

# Publishing Tolkien

by Rayner Unwin

I am sometimes asked, most recently by *Mallorn's* editor, to write about publishing Tolkien. My first response, like that of Professor Joad, is to say 'it depends what you mean by publishing'. Some aspects of the publishing process are deeply influenced by the relationship between the author and various individuals in the organisation to which he has entrusted his work, especially his editor who, like a ship's officer of the watch, is the captain's representative on deck. But many other publishing functions are semi-mechanical as far as the author is concerned, and to that extent Tolkien publishing was very much the same as publishing for any other author. Rather than write a blow-by-blow account I think it might be better to highlight under the broad headings of normal publishing procedures some of the ways in which the Tolkien relationship was unusual.

## ACQUISITION AND CONTRACT

The story of how first *The Hobbit* and later *The Lord of the Rings* came to be published by Allen and Unwin is already well-known. But once his publisher had demonstrated commitment and reasonable efficiency Tolkien in turn demonstrated the old-fashioned virtue of loyalty. He once compared our relationship to that of Rohan and Gondor, and declared that for his part the Oath of Eorl would never be broken. Nor was it. At any time, but especially nowadays, this is unusual. One element that, I believe, added to our sense of partnership was the profit-sharing, as distinct from the normal royalty, agreement. This form was sometimes used when the publisher needed no persuasion about the merit of a book but was dubious about its marketability. It was an old-fashioned type of agreement even then, but personally I believe it has many virtues. No advance is paid; the publisher recovers the costs of production and promotion as a first charge against earnings; and thereafter the author and publisher share the results equally. If the book is a failure, the author gets nothing and the publisher is out of pocket. If the book is a success (as, eventually, was *The Lord of the Rings*), the author would get the overall equivalent of a generous royalty, though often earned in irregular lumps. Once the profit-sharing concept is agreed no haggling over contracts need take place. The difficulty in Tolkien's case was not getting an agreement signed but getting a date for delivery. He was reluctant to hand over a finished manuscript. Anyone remotely interested in Tolkien's writing knew about the existence of *The Silmarillion* for a decade or two before it was finally and posthumously brought into print. Even more extraordinary was the time taken to polish and perfect his translation of *Pearl*. When I was working at Blackwell's in 1943 Sir Basil Blackwell showed me galley-proofs he had set, but could not get Tolkien to pass for press. He never did. It was 1975 before it finally got published. All very frustrating for a publisher eager for new product, but nothing happened faster by fussing.

And Tolkien at least never indulged in the intolerable habit, for which Churchill was notorious, of re-writing the whole book several times in proof.

## PRODUCTION

One of the peculiarities of Tolkien hardbacks is their size. It is known as Medium 8vo, and it was chosen in order to accommodate more print on the page than was reasonable on the largest normal size for novels, Demy 8vo, but without scaring off fiction buyers by using Sm Roy 8vo which was then the conventional size for solid non-fiction. Tolkien took great interest in the physical appearance of his books, and his views were vehemently expressed. He had particularly strong feelings about display types. Fancy lettering, gothic, sans-serif or 'black-letter' (which he denied was anything of the sort) all met with total disapproval. Once, when challenged to say what he *did* like, he told us that the nearer to the lettering on Trajan's Column in Rome that we could get the happier he would be. And we tried to keep it like that thereafter. However the designers of paperback covers in particular do nowadays have a tendency to stray. The text, when eventually it was delivered, was of course inviolate. We learned early on (and Puffin to their cost learned for ever) that one tinkered with what appeared on the typewritten page at one's peril. Not that he was 100 accurate, but the sort of thing the average copy-editor might have been tempted to alter was usually precisely what he intended should remain. Even so plenty of mistakes crept into print, and some are being corrected still. And there were unexpected hazards with Tolkien's invented languages. Quoting back at us Frodo's quavering remark on first seeing the inscription on the Ring - 'I cannot read the fiery letters', Tolkien dryly remarked, 'Of course the poor chap couldn't; you've printed them upside down'. And years later he remarked with amusement that because no-one at Houghton Mifflin could read runes the covers announced that their books were published by George Allen and Unwin.

I think Production had the toughest time of any department, because the author had an acute visual sense and knew exactly what he wanted to achieve. Sometimes this was impossible. The moon-runes on Thrór's map, or the emblems on the Doors of Dúrin - which were wrought of *ithildin* that mirrors only starlight and moonlight - were, not surprisingly, beyond the technology of reproduction in print. Technology also bunkered the first single-volume paperback of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1968 which proved to be too thick for the existing binding machines, and caused us to have to drop the appendices. Tolkien was never unreasonable in the face of such obstacles, but he liked to be involved and hated any suspicion of being steam-rollered or bounced. Who can blame him?

As we know Tolkien was a very private person, and consequently that aspect of the publishing process that interests and attracts most successful authors was, for the most part, the area that Tolkien was happy to let his publisher get on with, and in which he expressed very little curiosity and held few strong opinions. Of course he was always delighted to be told about particular successes in selling his books, and he was not indifferent to the increase in his earnings. Even though in those days there was less of the *razmataz* that afflicts popular authorship now, he was a reluctant publicist. He especially hated the personalising aspects of publicity. During his lifetime he refused to let us use more personal detail than was contained in his entry in *Who's Who*, and he dodged or declined almost every chance of interview or appearance. There were a few exceptions, perhaps to oblige friends, but he usually regretted having weakened in his resolve. There were of course unwritten rules that we quickly learned to observe. Insofar as licensing abridgements, adaptations into other media, illustration and the like, which we were probably entitled to do under the contract, we always consulted Tolkien first and most often were turned down, especially if there was a whiff of cheapening the product. It was a balance that both sides happily accepted. Once the form of the book had been established the publisher could get on with the job of selling the product (but not the author) without the slightest interference. In return the publisher did not exploit fringe rights if the author was at all unhappy.

All this was made possible by something that hardly exists today - continuity. Just before I left Unwin Hyman a quite separate author, more in sorrow than in anger, pointed out that he had already had three editors looking after his book and it had not yet been published. I think he was right to complain. The larger the publisher becomes the less senior and more liable to disaffection its commissioning editors seem to become. I was fortunate to grow up in a world of comparatively small, owner-managed publishers, and if we got on with our authors they stuck with us. It was, I think, good luck for both of us that Tolkien and I hit it off together; but today I doubt if such a long and trusting relationship could occur. Perhaps for a decade or so, but eventually, as head of the business in today's commercial climate I would never have had enough time to spend on the detailed concerns of even the most prestigious author. Delegation in management terms is a virtue, but it spells doom for the association between author and publisher. An author needs one person with time and authority within the business to deal with his book as a unique product. The size of his publisher concerns him very little, though he might acknowledge that when buying print or selling product the big battalion has the greater clout. But if editorial continuity is lacking authors quickly lose heart, and will quickly shelter behind a surrogate editor, the literary agent. If big, plc publishers are going to survive they need to recognise and respect the one-to-one relationship between their authors and their editors. Small publishers have always known this, and that in essence is what publishing Tolkien has been about.



## REVIEW

Tolkien, John and Tolkien, Priscilla *The Tolkien Family Album* HarperCollins, 1992. £12.99

Review by John A. Ellison

The "life-in-photographs" has become quite a frequent form of tribute in recent years, providing a supplement to formal biography, if not an alternative to it. It can be particularly helpful and revealing in relation to writers or other creative artists, whose works take on added significance when accompanied by visible reminders of the atmosphere of the times through which they were created. So it is with this very attractively produced memoir. Collectors of "Tolkieniana", in other words the majority of us, will not find any substantial added information not already available to the reader of Carpenter's biography. They will encounter quite a number of interesting sidelights, however; we learn, for instance, that as one result of his visit to France as a young man, he was prone in later years to entertain his family and friends "with his expert mimicry of the accents of Paris errand-boys and their gutter talk". That certainly highlights his linguistic expertise, as it was employed through the medium of a language which *didn't* particularly appeal to him!

The photographs which intersperse the text, because of the accelerating pace of social change as it has occurred over the last half century, now serve to remind us of an age which seems to have become quite remote, even up to and including the Second World War. At the same time they emphasise the essential ordinariness of the life that Tolkien lived with his family, the same kind of life that was lived by many thousands of middle-class families in Britain at the same time. Ordinary, that is, until it was disrupted from the outside, as the group of pictures devoted to the First World War period strikingly confirms - notably a famous image, reproduced here, of the devastated landscape by Ypres. The collision between normal life's daily round and external changes and catastrophe provided the subject matter of Tolkien's life, as it did of his art. It must have been just the starkness of this contrast that gave him the impulse, after his return from the war, to pursue his imaginative concepts with such energy and persistence.