

The Hobbit and Tolkien's Other Pre-war writings

John Rateliff and Christina Scull

Part One

The paper by John Rateliff, which formed the first part of a two-part presentation, not available for this edition of *Mallorn*, covered the history of the writing of *The Hobbit*, giving evidence for its origins in the phrase "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." and in the tradition of story-telling in the Tolkien family.

Rateliff goes on to compare *The Hobbit* to two earlier forms of Tolkien's writing: the mythology and the stories for children. He finds that *The Hobbit* shares a common audience with the children's stories, a similar hero, a bear and a dragon. Dragons also are found in *The Silmarillion*, and there are other species in common.

Concentrating on maps and the Silmaril/Arkenstone parallels, Rateliff argued that in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien drew upon *The Silmarillion* in a liberating way.

Part Two

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According to Christopher Tolkien, *The Hobbit* was probably begun in 1929, and it was eventually published in 1937. During the whole of this period and for many years previously J.R.R. Tolkien had been working on his mythology. He had written various other stories for his children, at least two of which, *The Father Christmas Letters* and *Mr. Bliss*, while having a few interesting links, do not appear to take place in the world of his mythology. *The Hobbit* was also originally conceived as being unconnected, but as it turned out it was not only in many ways influenced by it, but actually became incorporated into it. Tolkien writes about this in various letters. On 14th Dec. 1937 to his friend Selby:

I don't much approve of *The Hobbit* myself, preferring [sic] my own mythology (which is just touched on) with its

consistent nomenclature – Elrond, Gondolin, and Esgaroth have escaped out of it - and organized history, to this rabble of Eddaic-named dwarves ... newfangled hobbits and gollums¹ (invented in an idle hour)...

(Haggerty Catalogue)

On 16th December 1937 to Stanley Unwin:

I am sure you will sympathize when I say that the construction of elaborate and consistent mythology (and two languages) rather occupies the mind, and the Silmarils are in my heart... Mr. Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm's fairy-tale dwarves, and got drawn into the edge of it – so that even Sauron the terrible peeped over the edge.

(*Letters*, p. 26)

¹ A catalogue in early 1937 had "goblins" but Haggerty has "gollums".

And on 16th July 1964 to Christopher Bretherton:

I returned to Oxford in Jan 1926, and by the time *The Hobbit* appeared (1937) this "matter of the Elder Days" was in coherent form. *The Hobbit* was not intended to have anything to do with it. I had the habit while my children were still young of inventing and telling orally, sometimes of writing down, children's stories for their private amusement.... *The Hobbit* was intended to be one of them. It had no necessary connexion with the "mythology", but naturally became attracted towards this dominant construction in my mind, causing the tale to become larger and more heroic as it proceeded. Even so it could really stand quite apart, except the references (unnecessary, though they give an impression of historical depth) to the Fall of Gondolin, the branches of the Elfkin and the quarrel of King Thingol, Lúthien's father, with the Dwarves.

(*Letters*, p. 346)

It is indeed in the depiction of Bilbo's comfortable home and way of life that *The Hobbit* is furthest from the mythology. It is generally agreed that the lifestyle Tolkien described is closet to that of a small prosperous English town or village in the eighteenth century or early nineteenth, enjoying a multitude of small manufactures which added to the comfort of life without any of the incipient social and economic problems due to the beginnings of the agrarian and industrial revolutions. It is also a society without fear of outside attack or foreign interference. *The Silmarillion* in all its versions depicts a mythic and heroic world with danger nearly always present which has greater affinity with antiquity and the Middle Ages than with the eighteenth Century. It is true that the elves were great creators and craftsmen but most of the material comforts enjoyed by Bilbo seem too mundane for elvish craftsmen. One must also remember that the introduction of items such as ferhs [C. – what is that word?], handkerchiefs, late or post-Medieval in our society, may have taken place at a different stage in Middle-earth. Also, later in *The Hobbit* Tolkien implies that much time has elapsed since the fall of Gondolin

so that there might be considerable changes in the style of living. However, a problem arose when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Having once established this comfortable bourgeois setting it became so much a part of the hobbit background (indeed hobbits would not be hobbits without it) that he could not abandon it when he returned to the more mythic and heroic culture in the later part of *The Lord of the Rings* and it had to be fully absorbed into his mythology. Gondor (which recalls Byzantium), and Anglo-Saxon Rohan are closer to the culture of *The Silmarillion*, though their heroes are more human and less powerful than the culture of the Shire and the hobbits. Indeed there is so little difference that it seems incredible that two whole Ages have passed. However, Tolkien joins the two cultures together so carefully that only the mildest feelings of anachronism are aroused by the conjunction of the eighteenth century Shire and the medieval South. Of course in the history of our own world different parts have been in various stages of evolution at the same time but in *The Lord of the Rings* it is Gondor which is intended, even in decline, to show the greatest degree of civilization, as the heir of Númenor. However, the Shire with all its detail and comforts appears at the beginning of the book when the story moves at a much slower pace. Then when after a long period of travel, we reach the supposedly more advanced culture, the story is moving at such a pace that we have little time to stop for detail. The contrast between Shire and the world outside is indeed close to other fantasy stories, wherein children from our world enter another world or go back in time in our own world. Tolkien introduces this effect within his own secondary world with no disruption of time or space.

Beginning with clothing, Bilbo has pegs for coats, he wears braces, and a waistcoat, a dressing-gown and has pocket handkerchiefs, none of which I would associate with anybody in *The Silmarillion*; Gandalf and the dwarves are more appropriately dressed in cloaks and hoods, other items not being mentioned. I wonder too who might have carried the muff which occurs in the reference to Beorn as a skin-changer. We hear a great deal of the furnishing of Bilbo's home – panelled walls, tiles and carpeted floors, hearthrugs, bedroom mat, a clock on the

mantelpiece, sofas, and even a big lamp with a red shade, far removed from the lanterns used by the Noldor, such as Flinding carried. It all seems so down-to-earth and practical. *The Fellowship of the Ring* adds umbrellas, wastepaper baskets, gold pens and ink bottles, and a bookcase – something that would have been rare in a private person's house in our world prior to the invention of printing; there is no suggestion of printed books in Middle-earth. With the exception of halls of audience we do not hear much detail of furnishings in the mythology or in *The Lord of the Rings* outside the Shire. We do get a description of the room used by Gandalf and Pippin in Minas Tirith but again it suggests a medieval background rather than the more cluttered rooms of the Shire, and the description is very general:

A fair room, light and airy, with goodly hangings of dull gold sheen unfigured. It was spare furnished, having but a small table, two chairs and a bench; but at either side there were curtained alcoves and well-clad beds within with vessels and basins for washing.

From the details I have of other rooms I could visualize Bilbo's bedroom at Bag End but I have no idea of what the royal bedchamber used by Aragorn in Minas Tirith was like. John Rateliff has commented to me that artists probably have the same problem in visualising interiors since so many choose to depict characters standing by windows thus avoiding having to depict much furniture.

For meals Bilbo has cups and saucers (called crocks in the dwarves' song), glasses, knives, forks and spoons, much of which seems quite modern. Most versions of the mythology are too swift-moving to record such utensils in detail, but in the *Lays Beleg* has a flask of leather, the company at Thingol's table used gold goblets and Turin flung a horn adorned with gold at Orgof. At Nargothrond we hear of dishes and goblets, wine flagons engraved, with gold and silver and cups of wrought silver and gold used by Fuilin. Even in *The Hobbit* the elves used bowls in their feasts, and the butler and chief guard used great flagons. I don't quite see them passing cups and saucers around. When Frodo and Sam eat with Faramir, the utensils include round platters, bowls and dishes

of glazed brown clay, turned box wood cups, basins of polished bronze and a goblet of plain silver. In Gondor we hear of a salver with silver flagons and cups, a leather flagon of ale, and wooden platters and cups. *The Silmarillion* and much of *The Lord of the Rings* seem very close. It is the Shire in both *The Hobbit* and the early part of *The Lord of the Rings* which is different. It is not only crocks, saucers, forks, and glasses, which we do not hear of outside the Shire, coffee and tea and such homely items as buttered scones are also missing. From the morning letters mentioned in *The Hobbit* and the *postman* in *The Lord of the Rings* who brought acceptances to the party it is clear that the Shire had a regular postal service, unmentioned elsewhere in Middle-earth. Bilbo was used to having his meat delivered by the butcher all ready to cook.

The hobbits themselves of course are also new. They were probably invented as small creatures with whom Tolkien's children could identify and perhaps we learn something from the change in their description. The first edition has "They are (or were) small people, smaller than dwarves (and they have no beards) but very much larger than lilliputians." (p. 12) This was changed to; "They are, or were, a little people about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves; Hobbits have no beards" (p. 10). The change, omitting the lilliputians, makes them seem more human, less remote. They are so much a part of the Shire that Tolkien never wrote them into the earlier mythology. Galadriel was written in and became a person of great importance, and Gandalf and the ents were mentioned, yet Tolkien could not find a place for the hobbits in the First Age. Where could they have lived in that Age and remained hobbits?

In the first edition it was said of the Tooks, "It had always been said that long ago one or other of the Tooks had married into a fairy family (the less friendly said a goblin family)." (p.12) This became: "It was often said (in other families) that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife. That was absurd, of course." (p. 10) Tolkien was probably originally thinking of traditional fairies rather than his elves, who are sometimes referred to in *The Book of Lost Tales* as fairies, and he throws no doubt on the possibility. In the third edition

(1966) Tolkien refuted any possibility of such a marriage, though he still used the word *fairy*, not *elf*. At that time he no longer used *fairy* and *elf* interchangeably, nor had he introduced fairies separately from elves into Middle-earth. When he first wrote the passage in about 1929 elves can not have been entirely unconnected with our fairies if those who remained in Middle-earth were to dwindle into our traditional fairies. Nor has he either completely established the significance and rarity of elf-mortal marriages.

No wizards occur in the mythology as it was in 1930, and it seems likely that Gandalf was originally seen as something entirely apart, depending on the traditional wizard with his pointed hat, cloak, long beard, and staff. He is a different figure in *The Lord of the Rings* and gains much in dignity and authority so that he can be described in the mythology as the Maia Olórin. In *The Hobbit* he is introduced as a *little* old man, though later the word *little* was removed. He is interested in trivialities such as magic studs and fireworks, though the interest in fireworks is later seen as reflecting his wearing Narya and his role as a wielder of the Secret Fire, the flame of Anor. He is a slightly comic figure on page 38 exclaiming "Great Elephants!", and on page 41 he is described as having eaten most, talked most, and laughed most. He is unable to read the runes on the swords, which suggests he is much less learned than Elrond, yet in *The Lord of the Rings* he is a master of tongues. He is also a little conceited; on page 105 we are told; "The wizard, to tell the truth, never minded explaining his cleverness more than once." The smoking indulged in by Gandalf, Bilbo, and the dwarves is also unknown in the mythology. Gandalf is a new and somewhat incongruous element which in *The Lord of the Rings* is made over and fitted into the mythology.

There are also some real anachronisms in *The Hobbit*, mainly due to the comments of the narrator. These are absent in the mythology and in most of *The Lord of the Rings*, the firework dragon passing "like an express train" being the main exception. In *The Hobbit* there is also a railway allusion. In the first chapter Bilbo's shriek bursts out like the whistle of an engine coming out of a tunnel. The story of the invention of golf at the Battle of the Green Fields

also seems a little out of place. On page 43 the statement is made :

These parts are none too well know, and are too near the mountains. Policemen never come so far, and the map-makers have not reached this country yet. They have seldom even heard of the king round here.

Tolkien changed it later in 1966 (p. 42):

These parts are none too well known, and are too near the mountains. Travellers seldom come this way now. The old maps are no use: things have changed for the worse and the road is unguarded. They have seldom even heard of the king round here.

He thus removed the mention of policemen and recent map-making but left the reference to the king. Possibly he was thinking originally of the British conceptions of the King's highway and the King's justice, but *post-The Lord of the Rings* it might have been better to remove the reference to the king since centuries had passed since that area had had a king. Yet on page 67 he repeats the allusion to "great tall mountains with lonely peaks and valleys where no king ruled". Maps were certainly well known in the Shire. Bilbo loved them, and in his hall there hung a large one of the Country Round with all his favourite walks marked on it in red ink. No one ever uses maps in the *Silmarillion* mythology and they are rare in *The Lord of the Rings*. On page 20 Gandalf makes a very unlikely remark when he accuses Bilbo of opening the door like a pop-gun. Elsewhere weaponry in Middle-earth is strictly Medieval – bows and arrows, spears, swords, axes, shields, etc.

Much of *The Hobbit* is, to quote Tolkien, "derived from epic, mythology and fairy story" (*Letters*, p. 31). Such details include the pair of magic diamond studs that fastened themselves and never came undone until ordered, which Gandalf gave the Old Took, and the stories which Gandalf used to tell about dragons and goblins and giants and the rescue of princesses and the unexpected luck of widows' sons. Dragons do occur in the mythology but are not particularly noted there as having a taste for maidens. In the first edition of *The Hobbit* Gandalf says "Smaug could not creep into a hole

that size, not even when he was a young dragon, certainly not after devouring so many of the maidens of the valley" (p. 30) – this allusion to the traditional dragon was later changed to "certainly not after devouring so many of the dwarves and men of Dale." (p. 29). Gandalf himself says they are no longer in heroic times:

That would be no good, not without a mighty Warrior, even a Hero. I tried to find one; but warriors are busy fighting one another in distant lands, and in this neighbourhood heroes are scarce or simply not to be found. Swords in these parts are mostly blunt, and axes are used for trees and shields as cradles or dish-covers; and dragons are comfortably far off (and therefore legendary)."

With this he both alludes to the traditional idea of the hero killing the dragon and shows that he is not telling such a heroic saga – yet not far into the book the whole atmosphere begins to change. Tolkien notes this in his summary of *The Hobbit* for Milton Walman:

For in effect this is a study of a simple ordinary man, neither artistic nor noble and heroic... against a high setting – and in fact... the tone and style change with the *Hobbit's* development, passing from fairy-tale to the noble and high and relapsing with the return.

(*Letters*, p. 159)

The Trolls who turn to stone are part of the northern folk tradition and legends but the talking purse which like them speaks with a cockney accent is pure fairy tale as are the spells the dwarves put over the Trolls' pots of gold to protect them. The dancing and singing of the elves of Rivendell on midsummer eve probably rely as much on general fairy tradition as to the custom of the elves of the mythology. The song they sing to greet the travellers, which even Tolkien calls "pretty fair nonsense", seems to lack all inspiration, though perhaps no more than "Tinfang Warble". The episode with the goblins in the Misty Mountains recalls the goblins in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and it is interesting that in one letter Tolkien says that Victorian fairy-tales did not inspire him with the exception of those of George MacDonald. The ring which makes you invisible is a fairy-tale element, and no such object occurs in *The*

Silmarillion. There are also many talking creatures – eagles, ravens, the thrush, spiders, and – although they do not talk to others, there are animals who serve Beorn and communicate with him. Another such element is the enchanted river which gives drowsiness and forgetfulness.

I am now going to consider some of the names, motifs, and ideas which have crept into *The Hobbit* from Tolkien's mythology. John Rateliff has already pointed out that the picture of the Elvenking's gate owes much to the pictures and conception of Nargothrond, and that the picture of Mirkwood is adapted from one showing Beleg finding Gwindor in Taur-na-fuin. Indeed the very name *Mirkwood* is similar to *Taur-na-fuin*, meaning the 'Forest under Night'. There are other influences on the illustrations to *The Hobbit*. *Rivendell* has some similarities to *Tol Sirion*, especially in the bridge and its relationship to the buildings, though, of course Rivendell is not on an island. In the drawing of Lake Town the boats have swan-headed prows recalling the ships of the Teleri in the painting "Taniquetil". The picture of the Front Gate of the Lonely Mountain recalls "Glauring setting forth to seek Túrin". On Thrór's map Tolkien uses ordinary Anglo-Saxon runes for a modern English text. In "Conversation with Smaug" the large pot of gold in the foreground is inscribed in Fëanorian script "Gold th... Thráin accursed be the thief...".

One of the more direct references comes in Chapter 3 when the company meets Elrond:

The master of the house was an elf-friend – one of those people whose fathers come into the strange stories before the beginning of History, the wars of the evil goblins and the elves and the first men in the North. In those days of our tale there were still some people who had both elves and heroes of the North for ancestors and Elrond the master of the house was their chief.

He was as noble and as fair in face as an elf-lord, as strong as a warrior, as wise as a wizard, as venerable as a king of dwarves, and as kind as summer. He comes into many tales.

While the travellers are at Rivendell he identifies the swords they found in the Trolls' hoard:

These are not troll-make. They are very old swords, very old swords of the elves that are now called Gnomes. They were made in Gondolin for the Goblin-wars. They must have come from a dragon's hoard or goblin plunder, for dragons and goblins destroyed that city many ages ago. This, Thorin, the runes name Orcrist, the Goblin cleaver in the ancient tongue of Gondolin; it was a famous blade. This, Gandalf, was Glamdring, Foe-hammer that the kings of Gondolin once wore.

(p. 63)

This history is reiterated when the Goblins see Orcrist:

They knew the sword at once. It had killed hundreds of goblins in its time, when the fair elves of Gondolin hunted them in the hills or did battle before their walls. They had called it Orcrist, Goblin-cleaver, but the goblins called it simply Biter.

(p. 75)

Here we have direct references to the events of the mythology and especially the destruction of Gondolin. *Gnomes* is an early name for the Noldor. Orcrist and Glamdring had not previously appeared in the mythology, but they are good Sindarin names. Elrond makes his first appearance in The "Sketch of the Mythology" written c.1926-30, when he is already the son of Eärendel and Elwing, and defined as half-mortal and half-elfin, and it is said of him,

when later the Elves return to the West, bound by his mortal half he elects to stay on earth. Through him the blood of Húrin (his great uncle) and of the Elves is yet among Men, and is seen yet in valour and in beauty and in poetry.

(*The Shaping of Middle-earth*, p. 38).

This last seems close to the description of Elrond in *The Hobbit*. The meaning of this text is a little difficult, and implies that Elrond chose mortality, even if perhaps greatly extended, and life in Middle-earth; thus incorporating elements of both his eventual choices – immortality and Middle-earth for a time – and that of his brother Elros chose mortality with long life but in Númenor. The phrase in *The Hobbit* that Elrond was an *elf-friend* does suggest that he was not actually an elf. The "Quenta" of about 1930 states,

But of these only Elrond was now left, and [he] elected to remain, the half-elven being bound by his mortal blood in love to those of the younger race; and Elrond alone has the blood of the elder race and of the seed devine if Valinor come among mortal Men (for he was son of Elwing, daughter of Dior, son of Lúthien, child of Thingol and Melian; and Eärendil his sire was son of Idril Celebrindal, the fair maid of Gondolin.

This suggests that his descendents, at any rate, were mortal. I was for a time intrigued as to why Elrond, whose ancestry we know from *The Silmarillion*, made no comment that Glamdring had been the sword his grandfather, Turgon of Gondolin. One would have expected him to claim it as a family heirloom. I also wondered what the tales were in which he played a great part, since he is only mentioned in the early mythology and takes no direct actions, while his great deeds in the Second Age are as a leader against Sauron the Ringmaker which were only evolving in the late 1930's. The answer to these questions lies in the letter written by Tolkien to Christopher Bretherton in 1964. The Elrond of *The Hobbit* as originally conceived and the Elrond of earlier ages were not necessarily the same. Tolkien says about Elrond:

The passage in Ch. III relating him to the Half-elven of the mythology was a fortunate accident, due to the difficulty of constantly inventing good names for new characters. I gave him the name Elrond casually, but as this came from the mythology (Elros and Elrond the two sons of Eärendil) I made him half elven. Only in *The Lord [of the Rings]* was he identified with the son of Eärendel, and so the great-grandson of Lúthien and Beren...

I would point out that while obviously Tolkien suggests some considerable time has elapsed since the Fall of Gondolin, this could as easily be centuries and not millennia.

Another reference occurs early in the book when Bilbo says: "Not the Gandalf who was responsible for so many quiet lads and lasses going off into the Blue for mad adventures, anything from climbing trees to stowing away aboard the ships that sail to the Other Side?" This was amended in the third edition to "Not the Gandalf who was responsible for so many

quiet lads and lasses going off into the Blue for mad adventures? Anything from climbing trees to visiting Elves – or sailing in ships, sailing to other shores!” (p.19).

After *The Lord of the Rings* it was impossible to think of anyone casually sailing to the Other Side. The lines between mortal and immortal were clearly drawn. What was the position at the time *The Hobbit* was written? The “Sketch” is the closest in date. The Valar had already strung the magic isles filled with enchantment “across the confines of the Shadowy Seas, before the Lonely Isle is reached sailing West, to entrap any mariners and wind them in everlasting sleep and enchantment”. Eärendel did eventually reach Valinor, but there is no debate as to what nature he was, elfin or mortal. After the Last Battle many elves did return to Valinor, and others from time to time set sail, leaving the world ere they fade. The Gods judged that the earth is for Men, but there is no mention of an actual prohibition. The “Quenta” of 1930, which almost certainly postdates this early reference in *The Hobbit*, does have an obscure reference, soon removed, that those of the race of Hador and Beör could leave with the elves for the West. It may be this was a time when the prohibition of Valinor to mortals was conceived less strictly, so that it was possible to suggest hobbit-stowaways on elven ships.

Another reference which has crept in is that the elf-king’s wine came from the great gardens of Dorwinion; and this brought deep and

pleasant dreams to the chief guard and the butler, Galion, another Sindarin name. This wine already occurs in “The Lay of the Children of Húrin” – given to the child Túrin and his companions by Beleg, served in Thingol’s halls. In the re-written Lay we learn that it was made from berries of the burning South, brought North from Nogrod by the Dwarves.

On page 226² when Bilbo sees the hoard Tolkien says:

To say that Bilbo’s breath was taken away is no description at all. There are no words left to express his staggerment, since Men changed the language that they learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful.

The Hobbit, without being a runaway best-seller, was successful enough in 1937 for Allen & Unwin to ask for a sequel. Tolkien was unwilling. He would have preferred to get his mythology published, but, as he says, “I offered my publishers something good: a complete & heroic history of the Elves – and they clamour for more hobbits. Mr. Baggins had more sense, and properly went into retirement.” (Letter to Selby, Haggerty Catalogue p. 4) We certainly must be grateful that Allen & Unwin clamoured for more hobbits, for the result was *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien himself must eventually have felt differently, for with the success of *The Lord of the Rings* the public began to clamour for *The Silmarillion*, which was eventually published. Without *The Hobbit* it is likely the mythology would never have been published.

² 2nd edition, p. 227 3rd edition.