

An Ethnically Cleas'd Faery? Tolkien and the Matter of Britain

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I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands ... nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalised, associated with the soil of Britain, but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing. (Tolkien 1981, Letters, p.144)

To a large extent, Tolkien is right. The mediaeval jongleurs, minstrels, troubadours, trouvères and conteurs could use, for their stories, their gests and their lays, the Matter of Rome (which had nothing to do with Rome, and everything to do with Romance), the Matter of France (extremely unhistorical stories of Charlemagne and his knights, like the *Chanson de Roland*, which the minstrel Taillefer sang before the invading Norman army in 1066); and above all the Matter of Britain: the myriad stories, largely of British Celtic origin, connected with King Arthur's Court and his knights. But there was no Matter of England – nothing connected with the people who invaded this island in the 5th and 6th centuries, and fell in love with it. Only “impoverished chap-book stuff” like the tales around Robin Hood. So Tolkien set out to create a “Matter of England” from his own fertile imagination, and integrate it with the legends of the other “Matters”. In a very real sense, he was attempting to impose Logres on Britain, in the terms that Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis used, the latter in *That Hideous Strength* (1945) when he speaks of Britain being “always haunted by something we may call

Logres” (p. 369), by which he means a specifically Arthurian presence. It is most interesting that Lewis, following the confused or uninformed example of Williams, uses the name “Logres”, which is in fact derived from *Lloegr* (the Welsh word for England), to identify the Arthurian tradition, i.e. the Matter of Britain! No wonder Britain keeps on rebelling against Logres. And despite Tolkien's efforts, he could not stop Prydain bursting into Lloegr and transforming it.

In *The Book of Lost Tales* (Tolkien, 1983), Ottor Wæfre, father of Hengest and Horsa, also known as Eriol, comes from Heligoland to the island called in Qenya in *Tol Eressëa* (the lonely isle), or in Gnomish *Dor Faidwen* (the land of release, or the fairy land), or in Old English *se uncuþa holm* (the unknown island). This was originally intended to be the island of Britain – which is referred to always in *The Book of Lost Tales* as “England”. Later on Britain is referred to as Lúthien, and Tol Eressëa is removed further over sea. Significantly, this island is inhabited not, as historically, by the Romanised British, later called “Welsh” by the invading English, but by the fairies – Elves and Gnomes. And yet, the Gnomish tongue, Goldogrin, in many ways resembles Welsh in both sound and structure; and from the beginning, despite Tolkien's stated purpose, the matter of the tales does not concern the English nation at all, but the doings of the Elves and Gnomes, the “fairies”. So from the outset this supposed “mythology of England” does not centre on the English, but rather on the land of what Tolkien, at this stage in the development of his *Legendarium*, goes out of his way not to call “Britain”.

The history of the name “Britain” and its varied usages is long and involved. To put it

simply, “Britannia” was the Roman version of the native name for what the Welsh have traditionally called *Ynys Prydain* – the Island of Britain. In the period of Roman rule (AD43 – ca.410) the overwhelming majority of their subjects here were Ancient Britons, i.e. the ancestors of the Welsh. Indeed, for a long time the term “British” continued to mean “Welsh” – as late as the turn of the 19th century, Welshmen resident in London referred to themselves as the Ancient British. The descendants of those Ancient British who between about AD380 and 500 had emigrated to North-western Gaul were known as Bretons, and their country as Brittany, or Britain the Less, as distinct from Great Britain. This last term was adopted by James I (England’s first Scottish king) to emphasise that the merging of his two kingdoms was an imperial idea (at least in his eyes, and those of his sons). The confusion over the names of Britain and England became further confounded, so that in the early 19th century (again!) William Blake could make his prophetic spirit Los speak of:

The Briton Saxon Roman Norman
amalgamating
In my Furnaces into One Nation,
the English

Jerusalem, (plate 92, l.1-2)

And in more recent times, the resistance to distinguishing between England and Britain has been expressed by a range of literate people, most blatantly perhaps by the eminent historian A.J.P. Taylor. Still, Purcell and Dryden were definitely on the right lines in calling their semi-opera *King Arthur, or The British Hero* – because in origin at least, King Arthur was a Welshman.

The name “Arthur” suddenly starts becoming popular in the Welsh and Irish parts of Britain in the later 6th century, and stories are being recorded by the 9th century of a “dux bellorum” (= war commander) by that name who, after the withdrawal of central Roman authority in the 5th century, rallied native Romano-British resistance to the invading Saxons (or English as they called themselves), and even made them retreat. The derivation of the name is probably from “Artorius”, an attested Roman gentile name. By the 10th century both Welsh and Breton sources have a growing

complex of legends about this heroic king and his henchmen Cei the White and Bedwyr One-hand; he is such a significant legendary figure that he has already attracted to himself takes of quite different (and much later) historical figures, such as Owain Prince of Rheged (a noted 6th century fighter against the English). According to many stories, he had not died but was sleeping under a hill, or had passed over sea to the Blessed Realms, and would one day return to free the British (i.e. Welsh) from their Saxon conquerors. The Bretons in particular developed a whole body of literature around Arthur; and when in 1066 the almost-perfectly-naturalised conquerors of Neustria, which is now called after them “the land of the Northmen” – Normandy – took it into their heads to become the last in a long line of conquerors of Britain, they brought with them their Breton minstrels – who for the sake of their Norman masters, had translated their lays into French.

So, by 1100 AD there are two different sets of Arthurian traditions in Britain: the “native” Welsh ones, as they appear in the middle section of the *Mabinogion*, and the more courtly Breton-Norman ones, in the French language imported by the Norman Conquerors. The Norman and Angevin kings who were now ruling over the still occasionally refractory English found it politically useful to identify themselves with these traditions, especially if they could be associated with the legends of the Return, gaining Welsh support by claiming to be the heirs of Arthur who had finally sorted out the English. Moreover, the Normans had not only gone to England but had spread themselves and their culture over a considerable part of western and southern Europe, so that from this point on the Arthurian tales are no longer just Welsh, or Breton, or even Breton-Norman; they become European.

Anyway here we have a number of easily perceptible reasons why Tolkien might have wanted to avoid Arthurian tales, not least of which is that they were associated with the Norman invasion he so detested. However, a thorough-going conscious rejection of the Arthurian element would also have meant a rejection of his beloved and ancient Welsh language, and Tolkien drew back from such a definite break. As I have already mentioned,

from the earliest days Welsh-related languages formed an essential part of Tolkien's conception of the Elves. Similarly, the Arthurian element is constantly suppressed, but none the less it keeps on breaking through.

In this connection it is interesting that Tolkien refers to the Arthurian corpus as being "imperfectly naturalised". Usually it is up to the newcomers to a country to become "naturalised", or assimilated – and Tolkien reversed the normal order of things to confuse the issue. Historically, it was up to the English invaders to become "naturalised" – and this, in a linguistic and cultural sense, they signally failed to do. Their Christianity, on which Tolkien sets so much store, they eventually took not from the native British, but from Roman missionaries – in this instance at least they rejected insular British culture and tradition in favour of identification with a federal Europe. Even more importantly the English rejected the native language of the island they had conquered in a remarkably extreme fashion. Although for many centuries the English lived side-by-side with Welsh-speakers in what is now England, the ancient British language has left almost no trace on English; whereas the native Welsh language has borrowed extensively from English since at least the 11th century (for example, a mediaeval Welsh word for "chapel" – *betws* – which survives in place-names is in fact a Welsh version of the Old English *bed-hus* = prayer-house). But of Welsh in English there is hardly a trace; and in the very rare instances when a Welsh word has crept into English usage, it is usually of a geographical character, such as "coomb". Even the French language can do better than this – there is evidence of a Gaulish substrate (as it is technically known) in a number of relatively common words, such as "bec" and "glaive". But English has solidly rejected its potential Celtic substrate. And yet an informed look at the map of England shows that it cannot be so easily ignored. A considerable number of what we think of as purely English place-names are in fact of Welsh origin; to give just a few examples: Malvern, Berkshire, Pendle, Lichfield, Tamworth, Eccles, Winford, Penge, York, London, and of course all these rivers with names like Thame, Thames, Ouse and Avon. So although the English have consciously rejected

the language of Britain, the place-names of Logres give the game away. In fact, the "imperfect naturalisation" of the English means that instead of Britain being haunted by something we may call Logres, Logres is haunted by something we may call Britain.

So the English denied their Welsh heritage; it might be suggested that this denial of their "roots", to use a cliché, is at least a partial explanation of why English mythology consists only of "impoverished chap-book stuff". In the *Book of Lost Tales*, as I mentioned earlier, Tolkien is equally concerned to reject the British inhabitants of these islands. The real Welsh are replaced by the "fairies" – *fairi* – providing an invented linguistic substrate in place of the real Welsh one that the English rejected in their linguistic cleansing of Lloegr. And, of course, the *Book of Lost Tales* implies an ethnic cleansing of Tol Eressëa – Logres denying Britain.

But Tolkien was not enough of a committed English nationalist to carry through this line consistently. Just as the places-names of England maintain an otherwise denied Welsh tradition, so in Tolkien's *Legendarium* the Arthurian substrate keeps breaking through in the same way. Already as early as the *Lay of Leithian* the country where the action takes place is originally called "*Broseliande*". This name is straight out of the Matter of Britain. Originally it was the Welsh "Bro Celiddon" – the land of Caledonia, and the supposed place of one of Arthur's battles. Emigrants to Armorica transported the name to a local forest, and French minstrels not only made it into a romantic sea-drowned wood, but Frenchified the pronunciation into Brocéliande. From at least the 12th century on it became an essential part of the Matter of Britain – and at first of Tolkien's *legendarium*, until he caught himself and changed it, bypassing the Welsh-Arthurian substrate apparently in favour of an even earlier one – the place-name "Belerion", recorded by Greco-Roman biographers as Lands's End. Thus was created Beleriand, with only the Arthurian suffix *-and* remaining to become a common Elvish element meaning "land," "country". Still, it is hardly surprising that the Arthurian element pokes through in a work that its author calls both a "gest" and a "lay" – forms that were used by

those same French-Breton jongleurs and conteurs whose major theme was the Matter of Britain; and that causes no surprise when found in the work of a scholar who was at this time publishing a definitive edition of the highly Arthurian *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight*. The appearance of “Broseliand” in the *Lay of Leithian* is thus an example of Britain rebelling against Logres; but the rebellion was fairly swiftly put down at this time, and converted into something rich and strange, viz., Beleriand. However, there was a more serious revolt to come.

When Tolkien started to write *The Lost Road*, he found himself approaching the stories of the Elves from a very different direction – first via the Lombards, and then involving the Downfallen Land: Atalantë, derived from a Quenya verb TALTA ‘incline, decline, shake at foundations, make totter, etc.’ which had already appeared in the *Book of Lost Tales*, long before Numénor was even thought of. The appearance of Numénor moved Tol Eressëa still further west, so that it is near Valinor; and now it acquires a new name in the second draft of the *Fall of Numénor* – Avallónë, “for it is hard by Valinor”. Of course, the derivation of the Arthurian Avalon is very different – it is related to the Welsh *afal* ‘apple’ – but the form of the name is the same as the Welsh word in Tolkien, and unlike that of Broseliand, it was not transformed, and Avallónë became the Haven of the Valar. Its etymology is obscure, but it appears to be connected with the word *vala*. This is using elements that go far back in the development of the Legendarium, though it is interesting that it does not account for the double l in both Avallon and Avallónë, which reflect the usual form of *Ynys Afallon* in Welsh. Could it possibly have been that there was an unconscious process of back formation at work here? That the known Arthurian “Avalon” had suggested a name for angelic beings who might have been connected with it, or a word for an island? As the known Atlantis might have suggested an appropriate Quenya verb form?

And another thing – at this stage in the development of the Legendarium – in the aforementioned second draft of the *Fall of Numénor* – Tolkien called the new abode of Thû, or “Sauron” in Quenya, the Black Land - Mordor. This name has numerous resonances – not least, it recalls the traditional form of the name of King Arthur's nemesis: Mordred. The fact that this Arthurian echo first appears in the evolution of the Legendarium at precisely the same point as “Avallon” is doubtless pure coincidence – a chance occurrence, as they might say in Middle-earth.

Well, this is all very far fetched, and I won't object if anybody denies its likelihood. But there is no denying one thing: a spectre is haunting Middle-earth – the spectre of Britain. Arthurian elements keep making their way into the Legendarium, and not just in nomenclature. By the time that Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, the ethnic agenda had receded into the background, and the plot had become full of elements that recall the Matter of Britain: for example, the Return of the King, the inverted Quest and the departure westward over the sea for healing beyond the circles of this world. And since Tolkien was above all a linguist, his treatment of names is particularly significant. As we have noted, he has a tendency to take names from other traditions – especially the Arthurian – and make them relate to his very different tradition by transforming their linguistic origin: one might say, he naturalises them. A look at the place- and personal names of the Shire and Bree are highly instructive in this regard. And despite his original intentions, despite his attempts to cleanse Logres of material that was not of its own language and its own culture, he could not stop his work being haunted by the Matter of Britain. Eventually he stopped trying, and at last everything came together – Logres with Britain, The Shire with Valinor – and the intended Mythology for England was finally transformed into what we now might call the Matter of Middle-earth.

References

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