

Checking the Facts

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When reading the accumulated J.R.R. Tolkien commentary and scholarship, the reader assumes an authority or expert who knows the facts and is able to interpret them in new and revealing ways. This essay explores some examples of Tolkien scholars' relationship to facts, documenting problems with ignoring established biographical facts, overlooking a well-documented historical context, changing views without acknowledging or explaining this, and creative editing of quotations. The overall result of these errors appears to be a 'biographical legend'.

The first example of this problem is from Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Anderson's 2008 *Tolkien on Fairy-stories, Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes*. On March 8, 1939, Tolkien presented the lecture, "On Fairy-stories," when he was an academic whose private life was of little or no interest to his audience. He had no reason to be cautious about a passing self-revelation. At that time he wrote and later kept in his revised essay the comment:

A real taste for [fairy-stories] awoke after 'nursery' days, and after the years, few but long seeming, between learning to read and going to school. In that (I nearly wrote 'happy' or 'golden,' it was really a sad and troublous) time I liked many other things as well, or better: such as history, astronomy, botany, grammar, and etymology (*TOFS* 71).

Flieger and Anderson comment on this passage saying:

Tolkien describes this time rather vaguely as being "after the years between learning to read and going to school." The best likelihood would make it a reference to the years following his mother's death when he was twelve years old. He and his younger brother Hilary were left in the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, a priest from the Birmingham Oratory who had been their mother's counsellor and friend. Father Francis arranged for them to stay with their aunt Beatrice Suffield, who had a room to let in her boarding house in Birmingham. This would have been a sad and troublous time indeed for a grief-stricken, orphaned boy, and it is no wonder that he turned to fairy tales (108).

On the contrary, Tolkien does not describe this time "rather vaguely." The Carpenter biography specifically states that Tolkien began to read at four and he began school at the age of eight in 1900, i.e. the years at Sarehole (21, 24). According to Tolkien, this period of time was "the longest seeming and most formative part of my life" (*Bio* 24). Further, internal evidence in Manuscript B, which Flieger and Anderson reproduce, confirms that the time period was before the age of eight: "I thought early about these things (and was not exceptional in that) before I was eight (when

my childhood reading or hearing of fairy-stories ceased)" (234). This passage is completely at odds with Flieger and Anderson's conjecture that Tolkien was referring to time after his mother's death, i.e. at the age of 12, when "grief-stricken" he took refuge in fairy tales. Given that the biographical facts are easily available and should be familiar to Tolkien scholars, this rewriting of history cannot be called 'speculation'.

The reviewers of this book, perhaps impressed by the authors' reputations, are generally favorable. *Tolkien on Fairy-stories, Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes* received its first review in *Tolkien Studies* (2009) from Colin Manlove who found no faults in this book (241-248). In *Tolkien Studies*' (2011) "The Year's Work in Tolkien Studies," David Bratman reviews works from 2008. In his review of *Tolkien on Fairy-stories*, he states "each of the three texts is accompanied by textual annotations by the editors ... Some of the editorial points are awkwardly put, but others are trenchant and most are highly valuable" (245). Jason Fisher in *Mythlore* 27:1/2 Fall/Winter, 2008 notes defects that "are few and small" (179-184). These include mis-numbering pages and items missed in the bibliography as well as his suggestions for more references to Tolkien's other works. David Doughan in *Mallorn* 47, Spring 2009 finds only one fault, and that is a lack of the text of *Mythpoeia* (7-8). In the same issue, Alex Lewis also reviews the book and has no concerns (15-18).

Further, Raymond Edwards in his 2014 biography, *Tolkien*, cites Flieger and Anderson's revision of the facts as canonical, though he repeatedly cites Carpenter's biography elsewhere. This is what Dimitra Fimi, in *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History*, identifies as the construction of a 'biographical legend', as opposed to fidelity to the facts of biography (7). Edwards also accepts the assertion in John Garth's 2003 *Tolkien and the Great War, the Threshold of Middle-earth* that "You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play" is a "love poem to Edith," although Garth admits the "setting of the poem has nothing to do with the urban setting in which he and Edith had actually come to know each other" (72). Garth makes this conjecture without other discussion or corroboration. Edwards' interpretation is the children are now "obviously meant for Tolkien and Edith" (99).

Nancy Bunting in "1904: Tolkien Trauma, and Its Anniversaries" ["1904"] contends that the cottage during the "sad and troublous" time in Sarehole is a source of the poem's "Cottage" as are Tolkien and his younger brother Hilary as "a dark child and a fair" (72). In *Roverandom*, Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond note the similarities between the garden from Howard Pyle's 1895 *The Garden Behind the Moon, A Real Story of the Moon Angel*, a place where children go when they die, with the cottage on the dark side of

the moon in *Roverandom* and the dream land of “The Cottage of Lost Play” (R 99). Carpenter stresses Tolkien relied “almost exclusively upon *early* (italics in original) experience [...] to nourish his imagination,” and Hilary nearly drowned during the “sad and troublous” years at Sarehole (Bio 126; H. Tolkien, 6). Pyle’s story presented Tolkien with a moving consideration of the death of children. Consequently, Edith does not fit Pyle’s setting as Tolkien never knew her as a child nor do we know of any life-threatening experiences for her.

In that garden, Pyle’s children “never have trouble and worry; they never dispute nor quarrel; they never are sorry and never cry.” Tolkien appears to draw on this in his poem when fairies visit “lonely children and whisper to them at dusk in early bed by nightlight and candle-flame, or comfort those that weep” as the years at Sarehole were a time of likely physical abuse for Hilary (LT1 20, “1904” 70-73). Pyle’s narrator states the garden can be visited in dreams (xi).

Children commonly slept together at the turn of the twentieth century and in the poem, “you and I in Sleep went down/ to meet each other there” (LT1 22). Hilary had dark hair and Tolkien had fair hair which then became “tangled” because as Carpenter states Tolkien and his brother wore “long hair” (“1904” 72, Bio 21). The poem includes the pair walking on sand and gathering shells, and Tolkien and his brother had a seaside visit during the years in Sarehole (C&G 1.4). The “Cottage of Lost Play,” later “Little House of Play,” appears to be a combination of the place where they stayed during the seaside visit (“looked toward the sea” LT1 23), Pyle’s garden, and the cottage at Sarehole with its familiar flowers (LT1 23). “We wandered shyly hand in hand” (22) can also refer to Tolkien and his brother as this was unremarkable behavior among “nursery” age children and consistent with their close relationship as they had no other playmates (Bio 21; Bunting, “Finding Hilary Tolkien in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Part I,” 2 and Part II,” 4). “The shapes,” which are more clearly fairies in the final version, are clad in white gowns. This would be evocative of the Sarehole years as Carpenter states Tolkien and his brother wore “pinafores,” i.e. gowns, while living in Sarehole (Bio 21). Hilary Tolkien’s book has a picture of them dressed in fine white gowns consistent with Grotta-Kurska’s report that Mabel Tolkien dressed her children in the “finery of the day” (62; see also John and Priscilla Tolkien, *The Tolkien Family Album*, 21).

Tolkien first wrote this poem in April, 1915, a time when Hilary Tolkien would be shipping out to the front lines in France as he volunteered in the first wave of war time enthusiasm (LT1 19, Bio 72). He was a bugler and a stretcher bearer, and this last duty was likely to expose him repeatedly to enemy fire (Currie and Lewis, 106). In June, 1915 Tolkien joined the military, and he too was facing the uncertainty of surviving the war (Bio 77). It would make sense for Tolkien to reflect on their close relationship in light of the stark possibility that they might never see each other again or survive the war. They would be reunited at “The Cottage of Lost Play” where dead children go.

Edwards cites Christopher Tolkien’s “clear reference” to Francis Thompson’s poem *Daisy* (305). In this reference, C. Tolkien tentatively writes, “This [line 56 only out of 65 lines] seems to echo the lines of Francis Thompson’s poem *Daisy*:

Two children did we stray and talk
Wise, idle, childish things (LT1 21).

These lines do not “echo” any poetic device, e.g. rhyme, meter, or alliteration, between the two poems. The poems do have the same two words: “childish things.” The *Daisy* poem presents the flirtation of an adult heterosexual couple. The narrator is a man who feels the woman is a tease. Being childish is part of this couple’s flirting. In 1915 when Tolkien wrote “You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play,” his marriage was so important to him that “it was like death” when he separated from his wife to go to France in World War I (Garth 138). Given the depth of Tolkien’s feeling for Edith, he is not likely, in a “love poem” to his wife, to quote from a poem in which the woman easily and heedlessly leaves the man who feels jilted.

C. Tolkien then adds an atypical and rather cryptic or (Roland) Barthesian comment that he will not offer any analysis, but the reader may interpret this poem “however” [he/she wants] as the reader needs no assistance in “his perception of the personal and particular emotions in which all was still anchored” (LT1 24). Speculating that this is a “love poem” about Edith, portrays Tolkien being in bed with his wife, when they are children, and this is unlike any other material we have from Tolkien. His reticence about sexuality is well known, and this imagery has awkward implications.

Edwards is also willing to raise doubts about Tolkien’s explicit dating of *Leaf by Niggle* to 1938- 9, citing in his footnote: “Hammond and Scull, however, date it to April 1942 (on the basis of a postcard seen on eBay - see H&S 2, p. 495)” (184, 312). This contrasts to what Tolkien, who was very careful with what he wrote for publication, states in his introductory comment in *Tree and Leaf* that both *Leaf by Niggle* and “On Fairy-stories” “were written in the same period (1938-9), when *The Lord of the Rings* was beginning to unroll.” Tolkien reinforces this dating in his September, 1962 letter to his Aunt Jane Neave: it “was written (I think) just before the War began, though I first read it aloud to my friends early in 1940” (*Letters* 320). This is also consistent with Tolkien’s March, 1945 letter to Stanley Unwin that *Leaf by Niggle* was composed “more than two years ago,” and a more precise dating would not have been relevant to either Tolkien’s or Unwin’s concerns with this story. Scull and Hammond’s *Chronology* entry “?April, 1942” states “Tolkien writes the story *Leaf by Niggle*” with only a question mark and a reference to ‘note’ to alert the attentive reader to possible problems (1.253). One has to refer to the separate *Reader’s Guide* to find their citation of an April 21, 1943 postcard to the poet Alan Rook, in which Tolkien “hopes that Rook will one day (metaphorically) paint a ‘great picture’, and promises to send him a story relevant to ‘pictures’ that Tolkien ‘wrote this time last year’ (reproduced on eBay

online auctions, October 2001). This must surely refer to *Leaf by Niggle*, and therefore would date its writing to around April 1942” (2.495). Why “must” this refer to *Leaf by Niggle* when they present no reason or evidence to support this supposition? Why is it difficult to imagine Tolkien speaking metaphorically about his “picture” *The Lord of the Rings*? The *Chronology* documents that in the spring and summer of 1942 Tolkien was working of *The Lord of the Rings* and that time frame matches the reference in the Rook postcard. If a biographer wanted to report this allegation, would there not be an evaluation of the assertion? Edwards is willing to evaluate and give opinions on detailed information about C.S. Lewis’ relationships with Mrs. Moore and Joy Davidson, which details Tolkien did not know and which had no effect on his personal life, academic activities or writings, the purported focus of this book. However, when faced with evaluating conflicting claims about the chronology of Tolkien’s writings, Edwards suddenly seems agnostic and willing to muddy the waters with an unsupported claim. This repeats the type of situation that Garth creates with his assertion that “You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play” is a “love poem to Edith”.

Reviewers, including David Bratman in the 2015 *Tolkien Studies* (196), Nancy Martsch in the September, 2016 *Beyond Bree* (1-2), and John Rateliff’s letter in the October, 2016 *Beyond Bree* (10), generally praised this book. There were no reviews of Edwards’ *Tolkien in Mallorn* or *Amon Hen*. In *Mythlore* 128, Spring/Summer 2016, Cait Coker acknowledges Edward’s focus on Tolkien’s academic studies and “how they framed his work” (185). However, she ends her review with: “*Tolkien* is a bit of an odd book ... [g]iven the Tolkien Estate’s fractious protectionism of Tolkien’s work” and lack of access to his personal writings (186).

Having noticed errors when dealing with Tolkien’s biographical facts, the author wondered if there might be other examples.

Not only Flieger, but Anderson, has previously been negligent. In his article, “Obituary: Humphrey Carpenter (1946-2005),” Anderson quotes from “Learning about Ourselves: Biography as Autobiography.” Anderson’s paragraph, beginning with “This rather comic Oxford academic” and ending “I’ve therefore always been displeased with it ever since,” is misquoted (219-220). While, in fact, all the words and sentences are in the correct order, Anderson has combined two paragraphs. The original first paragraph ends at “I never resolved this properly,” and the second paragraph begins at “The first draft of that life” (“Learning about Ourselves” 270). As an experienced editor, Anderson, would know that combining two paragraphs makes a significant change in meaning and consequently places Carpenter’s statements in a different context and light than in the original source.¹

Running the two paragraphs together leads the reader to believe that the first draft, that was rejected by the Tolkien family, was the same as the first draft in which Carpenter treated Tolkien, the “rather comic Oxford academic – the stereotype of the absent-minded professor” in a “slightly slapstick” way. In the original article, the paragraph break

signals a new thought indicating that the “first draft” submitted to the Tolkien family was not the same as the “first draft” in which Carpenter struggled with learning how to write his first biography and which contained the initial “slapstick” treatment of Tolkien. Anderson’s editing implies that the Tolkien family rejected the initial biography because of Carpenter’s disrespectful presentation of Tolkien. In the obituary, Anderson writes that the Carpenter biography has “pride of place,” but that attitude is not evident in his use of its biographical information in *Tolkien on Fairy-stories* (223).

Anderson also writes that after Carpenter made the initial selection of letters for which Christopher Tolkien provided comments, this selection “proved too large from the publishing point of view, and cuts were made for reasons of length” (220). While there were cuts in the number of letters, there seems to be no evidence for a lack of appetite for publishing Tolkien materials.

Rayner Unwin, Tolkien’s publisher, in *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer* writes:

During Tolkien’s last years, in the early 1970s, when it was apparent that no major new work would be forthcoming, and yet the extraordinary interest that had grown up on both sides of the Atlantic during the past decade showed no signs of abating. I was hungry for new material that would help us continue to sell the old (245).

Consequently, Unwin was willing to explore “uncharted waters” by selling posters, calendars, and cards (246). He published *The Father Christmas Letters* in 1976 and Carpenter’s biography in the spring of 1977 (247-248). The demand for *The Silmarillion* was so great that pre-publication orders reached 375,000 books in 1977, “the largest subscription for any book that we had ever published” (248). He published *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* in 1979 and notes “the expanding Tolkien industry” throughout the eighties. The volume of demand for all things Tolkien could now absorbed the previously prohibitive production costs of volumes with colored illustration, like *The Father Christmas Letters* and *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*, without hurting the profit margin (C&G 1.404, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Artist and Illustrator* 163, *Letters* 16-17). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* was published in 1981, and Unwin still appeared “hungry” for material. Other twentieth-century authors have had multiple volumes of their letters published, e.g. Churchill and C.S. Lewis. Why was this not possible for Tolkien when there was such an interest and demand from the reading public?

In his Introduction to *Letters*, Carpenter states how he and Christopher Tolkien worked together. He adds, “We then found it necessary to reduce the text quite severely, for considerations of space” (3). While Carpenter discreetly says “We,” he had made the larger selection. Christopher Tolkien, the literary executor, had previously required cuts that “castrated” the biography (Carpenter, “Learning about Ourselves” 270). Who is likely to have demanded cuts?

Flieger presents another example in her “Tolkien,

Kalevala, and “The Story of Kullervo” published in *Tolkien Studies* 2010. She changed some of her comments in her 2012 essay “Tolkien, *Kalevala*, and ‘The Story of Kullervo’” in *Green Suns and Faërie, Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien*. In the 2010 commentary she states “Tolkien’s story follows its source closely; its main departure is in the matter of names” (212). In contrast, Flieger’s 2012 revision lists a number of the significant changes between Tolkien and the original *Kalevala*, and this is much more than “nomenclature” as previously claimed (192-198). While she corrected the error of her first version, she does not acknowledge that she has changed her view of this work. In the 2016 *The Story of Kullervo*, Flieger reprints the 2010 and 2012 essays, and she acknowledges revisions only to Tolkien’s manuscript (vii).

The reviewers again have no critical comments or analysis. Merlin DeTardo in “The Year’s Work in Tolkien Studies 2010,” found in *Tolkien Studies* 2013, reviews Flieger’s 2010 *Tolkien Studies* article, “‘The Story of Kullervo’ and Essays on *Kalevala*.” He finds no fault in this article. In the same *Tolkien Studies*, John Rateliff reviews *Green Suns and Faërie, Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien* (235-239). In his footnote 8, he notes some “minor mistakes” including substituting Kullervo for Túrin (239). Jason Fisher in “The Year’s Work in Tolkien Studies 2012,” found in *Tolkien Studies* 2015, writes the essay “Tolkien, *Kalevala*, and ‘The Story of Kullervo’” “expands on Flieger’s work with Tolkien’s Kullervo manuscript, published in volume 7 of *Tolkien Studies*” (211). He has no concerns about this article and does not comment on any changes. Janet Brennan Croft in *Mythlore* 115/116, Fall/Winter 2011 reviews *Tolkien Studies* 2012 including Flieger’s essay (188). She reports on the essay’s content with no other comments. A review of *Mallorn*, *Amon Hen* and *Mythlore* did not find any reviews of *Green Suns and Faërie*.

In both “‘The Story of Kullervo’ and Essays on *Kalevala*” and *The Story of Kullervo*, Flieger states, “The tradition that physical mistreatment of an infant could have psychological repercussions is an old one” (*Tolkien Studies* 241, *The Story of Kullervo* 53). This is not true as discussed in Bunting’s “1904” (70-73). In the nineteenth century physical abuse and beating of children by strangers, educators, and parents was common, acceptable, and unremarkable. These ‘thrashings’ or beatings should be seen in the context of the casual and frequent physical discipline of boys, particularly in public schools (Rose 179). The widely accepted belief was that this practice was not only for the child’s good, but also necessary for education (Rose 180). Biblical authority and custom, i.e. “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” supported the physical abuse and exploitation of children, and this was even applied to infants. In the late nineteenth century culture saw children as little adults and the “indifference to what we should now see as cruelty to children sprang from [...] ignorance of the consequences of maltreatment in youth on the physique and character of the grown man” (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 348, 349). This common view dates from at least the Middle Ages as presented in John Thrupp’s Victorian overview, *The Anglo-Saxon Home, A History of the Domestic Institutions and Customs of England from the*

Fifth to the Eleventh Century (1862) with its catalogue of child abuse, including a frank and well-documented discussion of infanticide and the regular beatings and floggings of boys in school. This view was still prevalent in Tolkien’s childhood, though infanticide was now illegal (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 622).

In complete opposition to the nineteenth-century’s accepted view, the *Kalevala*’s poet bluntly and repeatedly states that childhood abuse has a life-long impact, an unexpectedly modern attitude. Summing up Kullervo’s life, the poet of the *Kalevala*, Väinämöinen, states:

Children brought up crookedly,
Any infant cradled wrongly,
Never learns the way of things,
Never acquires a mind mature
However old he grows to be
Or however strong in body (Friberg, 1988: 287).

When Tolkien was growing up in late nineteenth-century, Victorian culture, he would not have heard any such condemnation of childhood abuse. This poem would have been a completely new and unique presentation of this idea for Tolkien and his contemporaries.²

In Flieger’s 2005 *Interrupted Music*, she acknowledges the reality of the nineteenth century’s exploitation of children in “sweatshops, child labor, and child prostitution” (20). Violence and abuse created and maintained these actualities which are all irrelevant to Tolkien. She does not name the underlying problem.

In his chapter, “Why Source Criticism?” in Jason Fisher’s *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources* (2011), Tom Shippey advocates an understanding of the “milieu” or context within which Tolkien lived and wrote (9). This is what Dimitra Fimi in *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (2009) did. Many others have worked to accurately fill in the historical context, e.g. Michael Potts’ “‘Evening Lands’: Spenglerian Tropes in *Lord of the Rings*” (*Tolkien Studies* 2016). However, Flieger ignores and/or misrepresents Tolkien’s historical context.

Flieger and Anderson’s *Tolkien on Fairy-stories* came out in 2008, and in ten years, no one has commented in print on an obvious error. I am not aware of any place that Hammond and Scull, who scrutinize biographical citations and maintain a commentary on their website documenting biographical information, comment on Flieger and Anderson’s error in *Tolkien on Fairy-stories, Expanded*. A factual, biographical error seems at least as significant as mis-numbering pages and items missed in the bibliography. Further, this erroneous revision has now been incorporated as fact in Edward’s 2014 biography.

Humphrey Carpenter, who had unlimited access to all of Tolkien’s papers, dairies, and letters, was required by J.R.R. Tolkien’s literary executor and editor, his son, Christopher Tolkien, to rewrite his original draft. Rayner Unwin’s *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer* independently confirms a major revision to the original biography (249). Carpenter

states he “castrated” his original draft of the Tolkien biography and “cut out everything which was likely to be contentious” (“Learning about Ourselves” 270). Carpenter’s use of the word “castrated” indicates that what was left out was important and vital, if not essential. Whatever was left would be misleading due to an incomplete context. This is how biography becomes ‘biographical legend’. On the last page of the official biography, Carpenter states, “His [Tolkien’s] real biography is *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*; for the truth about him lies within their pages,” and this would be true for the Kullervo/Túrin story (*Bio* 260, “1904” 68-70).³ Flieger, Anderson, and Edwards continue the Tolkien tradition of ‘biographical legend’.

Notes

1. As one of the editors of the 2005 *Tolkien Studies* Anderson’s responsibility would be likely to include proofing his own article. Not only is *Tolkien Studies* a professional journal with a very high level of review as it caters to a readership of English majors equipped to nitpick every page, paragraph, and period, but the Carpenter obituary was sure to draw the interest of most, if not all, of the readers. If Anderson had originally separated the two paragraphs as they appear in the source, the lack of a break and/or extra white space would have been hard to miss. I am not aware of any later statement of errata in *Tolkien Studies* concerning this inaccuracy.
 2. Elaborating on the long-term effects of child abuse, the perceptive and truthful poet of the Kalevala adds a second family. But even having a ‘second chance’ of finding oneself in a new family and having the hope of belonging again cannot ‘fix’ or ‘cure’ the effect of child abuse. This is opposed to Flieger’s view that the family is merely there to provide a sister whom Kullervo has not seen for the act of incest (*Tolkien Studies* 193).
 3. Tolkien began rewriting the Kullervo story in 1914 and his investment in elaborating this tale through numerous forms and revisions continued through the late 1950s. Christopher Tolkien notes the centrality, importance, and complexity of this story sets it apart (C&G2 1056-1062). Bunting contends Tolkien used his brother Hilary as the starting point for stories and characters including Túrin, Parish in “Leaf by Niggle,” and Pippin and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* (Bunting “1904” ; Bunting, “Finding Hilary Tolkien in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Parts I and II”) BIBLIOGRAPHY Anderson, Douglas A. “Obituary: Humphrey Carpenter (1946-2005).” *Tolkien Studies*, Volume II. Eds. Douglas A. Anderson, Michael D.C. Drout, and Verlyn Flieger. Morgantown, W.V.: W.V. University Press, 2005. 217-224.
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