

The Invisible Shire

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At the Leicester Seminar in 1995 R.T. Allen presented a paper entitled 'Who Mends the Roads? Superstructures without Substructures'. His point was that from a purely practical view, the populations and economic structures which we see in Middle-earth are inadequate to sustain the societies described.

In this paper I wish to argue the contrary view, suggesting that detailed analysis of the available material will show a world much more complex than we tend to think.

If we wish to play the game of 'Middle-earth Studies' and treat Professor Tolkien's works as 'real' records of a 'real' place and time, it must surely be obligatory to apply the same principles of textual criticism to them as are employed by historians in dealing with records of our own past. Any document has its own agenda, its own biases and selectivities, its own intended audience. No work is ever a simple, transparent reflection of its time and place; things which we, the later reader, might love to know more of, may be left out because they are too obvious to bother mentioning, not interesting to the author and the intended audience, or just not relevant to a narrative in progress. Conversely, things may be put in which are not nearly as commonplace or important as the author makes them out to be, if that author is trying to make a point or (in the case of fiction) use those things as a plot device. This process of selection results in any

Speculations on the hidden infrastructure of The Shire - its commerce, industry, culture and demography

one document giving us only a partial view of the world its author lived in. To take a real-world example, Jane Austen's novels present a very selective view indeed of eighteenth-century England; yet, firstly, the society portrayed in those novels is a segment of the whole, from which their intended readers were largely drawn and to which those readers could relate, and secondly, that segment could not have existed without the underlying totality of society and economy that is not presented in detail in the books. In the case of Middle-earth we do not have the external documentation that allows us to reconstruct that totality, or something like it, for eighteenth century England. What we can do is to bear in mind the likely biases within the Red Book of Westmarch and then say, 'if this existed, then by all we know of historical societies which are reasonably similar, that must also have been present whether or not it is referred to'.

Let us look, then, at the Red Book of Westmarch, to consider exactly what sort of text we are dealing with and what biases it

may contain. Firstly and most importantly, its authors were hobbits, writing for other hobbits. That one copy was subsequently made (and expanded) outside the Shire was not, so far as can be seen, any part of the authors' intention, and further transmission - by hand-copying, which lends itself to alteration of the text - was in the hands of hobbits. All the internal references to later readers or hearers of the tale picture them as hobbits. This has certain implications. For one thing, many matters within the Shire are liable to be passed over as being too commonplace to mention; why waste ink on what everyone knows anyway? For another, the picture of the world beyond the Shire is likely to be limited by hobbit interest or lack of it. Following on from this point, we are told that relatively few hobbits were literate, and fewer still took any interest in scholarship, though admittedly Sam Gamgee does think of the Red Book being read for entertainment, which would widen its potential audience. Nevertheless, it could only be read in households rich enough to afford a manuscript, however simply produced, for printing did not exist so far as we can tell. That potential audience, then, consists largely of middle to upper class hobbits who can afford to buy books - very much the same sort of hobbits as the authors and their friends and companions.

The possibility of a second-hand book trade extends the range somewhat, but, equally, lower-

class hobbits would be less likely to be literate. We should be aware that the concerns and interests of such middle to upper class hobbits may well be involved in the presentation of events and their background.

Secondly, the Red Book may be described as being a work of contemporary history, an account of events by persons involved in them. As is not unusual in such works, it also incorporates ele-

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ments of travel-tale and the novel. Books like this often have a strong narrative drive and tight focus, assuming that the reader knows much of the background which therefore need not be elaborated on, and will understand very brief references. Again, therefore, the commonplace and that which is irrelevant to the narrative is omitted. Later readers, no longer familiar with the cultural context, have to attempt to decode brief sidelong references (or have it done for them by an editor, in footnotes) and, if interested, refer to other works on the time, place and subject concerned. These of course are exactly what we do not have in the case of Middle-earth, and so it is necessary to argue backwards by analogy in any attempt to explain such things.

Beyond this, the 'tight focus' of the Red Book is very noticeable, and extends even to its maps. In fact, the maps are one of the clearest examples of what is hap-

pening, and well worth considering in this regard. If we look at the south, we find that not a single place in Gondor is marked that is not mentioned in the narrative, even though it is quite clear that others must have existed. We are told that the three thousand men who came to aid in the defence of Minas Tirith were a tithe of what was expected, and it must be unlikely in the extreme that that would be the full muster. Even Steward Denethor could not expect the south to leave itself wholly undefended on his behalf, after all. The map, as we have it, flatly does not account for a society and economy that could produce an army well over thirty thousand strong. Equally seriously, such a major physical feature as the fens around Tharbad are not marked, and this on a Fourth Age map drawn at a time when the Greenway must have come back into use, to some extent at least. It would probably not be wrong to suggest the maps are accurate concerning areas important to the tale, but that over large stretches the hobbit copyist might as well have written 'Here be Dragons'; they would after all have stood more chance of being right than most people who use that phrase! Areas external to the tale were simply not of interest to hobbit readers, and so are not presented in any detail.

Besides these primary layers of hobbitocentric bias, in the map and in the Appendices dealing with the rest of Middle-earth there is a second layer. The Red Book as we have it derives partly from a copy made in Gondor, and the 'historical' Appendices display signs of having either been added at that time, or drawn from material assembled in Gondor. Beyond hobbitic general disinterest, these sections carry the distinct imprint of Gondorian biases

and selectivity. These are enough in some cases to drive later scholarly readers to pencil-gnawing fury, as they try to get past what can only be described as toffee-nosed indifference to the Rest of the World. Anything which does not involve the Dúnedain is very likely indeed to be slighted, inaccurately recorded, or just missed out. How accurate many statements are is a very debatable question, and there is no solid rule; each has to be taken on a case-by-case basis.

Even where matters impinge on the main narrative and we think we can be fairly certain, it may be well worth double-checking sources and statements as best we can. This applies to the map as well. In so far as it is accurate, that accuracy probably derives from a Gondorian source; the coastline, for instance, may have been drawn after charts preserved in some Southern archive. However, firstly, Gondor's cartography is unlikely to have been any

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more advanced than that of 18th-century Britain, if that; and secondly, over vast areas there may have been little accurate, contemporary information for the mapmaker to use - even in the unlikely event that they cared to do so! Expecting a cartographer in early Fourth Age Gondor to produce a wholly accurate map of the rest of Middle-earth is like asking a Byzantine cartographer to produce an accurate map of Dark Age Europe. Neither the information nor inclination required were

present, and end result has to be handled with care.

Enough of theory; let me proceed, along the lines I have described, to look at the Shire as a particularly good example. Most of us, I think, will feel that the Shire is in many ways familiar, a 'little England' out of older and better days. Yet arguments have raged over hobbit population sizes and whether the Shire could in fact support the sort of society we see. To me, this puts the cart before the horse. A segment of society is presented in a text, which has very good reasons for not going into great detail about the background. Rather than saying 'A is not mentioned so B should not exist', we should pose the question 'B is there; A must in consequence exist, so where might A be?' Such a procedure will throw light on the 'Invisible Shire' of my title - and could readily be extended to other parts of Middle-earth.

The Shire is quite clearly a pre-industrial society; but just exactly what does that imply? The usual comparison is with pre-modern England, often the eighteenth century. We are therefore, looking at a land which might well be underdeveloped by modern standards, but which to its contemporaries was sophisticated and well-off. Assuming that the comparison holds, certain statements can be made;

1. That agriculture was the single most important activity, in which 96% or more of the population was engaged.

2. That there was relatively little occupational specialisation, many people combining agriculture with industrial and commercial activities.

3. That economic and technological change was extremely slow.

4. That by modern expectations, most people were and remained

poor, and had a low standard of living.

5. That the economy was of a market type, but hampered by poor communications, bad currency and the poverty of potential consumers.

Most people would I think readily agree with points 1 and 3; point 2 is one of our 'invisibles' which I mean to investigate later in this paper; 4 and 5 may come as more of a surprise. I will look at each of these points in turn.

Taking point 4 first, the existence of widespread and persis-

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tent poverty by modern standards, let us stop to think what sort of hobbits we actually see in the Red Book. Bilbo Baggins is, by the best definition, a gentleman; he does not work to support himself. Exactly where the Baggins fortune was hiding is not obvious, but the most likely possibility is that it had been invested in property around Hobbiton and the Hill, on the rent from which Mr B. Baggins could live in the style to which he was accustomed. His heir Frodo was likewise comfortably situated. Merry and Pippin were both able to take off into the blue at the drop of a hat, without any sign of having to make excuses to anyone; they both came from ancient and important families, and by the definition I have used were indeed gentlehobbits. Farmers Maggot and Cotton were either owner-occupiers or yeoman tenants; the Sandyman were

millers - skilled craftsmen, in business on their own account.

The Gamgees are not in the same league, but, judging by the standards of my own grandparents' day on the Scottish Borders, a gardener working for a rich family was unlikely to be poor. He was regarded by others as being at a similar level in the community as a skilled workman, was likely to have a house and a decent wage, perhaps land for his own use, or other perks, and might well be able to put his children through school. All of these points could be applied to the Gamgees.

The real agricultural poor of my grandparents' day - and the eighteenth century - were landless labourers, a class as invisible in works of those times comparable in intent to the Red Book of Westmarch as they are in that work itself. At that time farming was a labour-intensive business - the family farm is a very recent development, one reliant on mechanisation and still not complete. With the best will in the world, Farmer Maggot and Farmer Cotton would not have been able to rely on their own immediate kinsfolk for all the labour they needed. Equally, they were not farming within an open-field system where they could readily draw on mutual help. The pictures we have of the Shire make that quite clear, in their labyrinth of field boundaries. The answer has to be that behind the likes of Farmers Maggot and Cotton stood a number of employed farmworkers, ranging from skilled hands who might be given a cottage and land as part of the deal, to unskilled labourers hired at harvest and other busy times. It was also common for people with a little land, smallholders or small farmers, to practice another occupation, if their land was insuffi-

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cient to provide enough income to keep themselves and their families, and this pattern very likely held for the Shire too. Such hobbies as these, though, were unlikely to buy books and even less likely to have adventures. Their interests played no part in shaping the Red Book, and they are invisible within its covers.

This leads us back to point 1, that the majority of the population was engaged in agriculture, and to the vexed question of population sizes. Both the farms we actually see, those of Farmers Maggot and Cotton, are sited outside villages on the land which is worked from them. If this pattern holds good for the majority of hobbit farms then, given the need for labour on each of those farms and the probability that most farmworkers lived where they worked, a large part of the population of the Shire may have lived in the countryside rather than in villages or the few larger settlements. The paucity of even villages, compared to the number and apparent sophistication of craft products in the Shire (as witness the contents of Bag End) also suggests that the agricultural population was dispersed, and the villages functioned as centres for craft production, administration and social life. Certain things in Bag End must have been imports; many more are highly unlikely to have been, so we have to find a place for local manufacture and hobbits to carry it out. Even allowing that the map of the Shire as we have it is accurate in terms of number and placing of villages, which is not necessarily so, the necessary population base to sustain the likes of the Bagginses and the Tooks could have been present. But those hobbits could easily have existed invisibly, such a commonplace feature of life and the countryside that no native

work like the Red Book would have any need to consider who or where they were.

Turning to point 5, it is quite clear that the Shire and its adjacent areas had an economy based upon the market. Bilbo Baggins bought his meat from the butcher, Bill Ferny sold a pony and Barliman Butterbur paid compensation for ponies lost while in his care. An agreed amount, a price, was paid in negotiable currency (silver pennies) for an object or a service, and no further relationship between buyer and seller needed to exist beyond that moment; some of the essential features of a market economy. Another feature of such an economy, private property, was clearly present in the Shire. Auctioneers and auctions, wills and solicitors do not exist outside the framework of private property and a market economy. However, it is equally clear that the 'market' was severely hampered compared to today's.

Firstly, transport and communications were poor. Both relied upon humans or animals, travelling over roads of uncertain quality; the Shire has no canals, let alone railways, and even if any of its rivers (other than the Brandywine, which largely marked the border) had been large enough to carry barges, hobbits had a cultural prejudice against waterways and water transport. Long-distance transport, then, must have been time-consuming and expensive. To quote a Roman figure, it was cheaper to ship grain from one end of the Mediterranean to the other than it was to cart it fifty miles inland, and that principle held until the Industrial Revolution. If transport is expensive and communications are poor and uncertain, markets are restricted in area and vulnerable to local events, and competition

is either slight or even non-existent. Most goods will move only short distances; there is a strong tendency for long-distance trading to be restricted to essentials unavailable in the immediate area and luxuries worth the expense of transport. Mercantile wealth in 18th century Britain did not come from dealing in grain or cattle. The rich merchant was typically engaged in overseas trade, bringing in items which were seen as luxuries and commanded high prices; tea, sugar, wine, spices and fine fabrics. At the same time, (outside the orbit of London which as a large and growing city distorted trade in the Home Counties), most people dressed in locally produced cloth and ate bread baked from grain grown locally. There was already a fair degree of specialisation divided among areas suited to grazing and areas suited to crop-growing, but it was very far from what we see today. Nothing else was possible under the conditions of the time, and much the same conditions apply to the late Third and early Fourth Age Shire. The White Downs might have been noted for wool and the Southfarthing for wheat, but a grain shortage at Bree would not mean better prices for Shire farmers.

Secondly, local markets are small in terms of numbers of consumers as well as in area. On the one hand, this restricts competition, because very few merchants can hope to make a living, like fish in a small pond with no access to a river. As a result, prices tend to stay high and there is little scope for entrepreneurship. The impossibility of making economies of scale in a small market also tends to keep prices up. On the other hand, in a setting such as the Shire, most of those consumers will be poor so there will be very little 'give' in the market.

If prices do become lower, it may not result in increased demand for the product if people either simply cannot afford it anyway, do not have the ready cash to take advantage, or are already buying as much as they need regardless of the price - all problems of small, poor markets.

Thirdly, the absolute value of silver pennies at Bree makes it clear that hard cash was in very short supply, and it is unlikely that the situation in the Shire was much better. Indeed, it is not at all clear who may have been responsible for minting coins in the area. If cash - especially small coins - is in short supply, most people most of the time have to rely on short-term credit until they can pay the baker or the butcher. In turn, with their capital effectively tied up in a multitude of tiny loans, tradesmen and merchants are reluctant to make larger investments or undertake risks. It is not by any standard a good climate for business, and it does not help the customer either.

Lastly, let me turn to point 2, occupational diversity. Limited as our view of the Shire is, the existence of a vast number of crafts can be inferred. It is sometimes suggested that much of what appears in descriptions of Bilbo's residence at Bag End could have been imported, but that really only pushes the problem back a stage. Imports have to be paid for, and transported to where they are found. It is much more likely that the cups and plates and furniture in Bag End were locally made, along with a host of other objects. A run through the illustration of the hall at Bag End (*The Hobbit*) produces the following list; *carpenter* (the door, beams) and therefore *forester* producing timber and *carter* bringing it to site; *cabinetmaker* (chairs, table, dresser and therefore *smith*, pro-

ducing iron or steel tools for all these workers, and heavy iron-mongery such as the door-hinge; *spinner*, *weaver*, producing cloth for - the *upholsterer* (chairs), and *tailor* (Bilbo's clothes); *button-maker* (clothes); *rugmaker*, flat-weave or possibly knotted (the carpet); *bellmaker and rope-maker* (doorbell); *glazier and whitesmith, candlemaker or oil-producer* (lantern); *mirror-maker; umbrella-maker; tile-maker* (floor); *pipe-maker* and *leaf-curer* (smoking pipe). Only the barometer and the clock are truly likely to be imports, though the carpet might be one.

All these crafts and occupations have therefore to be accounted for within the hobbit population, together with a multitude of others. Some crafts and trades, such as that of blacksmith, are full-

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time occupations. Others, like those of the tailor and whitesmith are full-time but may be practised by travelling tradesmen. Yet others again, such as weaving and wood-turning, may be full-time but can equally well be practiced by people who engage in other occupations besides. The curse of the pre-modern economy was not unemployment but underemployment, owing to the strongly seasonal nature of work on the land. A multiplicity of hands might be needed at harvest - but what were those people going to do for the rest of the year? One solution was to use the families of farmworkers as extra labour at the busiest times; another was for those with very little land or none to engage in occupations other than those of farm labourer when work was

slack. In the Shire as in pre-modern Britain, such rural part-time industry would be very dependant on local resources, and on small-scale traders who could gather and sell on the products.

Middlemen are a necessary part of this process. The rural weaver aiming at the market rather than home consumption depended on the wool-merchant who gathered wool from farmers, graded it, and put it out in small parcels to the spinners and weavers, before selling on the cloth to be finished and made into goods. Within a pre-modern, non-industrial society, such a system makes fuller use of the available labour, and allows far more craft/industrial production to go on than the obvious activities of villages and small towns might suggest. It does fit the model thus far suggested for the Shire, and is exactly the sort of economic activity which to the likes of Bilbo Baggins would be quite invisible, something so commonplace as to be not worthy of mention - especially when writing for other hobbits. Yet without such an underpinning, Bag End and its master simply could not exist as we know them.

I hope that this exposition of matters relating to the Shire has shown, firstly, the nature of my method and, secondly, the results it can yield. Argument from analogy is a time-honoured resort of 'Middle-earth Studies'; all I have really done is to suggest that, combined with a solid appreciation of historical possibility and a degree of source criticism, it can yield better results than expected. For myself, within its limits I do not think the method or the effort inappropriate. It is a mark of the depth of Tolkien's achievement that we can play this strange game, and find that his creation is at once so far from reality and so solidly rooted in it.