THE MAN WHO UNDERSTANDS HOBBITS

The strong underground cult for J. R. R. Tolkien's fairy-tale saga about Middle-earth is coming out into the open. Songs from the books, set to music by Donald Swann, will be published on March 28, and the Professor himself will appear soon on BBC-2 in a colour film about his work. CHARLOTTE and DENIS PLIMMER talked to him in Oxford*

Graham Finlayson

***THE PROFESSOR,** at 76, watches an Oxford bonfire with his daughter and grandson. He has four children. "If a fairy-story is worth reading at all, it is worthy to be written for and read by adults . . . Then, as a branch of genuine art, children may hope to get fairy-stories fit for them to read and yet within their measure"*

"Spiders," observed Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, cradling the word with the same affection that he cradled the pipe in his hand, "are the particular terror of northern imaginations." The Professor, now 76, is the author of *The Hobbit* and of the three-volume epic fairy-tale, *The Lord of the Rings*, the slowest-developing best-seller in modern publishing history. He was on the subject of dragons and the other horrenda which are his scholarly stock-in-trade.

Discussing one of his own monsters, a man-devouring, spider-like female, he said, "The female monster is certainly no deadlier than the male, but she is different. She is a sucking, strangling, trapping creature."

To Professor Tolkien, a retired Oxford philologist and a man used to dealing evidentially with his material, everything, even in fantasy, must be specific. In his world of wondrous things, he moves with the surety of a white hunter on a game reservation. His dwarfs have detailed family trees. His elves have their own carefully-constructed languages. His wizards work according to union rules. And his hobbits, the most famous of all his characters, are a distinctly unfanciful race—food-loving, gift-giving, house-proud, paunchy—and as believable as your local newsagent.

When John Ronald Reuel Tolkien leads you into the cramped garage that serves as library, he leads you at once into the magic and legend of Middle-earth, the three-dimensional cosmogony of *The Lord of the Rings*. Not that the garage itself is any cave of wonders. Jammed between the Professor's own house and the one next door, in an undistinguished Oxford suburb, it would be no more than a banal little room, filled with files and a clutter of garden chairs, if it were not for the man.

Tolkien, who describes himself as "tubby", has grey eyes, firm tanned skin, silvery hair and quick decisive speech. He might have been, 50 years ago, the model of the kindly country squire. Any hobbit would trust this man, any dragon quail before him, any elf name him friend. Effortlessly, he compels you to admire him as much as—and herein lies his charm—he clearly admires himself.

To the small but bitter anti-*Ring* coterie—some of whom profess to see sinister meanings in the text—his very ebullience would presumably constitute an irritant. But to devotees, all this adds up to the perfect cult-hero.

Tolkien cultists, though predominantly academic and egg-head, are not wholly so. Housewives write to him from Winnipeg, rocket-men from Woomera, pop-singers from Las Vegas. Ad-men discuss him in London pubs. Germans, Spaniards, Portuguese, Poles, Japanese, Israelis, Swedes, Dutch and Danes read him in their own languages.

He is also a literary opiate for hippies, who carry his works to their farthest-flung pads, from San Francisco to Istanbul and Nepal.

Despite the fact that his books lack perversion, four-letter words, homosexuality and sadism—virtually everything that makes 20th-century fiction so commercially desirable—the Professor and those connected with his publications have found the streets of Middle-earth paved with gold.

"I never expected a money success," said Tolkien, pacing the room, as he does constantly when he speaks. "In fact, I never even thought of commercial publication when I wrote *The Hobbit* back in the Thirties.

"It all began when I was reading exam papers to earn a bit of extra money. That was agony. One of the tragedies of the underpaid professor is that he has to do menial jobs. He is expected to maintain a certain position and to send his children to good schools. Well, one day I came to a blank page in an exam book and I

*"*The road goes ever on: a song cycle*": Allen & Unwin, 30s

Gj mm ipm nim rlhp ::

Who now shall refill the cup for me?

scribbled on it. 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit'.

"I knew no more about the creatures than that, and it was years before his story grew. I don't know where the word came from. You can't catch your mind out. It might have been associated with Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt. Certainly not rabbit, as some people think. Babbitt has the same bourgeois smugness that hobbits do. His world is the same limited place."

WHEN Professor Tolkien spoke of the hobbits' limited world, he was referring only to their native heath, the Shire, where they built their snug homes in the ground, fitted them with round doors and windows, and placidly surveyed their possessions and studied their family trees. But the rest of Middle-earth, in which Bilbo Baggins of the Shire unexpectedly finds himself adventuring, is a boundless horizon filled with marshes and mountains, terror and beauty.

Tolkien let a few of his Oxford friends read *The Hobbit*. One, a tutor, lent it to a student, Susan Dagnell. When, some time later, Miss Dagnell joined Allen & Unwin, the publishers, she suggested it as a children's book. Sir Stanley Unwin assigned his son, Rayner, then ten, to read it. (I gave him a shilling," Sir Stanley recalls.)

Although *The Hobbit* was no run-away best-seller, readers were fascinated by Middle-earth, and Allen & Unwin asked for a sequel. Tolkien then offered–*The Silmarillion*, a saga of the mist-shrouded beginnings of elves and men, which he had begun in 1916. But it was turned down in Museum Street as being too dark and Celtic. "They were quite right," Tolkien recalls. He is now revising it.

Even before *The Hobbit*, he had been gestating *The Lord of the Rings* which historically, in Middle-earth terms, actually follows it. Now, with *The Silmarillion* rejected, he returned to the *Ring*, which relates the deeds of Bilbo's nephew Frodo, and of a mighty wizard called Gandalf. Over the next 14 years the bulky manuscript slowly took shape.

Sir Stanley Unwin, whose competitors called him mad when he published the first two volumes in 1954, told us, "I was in Japan when the manuscript arrived. Rayner wrote to say it seemed a big risk. It would have to be published in three volumes, at a guinea each–this at a time when 18 shillings was top for a best-seller. But Rayner added, 'Of course, it's a work of genius'. So I cabled him to take it.

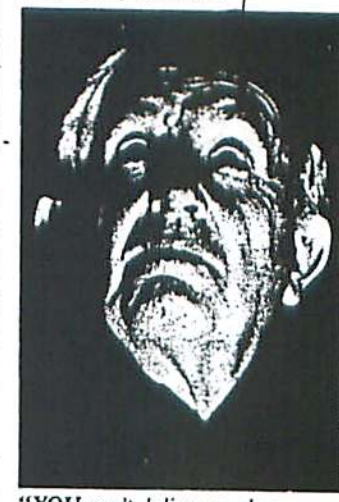
"Of all the books I've brought out in 63 years, there are few that I can say with absolute confidence will sell long after my departure. Of this one I had no doubts."

Tolkien's imaginary landscapes grew out of his predilection for creating languages. "Anyone who invents a language," he said, "finds that it requires a suitable habitation and a history in which it can develop. A real language is never invented, of course. It is a natural thing. It is wrong to call the language you grow up speaking your native language. It is not. It is your first learnt language. It is a by-product of the total make-up of the animal."

Tolkien's Middle-earth, with people, histories, languages all logically integrated, corresponds spiritually to north-eastern Europe. But it extends southward to include lands where dark-skinned people ride to battle on beasts called oliphaunts, and east to evil Mordor which "would be roughly in the Balkans".

Tolkien's friend and fellow author, the late C. S. Lewis, "was immensely immersed" in the development of the *Ring*, but not always mutely admiring. "He used to insist on my reading passages aloud as I finished them, and then he made suggestions. He was furious when I didn't accept them. Once he said, 'It's no use trying to influence you. you're uninfluenceable!' But that wasn't quite true. Whenever he said 'You can do better than that. Better Tolkien, please!' I used to try."

Professor Tolkien sold his original 4,200-page typescript of the *Ring* to Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin: "I wanted the money very badly to buy this house."



Graham Finlayson

"YOU can't believe a phenomenon is magic if you know how it works"

He was born at Bloemfontein in South Africa. "I was three when I was brought to England," he said. "After the dry, barren places I had known, I had in a way been 'trained' to savour the delicate English flowers and the grass. I had this strange sense of coming home when I arrived. The hobbit business began partly as a *Sehnsucht* for that happy childhood which ended when I was orphaned, at twelve."

The scene of his *déjà vu*–Sarehole, on the outskirts of Birmingham–became the model for the Shire.

He recalled, "As a child, I was always inventing languages. But that was naughty. Poor boys must concentrate on getting scholarships. When I was supposed to be studying Latin and Greek, I studied Welsh and English. When I was supposed to be concentrating on English, I took up Finnish. I have always been incapable of doing the job in hand."

He was a scholarship student at King Edward VI School in Birmingham, then went on to Oxford. With the Lancashire Fusiliers on the Somme, he saw tattered and burnt-out landscapes which find unearthly echoes in the *Ring*. The years that followed–in Leeds University and later at Oxford–were marked by academic honours. But parallel to scholarship has always run his strong preoccupation with the mystic land of Faerie.

This, to him, is a rich and wondrous realm filled with beauty, peril, joy and sadness–to be relished for its own sake, and not dissected.

So, naturally, he resists the earnest student who tries to read "meanings" into the *Ring*. "The book," he said, "is not about anything but itself. It has no allegorical intentions, topical, moral, religious or political. It is not about modern wars or H-bombs, and my villain is not Hitler."

Must fairy-tales be confined to legendary times and places, or could they be staged in modern settings? "They cannot," he said, "not if you mean in a modern technological idiom. The reader must approach Faerie with a willing suspension of disbelief. If a thing can be technologically controlled, it ceases to be magical."

TOLKIEN regrets that, over the centuries, fairy-tales have been downgraded until they are considered fit only for very young children. Most of all, he dislikes the story that moralizes: " As a child I couldn't stand Hans Andersen, and I can't now."

He has written: "The age of childhood-sentiment has produced a dreadful undergrowth of stories adapted to what is conceived to be the measure of children's minds and needs. The old stories are bowdlerised. The imitations are often merely silly or patronising or covertly sniggering with an eye on the other grown-ups present. . . ."

He said to us: "Believable fairy-stories must be intensely practical. You must have a map, no matter how rough. Otherwise you wander all over the place. In *The Lord of the Rings* I never made anyone go farther than he could on a given day."

So real to its creator is Middle-earth that he has included a 127-page appendix which is his characters' "actual" historical, sociological and philological underpinning. For Tolkien

A Tolkien Elf

Alas! leaves fall like gold

to have created a hobbit without a calendar and a family tree would be to leave him without flesh.

For the same reason, he must accompany his languages with notes on vowel-sounds and stresses, scripts, alphabets and derivations. "I have constructed them," Tolkien explained, "by scientific methods. They must be at least as complete and as organised as the history of the Elves."

It is the appendix, Tolkien thinks, which has helped trigger the enormous new enthusiasm for the *Ring* among students in the United States: "A lot of it is just straight teen-age stuff. I didn't mean it to be, but it's perfect for them. I think they're attracted by things that give verisimilitude."

PROFESSOR Tolkien has, in effect, provided an intellectual meccano-set for civilisation creators. Students search for word derivations in the invented tongues. They create new and improved maps of Middle-earth. They build hobbit houses. They try to fill in the early unrecorded portions of Middle-earth's history.

What he calls, rather affectionately, the "absurd frenzy" began in America in 1965 with an unauthorised paperback of the *Ring* by Ace Books. Previous hardback editions of *The Hobbit* and the *Ring* had sold unspectacularly to limited circles whose most vocal devotee was W. H. Auden. The Ace edition was cheap, and suddenly campus booksellers couldn't cope.

The unauthorised, i.e. non-royalty-paying, publication became a *cause célèbre*. In the autumn of 1965, Ballantine Books brought out an approved paperback. Hobbitomanes promptly made it a point of honour to buy the sanctified version, even if they already owned the exorcized one. The true aristocracy own the original English edition. "It smells right," one fan said.

Tolkien addicts wear lapel-buttons that say "Frodo Lives" or "Go go Gandalf" in English or Elvish letters, belong to Tolkien societies and write love poems in Elvish.

Tolkien receives innumerable offers for film rights, musical-comedy rights, TV rights, puppetry rights. A jigsaw-puzzle company has asked permission to produce a *Ring* puzzle, a soap-maker to soap-sculpt *Ring* characters. Tolkien worshippers are outraged by these crass approaches. "Please," wrote a 17-year-old girl, "don't let them make a movie out of your *Ring*. It would be like putting Disneyland into the Grand Canyon."

The song cycle, the only commercial venture so far, began when Donald Swann, half of the "At the Drop of a Hat" team, set to music six of the poems which punctuate the *Ring*. One is in Elvish.

When we asked Tolkien how Elvish should be sung, he replied, "Like Gregorian chants." Then, in a wavering churchly counter-tenor, he intoned the first lines of the farewell song of Galadriel, the Elf Queen:

Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen,
Yéni únótime ve ramar aldaron!

He feels strongly that the *Ring* should not be filmed: "You can't cramp narrative into dramatic form. It would be easier to film *The Odyssey*. Much less happens in it. Only a few storms."

He dislikes being bracketed with epic-writers of the past. C. S. Lewis once declared that Ariosto could not rival Tolkien. To us Tolkien said, "I don't know Ariosto and I'd loathe him if I did." He has also been likened to Malory, Spenser, Cervantes, Dante. He rejects them all. "Cervantes?" he exploded. "He was a weed-killer to romance." As for Dante: "He doesn't attract me. He's full of spite and malice. I don't care for his petty relations with petty people in petty cities."

"In any case, I don't read much now, not even fairy-stories. And then I'm always looking for something I can't find." We asked what that was. He replied, "Something like what I wrote myself."

Some people have criticised the *Ring* as lacking religion. Tolkien

Roger Hill

"EVERY morning I wake up thinking, 'Good, another 24 hours of smoking'"

denies this: "Of course God is in *The Lord of the Rings*. The period was pre-Christian, but it was a monotheistic world."

Monotheistic? Then who was the One God of Middle-earth?

Tolkien was taken aback: "*The* one, of course! The book is about the world that God created – the actual world of this planet."

When we asked the Professor if he would sign our copy of the *Ring*, he said, "Would you like an inscription? What kind?" We suggested something in Elvish. Carefully he wrote a line in the beautiful flowing script he has invented: "It's the High Elvish greeting, *'Elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo'*. It means, 'A star shines on the hour of our meeting.'"