hostetter had written a letter of comment (published in *Mythlore* 70, pp. 23-24) on Paul Nolan Hyde's analysis of the runes, I decided to wait before putting in my two cents' worth, lest I merely repeat his criticisms. As it turns out, I can state simply that I agree with everything that Carl said *one hundred percent*.

Carl covered all the major flaws in Paul's article, but there are still a few minor points that need to be addressed. First of all, Paul presents a detailed investigation of the Gondolinic Runes in order to demonstrate that they are not the same as the "oldest *cirth*" mentioned in Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings* (III 401). Although I think that such a conclusion was not only inevitable but even obvious, I am not faulting Paul for building a large case around it—that's standard scholarly practice. I do think, however, that he neglected to draw the other obvious conclusion: when Paul requested information on the "oldest *cirth*," he meant "oldest in terms of Middle-earth history," but Christopher Tolkien apparently thought that he meant "oldest" in terms of his father's lifetime and therefore sent this alphabet (dating around 1917?) that bears hardly any similarity to the "oldest *cirth*" described in 1955's Appendix E.

The second knot that I wish to pick is that Paul occasionally tries to suggest fine distinctions that simply cannot be supported by the data. On the variant forms of the runes for *a* and *y*, Paul poses this question:

Should there be or was there ever a distinction made between a fronted *a* and an 'ash' in the languages for which the 'Gondolinic Runes' was used? Similar kinds of questions might be raised about the *y* characters (*Mythlore* 69, p. 22)

I think that if there had been some sort of phonetic difference between \mathfrak{D} and \mathfrak{D} and between \mathfrak{Q} and \mathfrak{Q} , then Tolkien would have clearly spelled out the difference and most certainly would not have set each of them beside the same value with the word "or" stuck between them! Similarly, I actually cried aloud in disbelief when I read Paul's

proposal regarding the various forms of *lh* and *ngh*: "Could one represent a 'light' *l*, another a 'dark' *l*, and so forth? Similar questions might be raised about N^o 57-58, variants for *ngh* ... Perhaps in the case of *lh* and *ngh*, a kind of articulatory fronting is implied" (*Mythlore* 69, p. 24). Not only can I make the same arguments here that I made above, but I can also apply the notion of symmetry of phonological systems to the problem. It would be unnatural for a three-way phonetic distinction to be made in the voiceless lateral approximant *lh* when no such distinction is made in its voiced counterpart *l*. A similar argument could be made regarding *ngh* and *ng*. Granted, a writing system would be highly unlikely, especially in a written system created by a philologist like Tolkien!

I have one last comment: the pictures on page 33 of *Mythlore* 70 are all backward. Is this a subtle reminder that Lewis Carroll lived in Oxford too? [That was an inadvertent error of the printer at time of printing; only the sharp-eyed would detect it. —GG]

David Doughan

London, England

[This a combination of two letters he sent.]

This is just a very belated line to say how magnificent it was to meet you and so many of the Mythopoeic Society regulars at the Keble conference. I had already gathered that you were a pretty fantastic (in every sense of the word) bunch, but reality so far outstripped rumor that I was (by my standards) dumbstruck. Among many others, I was particularly delighted to meet Sarah Beach and Paula Di-Sante, whose artwork I have admired over the years, the Callahans, Mike Foster, David Funk, David Bratman, Charles Coulombe (who has to be met to be believed), Lynn Mauldin (I've met her and I still don't believe it) and, above all, the members of the E.L.F. — Carl, Pat, Nancy, Chris, Arden, and above and beyond all, PAUL NOLAN HYDE. I could write a long (and not entirely libelous) article about this character; for the present, I shall restrict myself to remarking that he showed us Brits up who consistently dressed like a Proper English Gentleman (apart from a couple of evening appearances which are best left to obscurity). Anyway, *thank you all very much for coming*. I trust that the consequences of the Conference will rumble on for a good few years yet (and I shall be adding my own occasional rumble thereto). Meanwhile, may I ask you to pass on to the above mentioned, and the Mythopoeic Society generally, in whatever way seems appropriate to you, my very best wishes and hopes that we may meet again in the not-too-distant future.

Many thanks for *Mythlore* 70, especially for the marvelous Conference photos — you and Bonnie are definitely to be congratulated! Did you see the Belgian writup in *Cirth de Gandalf*? In French, I fear, but you surely have some competent Francophones in California to translate. I've also seen a highly enthusiastic account in a Russian literary weekly ... its only we Brits who are lukewarm about it. Grr.

Just one comment on an article: on page 41 William

Senior quotes Christine Barkley to the effect that the unmaking of the Ring was the equivalent of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which solved all problems at a stroke, leaving an uncomplicated situation as distinct from the "post-Vietnam world." Surely Tolkien disposed of this very argument once and for all in his second edition preface to *The Lord of the Rings*:

If [the real war] had inspired or directed the development of the legend, then certainly the ring would have been seized and used against Sauron; he would have not been annihilated but enslaved, and Barad-dûr would not have been destroyed but occupied. Saruman ... before long would have made a Great Ring of his own with which to challenge the self-styled Ruler of Middle-earth.

It's surprising how few people either then or now realize that Tolkien was depicting the post-World War Two world: the world of the Cold War, pre- and post-Vietnam, which is with us yet in modified form, except that the war-led economy of Isengard has finally gone bankrupt, and Saruman has (temporarily?) been ousted by Wormtongue. The "self-styled Ruler of Middle-earth" is with us yet, and it remains true that hobbits are held "in hatred and contempt." Fortunately, Tolkien's prophecy that "they would not long have survived even as slaves" seems so far overly pessimistic.

Anyway, congratulations on 25 years of The Mythopoeic Society — I hope we'll all be around for your 50th!

Eleni Vardo isliër lumenn' omentielvo!

Nai kaluva anar motalyanna.



J.R.R Tolkien

by Canon Norman Power, Vicar of Ladywood,
Birmingham, England 1952-1988.

If I were well enough to write the article I would wish to write, I think I'd begin with the magic evening when Tolkien read to The Lovelace Club at Worcester College, Oxford in 1938. Of course, we undergraduates did not realize at the time that this was a turning-point in the great man's life.

Tolkien was despondent over publishing problems. The tremendous reception we gave him to his reading of *Farmer Giles of Ham* encouraged him to persist with his project — *The Lord of the Rings*. The occasion is highlighted in Humphrey Carpenter's excellent biography of Tolkien, page 165.