

"LORD OF THE ISLES"  
No, sorry MR Giddings,  
I mean "RINGS" by  
MARGARET ASKEW

**VERY WRITER'S** WORK IS TO A GREAT extent derivative and originality lies not in the near-impossible invention of a never-before-told plot, but in making an individual arrangement of long-known and studied myths, legends, stories, influences, history, facts and fiction. Since the first publication of *The Lord of the Rings* there has been an ever-increasing flow of scholarly studies of the influences and sources from which Professor Tolkien derived his ideas and narratives, some vital to a deeper understanding of his created world, some considerably less apt. Scholars, in addition to examining the essential sources of Celtic, Norse and Teutonic legend have studied the Kalevala collection of Finnish mythology, the Mabinogion, the Bible. Tolkien himself examined and lectured on fairy stories. Randel Helms has studied *The Hobbit* from the Freudian point of view, provocative of nervous laughter rather than serious acceptance. Elizabeth Holland has related Middle-earth to Asia Minor and the Shire to *The Wind in the Willows*. Robert Giddings has allied Lothlorien to influences from James Hilton (*Lost Horizon*) and Rider Haggard (*Allan Quartermain*). One source of influence on Tolkien and all his work from *The Hobbit* to *The Silmarillion* remains unexamined and this is, of course, the influence in legend and history of the Great Western Railway.

It is an influence which is easy enough to trace although Tolkien did not often acknowledge it. The reasons for his failure to recognise readily this influence are easily susceptible of discovery; he would be unlikely to acknowledge that a non-literary, non-mythic or non-religio-philosophical factor could influence him as much as an academic course with which he would be consciously familiar. In his later years it seemed that he came to dislike the mechanical inventions and the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for their capacity for destruction and

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communicate with others or keep a land under surveillance (the palantiri, the mirror of Galadriel), and into electronics and nuclear physics to invent 'jewel' containers which hold and transmit power and light (the silmarils, the phial of Galadriel) and security locks which open to a special key or a voice-pattern (Erebor, Moria). He felt the need to invent a new metallic element, mithril, which would be all that the civil and mechanical engineer could desire as well as all that a jeweller could want: light, malleable, non-rusting and 'harder than tempered steel'. Consciously he dismissed industrial technology as 'iron wheels [which] revolved . . . endlessly, and hammers [which] thudded', subconsciously it was part of him and he could not manage without it.

A young man brought up near Birmingham in the early twentieth century and later resident in Oxford could no more have escaped the actuality, myth, memory and history of the Great Western Railway than the Somme valley could have avoided being fought over in July 1916. Actual and legendary memory was still strong in both areas of the work and personalities involved in the building of 'God's Wonderful Railway'; Birmingham was the centre of a controversy in 1845 over whether to admit the Great Western's broad-gauge to the city, while Oxford had been reached by the seven-foot Great Western gauge in a connection from Didcot in 1844. Attempts to connect the two brought about the 'Gauge War' of 1845-46, in which the merits of the seven-foot GWR gauge were tested by practical demonstration, argument, discussion, physical threats and Acts of Parliament, against those of the 4 foot 8½ inch gauge in use elsewhere in the country - indeed overtones of this primal, stupendous row over how the railway system of this country was to be built may even have provided him with source material for the early, originating quarrels between Valar and differences between elves at the opening of *The Silmarillion*. The Gauge War resulted in a Great Western connection to Birmingham being achieved in 1848 after three years of noisy verbal war. The reverberations rumbled on into local legend well into Tolkien's time, taking with it the Great Western names, attitudes and traditions.

It was undoubtedly from the GWR that Tolkien derived his 'westward' thinking. The Great Western Railway easily transmutes into the 'Great West Road' through Middle-earth: Victorian engineers always referred to their metal permanent ways as 'roads'. Great Western's 'tween-wars slogan of 'Go Great Western' and advertisements for the Cornish Riviera Express and other far-western travelling trains to the idyllic retirement counties of Dorset, Devon and Cornwall served to encourage his views of a desirable and legendary far country in the west to

ecological harm, and would be unlikely easily to admit that they had ever held a fascination for him. He had come so much to prefer the idea of a green agrarian country through which a galloping horse provided the fastest transport which it was proper for a man to have and in which non-human powers - wizard's magic, elvish immortality and deep consciousness, entish influences over land and trees, and the spells and terrors of Sauron, the Nazgûl, the Balrog - replaced technology. For Tolkien, iron became the symbol of oppression (Morgoth's iron crown, the iron chains by the paths at Isengard), but if the metal on which and of which the nineteenth century railways were built had not bulked large in his mind he would not have mentioned it so frequently.

Yet he could not entirely suppress from his work references to technology in general and even railways in particular. The most obvious is a spectacularly anachronistic comparison which one would have expected authors or proof-readers to alter, his simile likening the effect of one of Gandalf's fireworks to 'an express train' (*FoTR* ch.1). With no hobbitish or elvish or even orcish railways to speed up transport in Middle-earth, this was a misplaced reference which can only be explained by subconscious stimulation from an old memory that the Great Western was the first railway company to run an express train service. Professor Tolkien ventures into the world of telecommunications to invent two-way television transmitters by which men could

which travellers could make their last journey.

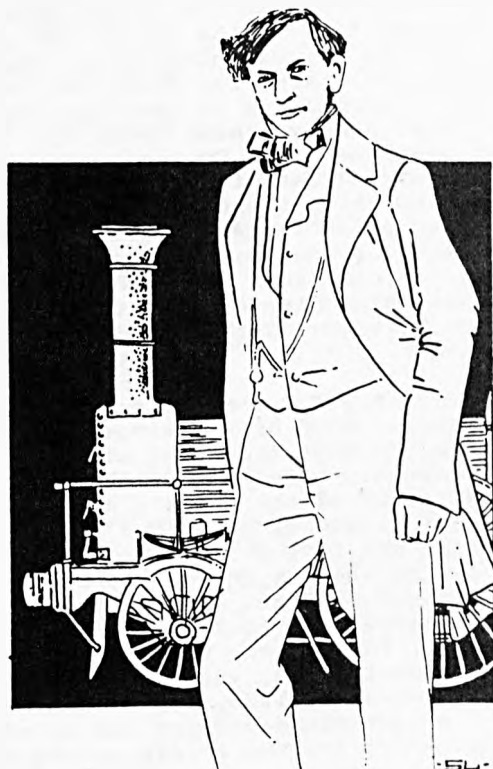
From the earliest days the Great Western itself had had this westward-seeking attitude, for even before the line from Paddington to Bristol had been completed the Great Western's engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, was thinking in terms of extending it from Bristol to New York by a transatlantic steamship to be named 'Great Western' and to be run by the Great Western Steamship Company, plying from Bristol to New York. The ship made her first transatlantic crossing in 1837 in fifteen days, and six years later the company's most successful ship, the SS Great Britain, also designed by Brunel, was launched. The requirement that to reach his Avalon-equivalent Undying Lands it was necessary to cross sea as well as land was established in Tolkien's mind by this tradition, as was the westward urge which he felt but did not personally yield to, though he transmitted it to his elves and some of his other creations. Galadriel, Elrond and the Númenórean-descended men of Gondor look to the west constantly and dream of westward ship journeys to an ultimate home; the grey havens have their equivalent in Bristol, Plymouth and Liverpool.

There are few more Tolkienish-sounding names than that of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Great Western's first engineer and impressive driving force, and he himself seems a Tolkien creation: hobbitish in appearance, wizardlike in creative powers, elvish in his love of music and language, and Tolkien would have seen him as orkish in his fascination with iron, machinery, speed and massive constructions. Tolkien borrowed Brunel's Norman-French Christian name for the unimportant seventh son of the Old Took, 'Isembard Took', making a significant one-letter change in the spelling as if to deny any influence from a distrustworthy engineer and also to dampen a little of the fire of the original name<sup>1</sup>. 'Kingdom' is an idea and influence pervading all of Tolkien's work throughout; the existence of ancient kingdoms and the desire to re-establish them in their old glory prevails throughout *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* is full of the notion of kingship amongst Valar, elves and men. The name 'Brunel' has the sound of the word 'rune', the written method of communication which Tolkien gave to the free peoples of the world.

(1) I am grateful for a reminder from Mrs. Jessica Yates that 'Isembard' was originally chosen as the name for the Old Took. The change of name of this patriarchal character to 'Gerontius' is symbolic of Tolkien's wariness of showing his undoubted fascination with Great Western early history and its multicompetent genius, Brunel.

Brunel is a Fëanorian figure in that he gave himself entirely to his work, allowing it to dominate him entirely even to the point of his destruction and early death, but also Celebrimborian in that his created gifts to the world were good in themselves, like the elven rings.

The name of 'Isambard' has a greater significance in *The Lord of the Rings*, in that it stands for 'Isengard', that ring and tower made by 'the craft of men', once full of fruitful trees (Brunel loved trees and made plans for rowan-trees to be planted in profusion on an estate he hoped to buy) but later chained and pillared with iron and copper (symbolic of Brunel's domination of and by his engineering career), where thousands dwelt (the navvies who built the railways and other engineering works), bored and delved, with shafts driven deep, ground trembling, giant furnaces, smithies, iron wheels revolving, hammers thudding, with plumes of vapour steaming at night, lit from beneath. In this description of Isengard Tolkien has given as good a picture as one is likely to encounter of the work of building a Victorian railway with its cuttings and embankments, and especially the Box Tunnel, two miles long, which consumed a ton of gunpowder and a ton of candles a week and which cost the lives of 100 men before it was completed. When the tunnel was finished and found to be true throughout, Brunel's gift to the works foreman was, Tolkienishly enough, his signet ring taken from his own hand. Brunel also built towers



(Orthanc - the cunning mind) for suspension bridges (slung by heavy chains) and for the South Devon Atmospheric Railway, and he even wore his own symbolic tower, his famous top-hat, usually stuffed with plans and high in the crown for safety in an engineering yard, the Victorian equivalent of the safety helmet.

'Wootton Major', the village where 'Smith' lived and was befriended by the master-cook, had its ancestry in Wootton Bassett near the Box Tunnel, and the tunnel itself, not to mention the earlier Brunel tunnel under the Thames, may well have been the source for the dark stories of the cave under the Misty Mountains in which Bilbo is lost, the Pass of the Spider, and the Dwarrowdelf, the Mines of Moria. The section of the Great Western line built through the Vale of White Horse, past the White Horse of Uffington, gave Tolkien the originals for his Vale of Rohan and even for Asfaloth and Shadowfax. Paddington with its vast heroic Gothic-style roof-span of Brunel's own design, seen by Tolkien every time he travelled from Oxford to London and back by train, may have forefathered the halls of Theoden and Denethor, and the wooden-hammer-beamed roof of Bristol Temple Meads station has its Tolkien-child in the wooden-pillared hall of Beorn. And, of course, there is a long and ultimate railway journey in one of the stories - "Leaf by Niggle".

Varda, or Elbereth, the star-kindler, early found a place in Tolkien's legends and all his books are full of most honourable references to the stars, especially as seen through the elves. The Great Western Railway had its own reason to honour the stars, for their earliest successful locomotive in 1838 was 'North Star', designed by Daniel Gooch for Robert Stephenson and Co., and the first of a notable series of locomotives named after stars which Stephenson and his company supplied to GWR. Later classes of locomotives used by the Great Western after the broad-gauge had been destroyed had names which also exerted their influences on Tolkien: 'Cities', 'Castles' and 'Kings'.

The source for the title itself of the trilogy, 'Lord of the Rings' must have been the most famous of all the Great Western's nineteenth-century locomotives, 'Lord of the Isles', a 4-2-2 eight-foot single of beautiful and powerful design and fast uncluttered lines exhibited by the company at the Great Exhibition of 1851 and kept to the end of broad-gauge days to haul the directors' train. Tolkien may well have remembered the controversy which surrounded its breaking-up in 1906, may even have taken a steam-engine-devoted son to see its eight-foot driving wheels preserved at Swindon, and in early days might have

seen its image on Great Western uniform cap buttons. 'Lord of the Isles' was more than a locomotive, it was a symbol of power and almost a mystic fane, like a great ring.

'Lord of the Isles' was perhaps the finest locomotive to be designed by Daniel Gooch, the Great Western's first locomotive superintendent and later chairman of the line. This plain and official description gives no true image of the rare individual who was almost certainly the direct source for one of Tolkien's most mysterious, heroic, constant and influential characters, Círdan the Shipwright. Even the names relate - Gooch after the award of his baronetcy in 1866 was frequently known as 'Sir Dan'el' or 'Sir Dan', which with a loss of sibilliance falls easily into the Sindarin name 'Círdan', ship-maker.

Círdan the Shipwright, 'Mighty among the wise' is a character almost constantly in the background, building ships at the Grey Havens to serve the elves who sail away from Middle-earth to leave exile and return to the west, but his influence is felt throughout *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* from first age to the beginning of the fourth. 'Sir Dan' was also a background character in that he disliked publicity, but he was equally possessed of great influence both in the Great Western Railway and beyond. A steam-locomotive genius, he was the GWR's locomotive superintendent and designer from the age of twenty, and he built the most powerful locomotives in the world at the time, and himself drove them faster than any man on earth had travelled until then, at speeds of 60 and 70 miles per hour. Of Círdan it was said 'Very tall he was . . . his eyes were keen as stars', and Sir Daniel was described as a 'lean, silent man with wide-set blue eyes'. Círdan resisted Féanor's revolt, was a friend of Elwë, aided Gandalf in the war against Sauron, and was a member of the White Council. Daniel Gooch also moved quietly in the company of the mighty, owning the manor in which Windsor Castle was a subsidiary holding, being acquainted with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and a friend of the Prince of Wales and of Disraeli, a Masonic grand master, a magistrate and a member of Parliament.

Gooch was also a shipwright in that he was Brunel's deputy from 1856 as engineer to the Great Eastern, that vast steamship fifty years ahead of its time which Brunel designed and the building and launching of which killed him. In Victorian terms it was comparable with Vingilot, the great ship which Círdan built for Eärendil the Mariner. Gooch was involved with his beloved Great Iron Ship for the rest of his life, succeeding Brunel as engineer and later owning the

ship and sailing it for three historic cable-laying voyages to his own Undying Land, a bay in Newfoundland appropriately named Heart's Content Bay. Círdan wore an elven-ring, the red-stoned Narya the Great, the ring of fire, which he gave to Gandalf for the wizard to use in his resistance to Sauron's forces. Sir Daniel, as mystic and elvish as his Tolkien-counterpart, was also the wearer of a strange ring in which he had set a stone dredged from the Atlantic ocean bed two miles deep, a gift from Ulmo. Like Tolkien's elves, Daniel Gooch was a non-sleeper while working, apparently having a limitless capacity to stay awake, also a visionary of far-western countries which he saw in fogbanks and icebergs out in the far Atlantic, a dreamer of prophetic dreams and a person whose name was a contemporary byword for loyalty in friendship. His writ ran through every inch of Great Western mileage until he departed for the Halls of Mandos in 1889, and his memory would still be strong in the districts in which Tolkien lived the first part of his life. The Great Western's man and Victorian broad-gauge died out but the stories remained, to become legend and to be woven into Professor Tolkien's created Middle-earth a century later.

*Author's note:* This article in its original form appeared in *Spell 10*, published by the Society of the Ring, Folkestone, in April 1982. A good many readers then showed a gratifying amount of interest, and I was grateful for a kindly message of interest from Mr. Robert Giddings. A more speculative suggestion came from the well-known authority on early railways Professor Heinrich Bahnhofer, who pointed out that the engineer Richard Trevithick, who designed the first working rail locomotive, was without doubt the original behind the character Fëanor - Trevethick's nickname, the 'Cornish Giant', his far-western connections, his early enormous success, the failure of his journey to South America and his death in poor circumstances, forgotten while others continued his work, all indicate Fëanorian characteristics. I am less convinced, however, by the contention of Col. Railtie J. Ironhorse III of Richmond, Virginia, that George Stephenson must have been the basis for a petty-dwarf (see *Silmarillion*) because he aided mining by designing an effective miners' safety lamp.

## ONDOMEIL

*Damask-mantled, moth-winged lover,  
Light as cobweb, soft as feather;  
White as swan-wing, stars above her,  
Evening-shadow, wild as weather,*

*Mist and moonlight round her finger,  
Silk and stardust, rosan-slender;  
Clear as crystal, twilight-singer,  
Summer-kissing, deep and tender.*

*Petalled night-star, silver-shining,  
Soft as mothlight, moon-glow-weaving,  
Lithe as lark-song, sorrows-twining,  
Hope-beloved, ever-grieving?*

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MICHAEL BURGESS