

Amon Hen V. 91

## "Tolkien Reconsidered"

A Talk by Humphrey Carpenter  
given at the  
Cheltenham Festival of Literature.

May  
1988

The Town Hall, Cheltenham.  
Monday, 12th. October, 1987.

The note in the official programme had promised that Humphrey Carpenter would reconsider "the life and writings of the Hobbits", and come to "some fresh conclusions as to the significance of the Tolkien cult." Carpenter began by assuring the audience, which nearly filled the meeting-room, that the note should have read "the life and writings of the creator of the Hobbits", doubtless to the disappointment of hobbitomanes, of whom he saw one or two in the audience [i.e., Christina Scull and myself]. As it turned out, most of his talk was about his own changing attitude to Tolkien, with only a few words at the end on the "cult".

When he had been asked to give this talk, he had thought it would be an easy undertaking. He had, after all, already written a book on Tolkien. In his book on Edwardian and Victorian children's literature, Secret Gardens, he had found the task of describing the subject challenging, but not impossible. Such stories really look beyond the familiar: they are about something other than what is on the surface, and reflect the situations of their authors - for example, a loss of faith on the part of Lewis Carroll, who took holy orders, but never rose above Deacon, and so took no active part in religious life. In the world of Winnie the Pooh, there is a surface cosiness, but look beyond that and you will see that the story is really about the ruthlessness of the human individual. In Secret Gardens, Carpenter had devoted only a couple of pages at the end to Tolkien. He hadn't felt up to tackling Tolkien in detail in that book, but he would read out the two pages he did write on him, folding back a paperback edition of the book to the required place as he did so. [Here I paraphrase the passage he read out, as well as his interjected comments.] Carpenter said that although the world of The Hobbit uses much of the material of Victorian and Edwardian children's stories - idealised landscapes, cosy villages, vast forests, etc. - Bilbo himself was something of an antihero, acting as a burglar to steal the dragon's treasure through a back door. There is very little security in that world, the mark, perhaps, of Tolkien's experiences in the trenches in 1916: the fruitlessness of conventional heroism in a real war, which, reflected in The Hobbit, questions the accepted ethics of children's books.

Moving on to The Lord of the Rings, Carpenter felt that there Tolkien was attempting to do something which certain children's writers of the classic period had fumbled towards, that is to create an alternative religion. This harks back to Tolkien's original intention of making a "mythology for England". However, there is little of the numinous in the book, and the Valar are remote from the action. Carpenter felt that where Tolkien tried to write in an archaic style, he failed to achieve his aim, whereas his ordinary adventure narrative is very good indeed and bears comparison with the best of Buchan and Haggard. The Lord of the Rings ends up being a tract for its times, set in a world where evil is not merely incarnate but seems destined to triumph and destroy everything. The only acceptable course of action for the right-minded individual is to perform small acts of kindness which may have unforeseen consequences of good. It is striking that at the end of The Lord of the Rings Tolkien attacks the very same thing against which the Arcadian movement in children's literature had reacted nearly a century earlier, the mindless industrialisation of society. However, as Christopher Tolkien commented in a letter to him, Carpenter had confused memories of The Lord of the Rings with Tolkien's earlier works. An alternative religion, a "mythology for England", might have been true for the Lost Tales, but was certainly not intended for the latter work. But Carpenter remained unconvinced. He felt that a writer like Tolkien, who argues

[Letter to Robert Murray, S.J., 2nd. December 1953] that his work is fundamentally religious, must indeed have a parallel with writers who invent alternative religions in children's fantasy.

Carpenter then went on to offer some reflection on his own relationship with Tolkien during at least the past twelve years, since he started work on the *Biography* in 1975. He was born in University College, Oxford. He first read *The Lord of the Rings* at about the time it came out - when he was ten, or slightly younger. His mother used to meet Mrs. Tolkien in the market, shopping. He remembered visiting the library to get the volumes; however, he wasn't aware of the long gap between the second and third volumes, as he got all three books out together. He read the story in four days. He re-read it later, when he was eighteen, which was his first real reading of the book. When he became an undergraduate at Oxford, he wrote musical comedies and similar entertainments. He and a friend [Paul Drayton] decided to do a stage musical version of *The Hobbit*, with Carpenter doing the words and his friend the music. Since they felt it would be discourteous to mount such a project without at least informing Tolkien, Carpenter wrote to the Professor and got a reply inviting him round to 76 Sandfield Road.



Carpenter recalled of that meeting which is described at the start of his *Biography*, that Tolkien gave an impression of energy, of twinkling eyes, of dynamic force, even of "daemonic" force (though the word is not used in a sinister sense); he was a rather overpowering person to be with. In some ways he seemed to be above the ordinary human level of activity. Tolkien was a rather private person. After only a brief meeting with Edith Tolkien, Tolkien ushered Carpenter into the garage, a damp, uncomfortable place, which he now used as a study, as if to keep this visitor at a distance. In order to limit the time taken up by interviews, Tolkien would set an alarm-clock to go off about ten minutes after his visitor arrived. When it did so, he would plead that he had another, urgent appointment to keep. This time with Carpenter, however, he affected to regard its going off as a pure accident. When the stage *Hobbit* was eventually put on, Tolkien attended it: he frowned when the musical departed from the story, but smiled when the original words were kept to. The youngster who played Bilbo asked him to autograph his copy of *Smith of Wootton Major*, so this had written on it: "To Bilbo Baggins from J.R.R. Tolkien". Tolkien was very sociable, and they afterwards had a party at a mutual friend's house.

After Carpenter left the University, he became a producer on BBC Radio Oxford. He decided to approach Tolkien with a view to his being interviewed for the radio. Tolkien said he would have to be taken out to a restaurant first. So they went to "The Bell" at Charlbury [a town about 10 miles northwest of Oxford], a pub which was about to close. It had old-fashioned cooking, and seemed very like "The Prancing Pony" in Bree. The landlord happened to complain about the threatened closure, whereupon Tolkien said to him, "Some of us, you know, might want to do something about it." Now the landlord didn't know then who Tolkien was, and said, "Far beyond your pocket!" Nothing came of it, although the pub did survive. Now, the landlord tells the story of how Tolkien once offered to buy the pub! Although, by the time he reached the brandy, Tolkien was very agreeable to do the interview, it later fell through at the last minute.

Tolkien is a difficult person to generalise about - no-one would surmise that he liked the Marx Brothers and had seen their films, for example. He was very subtle, something noted by Tom Shippey (whose own book on Tolkien [*The Road to Middle-earth*, George Allen & Unwin, 1982] is just about the only really good one about him). Then Carpenter moved on to discuss his *Biography* of Tolkien. He wrote to Allen & Unwin with the suggestion that he write Tolkien's life. He felt that he had the right background - he had a degree in English, and he had known Tolkien. He had expected a "No", but, to his surprise, Rayner Unwin replied that if the Tolkien family were agreeable, he could go ahead. And that was unexpectedly easy, as Christopher Tolkien gave his approval to the project after meeting Carpenter. So, on January 1st., 1975, Carpenter set to work - it turned out for about six months. The first week he spent putting about 1000 letters in order. Eventually, after much writing and rewriting, a trip to Milwaukee to inspect the Tolkien manuscripts at Marquette University, and much other research, the *Biography* as we now have it was published in May, 1977.

Then there was the matter of the motivation behind the Tolkien cult, although his strictures were not directed against "the wholly admirable Tolkien Society" (we should have kept out of sight...). He was not referring to those who also read books besides Tolkien, just those who read only *The Lord of the Rings*. He was thinking of the people who would even now write to him from the Midwest. Why the cult? He thought the answer lay in the parallel to be found in Tolkien's own field of studies, philology and Anglo-Saxon. Tolkien was probably the greatest scholar of Anglo-Saxon who ever lived; but it's a dead subject, having been replaced by structuralism. Like Anglo-Saxon, his world is a closed one, a finite world. Secondly, his world is English, very, very English indeed. The Middle-earth map reflects this: you have the Shire, or England, west of the Misty Mountains, which are the English Channel, and east of them is "abroad". Thirdly, it is a very paternalistic world. The hobbit-characters' relation to Gandalf is something like the undergraduate/tutor relationship.

Carpenter finished with some more general remarks on Tolkien's writings, and was applauded by the audience.

Charles E. Noad