

case. For that matter, now that we have to hand most of the “Silmarillion” material available, it should not be beyond the power of more devoted readers to construct their own version.

One thing which this reviewer believes that the “History” has accomplished to a far greater extent than would have been possible with a single-volume *Silmarillion* is the alteration in perspective on Tolkien’s creation. Before the “History”, the view probably of most of his readers was very much (and quite properly and understandably) *Lord of the Rings*-centred. But for anyone who has ploughed through (not said disparagingly; but the “History” can hardly be

described as “light reading”) the “History”, that perspective must be altered: *The Silmarillion* was always at the heart of the *legendarium*, and any true understanding of Tolkien must begin with that; “the Silmarils are in my heart.”

Christopher Tolkien has, as with all the previous volumes in the series, carried out the task of bringing order and coherence to the constituent texts with an unfailing attention to detail, and an outstanding ability to render the complex textual and narrational evolution of those texts with as much clarity as can well be done. We are all, once more, greatly in his debt.

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## J.I.M. Stewart, J.B. Timbermill and J.R.R. Tolkien

Jessica Yates

It was in 1976 that, scanning the *Times Literary Supplement*, my eye was caught by the name ‘Tolkien’ in a book review which otherwise might still have interested me, as it was a novel set in Oxford, *A Memorial Service*. The eye-catching sentence was:

Back in Oxford, Pattullo is among old friends, among them his former tutor J.B. Timbermill, a Tolkien-like figure, more isolated than ever, a nocturnal wanderer of Oxford’s lanes .....

I set off to the library for the book, third in what would become a sequence of five books by J.I.M. Stewart, who died on Saturday 12th November 1994.

The main story, told in the first person, is about Duncan Pattullo, who went up to Oxford in the 1940s just after World War II, and then became a playwright. He returns to his old college (never named, but modelled on Christ Church) 25 years after going down, for a Gaudy, or reunion of former students, meets his former fellow-undergraduates and tutors, and is offered

a five-year fellowship to lecture on Modern Drama – the chance to return to university life.

In *Pattullo*, Stewart has varied the facts, and chronology of his own life. Both are Scottish, and like *Pattullo*, Stewart went up to Oxford from school in Edinburgh, but as he was born in 1906 (one generation after Tolkien) he would have gone up to Oxford in 1924 or 1925 in order to gain his first-class degree in English in 1928. *Pattullo* also reads English, at an unnamed college modelled on Christ Church. Stewart, however went up to Oriel College, and became a Student (i.e. Fellow) of Christ Church in 1949, with posts in other universities, both after his graduation and appointment as Student, and also subsequently. So his close association with Christ Church came about shortly after *Pattullo* is supposed to have gone up as an undergraduate in about 1946. Was Stewart actually tutored by Tolkien as an undergraduate between 1925 and 1928? Although the dates are not impossible, there is no evidence for this in Stewart’s autobiography *Myself and Michael Innes*, and correspondence with Stewart’s family confirms

this. However, their time at Oxford did overlap. Tolkien came back from Leeds in 1925-6 to take up his professorship in Oxford; Stewart's first academic job was to lecture – in Leeds! – from 1930 to 1935, from whence he moved to Adelaide and Belfast, returning to Oxford in 1949 – in time to witness the academic furore over the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* by his colleague.

At least one other (minor) character is based upon a real person. Without inside knowledge I cannot determine whether any of the other characters are; since several of them are guilty of idiocy or immorality, probably not. If the originals were still alive they might recognise themselves! Stewart is quite clearly in sympathy with Tolkien – the real Tolkien – but deploys a caricature of Tolkien as one of a group of eccentric Oxford dons who range through his novel sequence. All are fairly obsessive and neglect “real” life and take leave of common sense in order to pursue their academic careers and/or hobby-horses.

The tale of how the friendships and enmities made in youth are resolved in middle-age is fascinating, but we must here concentrate on the character of J.B. Timbermill, whose name must immediately suggest “J.R.R. Tolkien” (the lover of trees and old mills). This character, however, is deliberately at variance with many facts of Tolkien's life, with significant differences chosen on purpose to prove that Timbermill is not Tolkien under a pseudonym, and Stewart is not satirising the real Tolkien, but perhaps ridi-culing those who imagine that the real Tolkien was an absent-minded bachelor who lived in an attic surrounded by thousands of books and a collection of Anglo-Saxon potsherds. Until the publication of Carpenter's *Biography* in 1977, most of Tolkien's readers knew little of his life, but Stewart as an Oxford don himself, knew more than most. This, after all, is the J.I.M Stewart quoted in Carpenter's *Biography* (from an early newspaper interview) as saying “He could turn a lecture room into a

mead hall in which he was the bard and we were the feasting, listening guests”.

In the first book of the sequence, *The Gaudy*, Pattullo recalls his encounters with Timbermill:

I myself ... had for a time absorbed myself in the pursuit of mere-dragons, marsh-steppers, eldritch wives, whales, whales, loathly worms and argumentative nightingales and owls.

In the second book, *Young Pattullo*, he describes his first year at Oxford. When Pattullo meets Timbermill<sup>1</sup> face to face he feels that there is something “preternatural” about him and that he

might be in the presence of a mage or wizard in disguise ... The posts which in a prosaic and utilitarian way held up the roof might have been dead timber in some sacred grove which a magic stronger than its own had blasted; the tunnel-like openings beneath the eaves and gables of the big house were as glades and ridings in a forest haunted by trolls and norms ...

Pattullo begins to call him “the Wizard of the North” (a title I think which originates with Sir Walter Scott), and discovers that when he gets his essays back, Timbermill had been doodling on them. Years later, an American university offers to buy them from Pattullo “for a large sum of money”, an offer he declines. “I was witnessing the birth, or the first dim movement in the night of their forbeing, of the presence one day to haunt *The Magic Quest*.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the matter of *The Silmarillion* would have been in existence in the late 1920s, but Stewart wouldn't have known about it then; however, *The Magic Quest* is clearly meant to represent *The Lord of the Rings* which hadn't been thought of at that time.

In the third book, *A Memorial Service*, Pattullo meets Timbermill again, now about 75, “an authority of the first eminence in his field”, and the author of the famed *Magic Quest*. Pattullo informs us that Timbermill has private

<sup>1</sup> From the university directory Pattullo learns that Timbermill is “M.A., D.Litt., F.B.A., (Balliol, New College, Merton), 20 Linton Road”. Interesting: Tolkien didn't obtain a D.Litt by study, but was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1972; his *Beowulf* lecture was given to the British Academy, but he wasn't a member. He did have an Oxford M.A., and of course Merton was one of his colleges, while Linton Road is very close to Northmoor Road in North Oxford where Tolkien lived, first at no. 22 and then at no 20.

<sup>2</sup> I should also mention that in *Young Pattullo* we find reference to a don at Magdalen who has written “a book about a chap called John. It's one of those pilgrimage fables of an edifying sort.”

means, so doesn't have to earn his living by tutoring, taking only a few pupils "to lighten his solitude"; another deliberate contrast with Tolkien, who had no private funds and took on extra marking in the vacations to help support his family.

At a party, a Professor gives Pattullo his opinion of Timbermill: "A sad case ... A notable scholar, it seems. Unchallenged in his field – a kind of apocalyptic romance." Does this, maybe, sound familiar? Another character, a creative writer, prefers *The Magic Quest* to works of scholarship:

It kept him from completing some enormous academic labour or other, and now he regrets having been lured away by it ... It mayn't be a work of the most enduring quality, but it's miles ahead of conservative scholarship. So what the old man has is a false conscience.

In the fourth book, *The Madonna of the Astrolabe*, Timbermill declines yet further. Walking with an elderly don, Duncan discovers Timbermill seated in peace, just resting a while, among a group of hippies at the church of St. Michael-at-the-North-Gate. Duncan's companion scorns the scene, but Duncan defends Timbermill: "He wrote a very remarkable book. Not about Angles and Saxons, but about some sort of imaginary heroic age." He also defends Timbermill's qualities as a tutor. Later, Duncan hunts for Timbermill's relatives, recording that "his father had been a merchant banker".

As we see by the dates of first publication, the series was mainly written between Tolkien's death and the publication of Carpenter's Biography. Stewart was free to use the concept of a don who writes a heroic romance and is distrusted by his peers, without fear of Tolkien actually reading the books. In the fifth book there are a few references to Timbermill.

## References

- Humphrey Carpenter *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*  
 T.S. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*  
 J.I.M. Stewart, *The Gaudy*  
     *Young Pattullo*  
     *A Memorial Service*  
     *The Madonna of the Astrolabe*  
     *Full Term*  
 1987. *Myself and Michael Innes* Gollanz 1987

In Stewart's autobiography *Myself and Michael Innes* (1987) there are, alas, few references to Tolkien. He is recorded as one of the examiners for Stewart's "viva" in 1928. This was the oral examination held to verify a candidates claim to be awarded a First-class degree. Later he recalls his landlady in Leeds:

Miss Rowe's connection with the university was old-established, particularly with former members of my own department. Ronald Tolkien is, I suppose, the only one of them to have entered the halls of fame, but to a fledgling like myself the roll was impressive.

Also of interest to Tolkienians is the reference to Stewart's former home near Oxford, Fawler Copse<sup>3</sup> which is, Stewart wrote

probably on the site of a Romano-British homestead running to one or two mosaic floors ... Philologists tell me that the very name of my house attests to the fact; my Saxon predecessors murmured it wonderingly to one another as they peered at the mosaic pavement from which a spade may still turn up the tesserae.

The philologists who connected the name Fawler with the Old English *fag flor* – "coloured floor", were of course Tolkien and Shippey (see *The Road to Middle Earth*, chapter 2).

J.I.M. Stewart has also experienced the tension between academic scholarship and genre fiction being the successful author, as Michael Innes, of the Appleby series of detective fiction, though detective stories are traditionally accorded academic respectability.

It is ironic, that the Oxford Quintet, a series of mainstream novels which Stewart was very proud, as representing "with the possible exception of my volume in the Oxford History of English Literature ... my most sustained single effort as a writer", may be remembered chiefly for its portrait of Tolkien.

<sup>3</sup> According to *Who's Who* 1982, the address was "Fawler Copse, Fawler, Wantage, Oxon."