

This is an un-edited eye-witness account of the pleasant times after the A.G.M. and Dinner, as seen by Chas. E. Noad. It rambles somewhat, but so did the evening, which was spent chatting with our guests, in a very friendly, informal and convivial manner.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY

Ivanhoe Hotel, Feb. 16th, 1974

In a conversation with Pauline Baynes, she said that I had been right about her picture of Gollum in her Map of Middle-earth: she had since re-read "The Lord of the Rings".

Mr. Rayner Unwin, head of George Allen and Unwin Ltd., addressed the meeting as follows:

He was somewhat amazed to find that his relationship with Professor Tolkien's works extended back for nearly forty years. He had brought with him a number of copies of parts of letters from Tolkien, and transcripts of tape-recorded interviews with him, which he would use to counteract his own pedestrian prose. Firstly, he said a few words about Tolkien himself, who had now "departed for the Grey Havens". He said that if he described Tolkien as having silvery hair, and being of middle height, and so on, that would not really tell us much. Tolkien lived very simply, his furniture was unmemorable, and his rooms never seemed very tidy. It never occurred to him to change his way of life when he eventually became well-known, not even when people trampled on his rose garden in order to take photographs of him at breakfast through his front window.

He read out part of a self-descriptive letter of Tolkien's, beginning, "I am a hobbit in all but size ... "

Mr. Unwin then moved on to the story of the publication of "The Hobbit". The unsung hero of this episode was one Susan Dagnall who, when she was a student of Tolkien's at Oxford, had read "The Hobbit" in manuscript. After Oxford, she joined Allen and Unwin in their children's books section; she recommended that they publish the story, Tolkien then looking around for a publisher for it. When they received the typescript, Sir Stanley Unwin, the head of the firm, gave it to his son Rayner to test read. It was his belief that children were the best judges of children's books. Rayner had been asked to test read before, at a fee of a shilling per book; a shilling was more than what he got for pocket-money in those days. He had now seen, to his dismay, that his handwritten report had lately been reprinted, with all his spelling mistakes, which were not very good even for a child of his age. Not that Tolkien himself always spelt correctly: in his books he spelt "dwarfs" and suchlike in his own manner. There was the story of the schoolboy who had spelt "dwarves" in the way that Tolkien does in "The Hobbit", and was marked down for it by his teacher;

however, when he showed the book to his teacher, he was marked up again. On being told about this, Tolkien said that that had been "very big" on the part of the teacher. He then went on to say something about one of his own teachers, with his two teaching rules ((I forget what they were.)), and the subsequent necessity of very great care on the part of the pupils. This mode of spelling of Tolkien's had, Mr. Unwin continued, led to a certain difference of opinion when "The Hobbit" was published as a paperback by Puffin Books. Their proofreader, a very conscientious man, "corrected" all of Tolkien's spellings. When Tolkien objected, the proofreader cited the Oxford English Dictionary in support. Tolkien responded, "I wrote the Oxford English Dictionary!" "The Hobbit" was not reprinted by Puffin. As it was, Mr. Unwin felt that the shilling he had been paid must have been the best invested shilling ever made in publishing.

Rayner Unwin first met Tolkien as an undergraduate at Oxford sometime during the war. He found Tolkien to be a model of courtesy and kindness. Tolkien gave him chunks of manuscript to read; he found that they were sections of a much larger story; he would come in in the middle of the action, and leave off before it had ended. He thought that it seemed quite good at any rate, and made the right sort of noises when he returned the manuscripts to Tolkien.

Tolkien was a brilliant talker, but it was very difficult trying to keep up with him, especially as he had the habit of laughing at his own punch-lines, preventing them from being said; all you could do was to keep smiling, and look as if you understood.

Initially, Allen & Unwin turned down "Lord of the Rings". It was sent to an outside reader, a man who had himself written some quite good children's books; he, however, couldn't make out what it was meant to be. It wasn't exactly fiction; it was hardly a children's book. He described it as "too Celtic"; the book was rejected and Tolkien put it away in his bottom drawer. When Rayner Unwin rejoined Allen & Unwin after his naval service, he decided to look into the matter of Tolkien's new book for himself. He decided that it was very good, but was, however, very long. He thought that it was a work of genius but that, if they published it, they would lose £1,000. Fiction books were mainly bought by circulating libraries, whose upper price-limit was £1 per book. One volume of "The Lord of the Rings" would cost a guinea. Rayner wrote of this to Sir Stanley Unwin, who was then in Japan. He got a very good letter from Sir Stanley, who said, "If you feel sure that it is a work of genius, then spend £1000 on it." As an economic safeguard, it was decided to split it into three separate volumes, to be published one after the other. It was never a trilogy, but rather one long story which happened to be printed in three books. Tolkien wrote it in six books originally. New names had to be found for the three books: "The Fellowship of the Ring" and "The Return of the King" came easily enough, but the second volume, consisting of the completely unrelated Books III and IV posed a problem; one which was neatly resolved in "The Two Towers".

Because it was felt that sales of serial books declined as they were successively published, 3,500 of Vol. I, 3,250 of Vol. II, and 3,000 only of Vol. III were initially printed. Houghton Mifflin in America were brought in to help sell some of these copies in that country. "The Lord of the Rings" was not intended to have a sequel; Tolkien felt that no real story ever has an ending. Mr. Unwin said that we knew the rest of its publishing history ourselves. He went on to say that there should be some further publication of Tolkien's works in the near future: near the end of the year, we should see "Bilbo's Last Lay", a poem written by Bilbo in old age, which was indeed premonitory of Tolkien's own death. Pauline Baynes would do the illustrations. Spring of next year will herald Tolkien's own translations of "The Pearl", "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", and "Sir Orfeo", all in one volume. ((Some remarks were made at this point about how and when Tolkien did the translation of "The Pearl" (during the War?), but I can't remember them exactly.)) Mr. Unwin thought that they were the best ever translations of these works; even their original metres had been preserved. To follow these mediaeval translations, which were left nearly ready for publication, there would sometime be ((I'm not sure when he said)) a volume of mediaeval imitations that would include such things as "The Homecoming of Beorthnoth Beorthelm's Son."

Mr. Unwin then came to "The Silmarillion" which we had all been waiting to hear about. The day before, in fact, he and Mr. Olney ((of Houghton Mifflin)) had gone up to see "The Silmarillion". It is in the hands of Tolkien's literary executor, his son Professor Christopher Tolkien of Oxford University, where he teaches Anglo-Saxon. His house was full of socks, umbrellas, pipes, and box files. He had also set up his garage as a study. The manuscripts of "The Silmarillion" are all there in box-files; together in a row, they are about as long as this table ((i.e. about 8 ft.))

Mr. Unwin described the state of the book as "inchoate", but far from completely disorganised. It is all there, and is being assembled and collated by Christopher Tolkien. When all that has been done, the "literary" version of the book should be capable of being put into a volume the size of just one of those of "The Lord of the Rings". "The Silmarillion" forms a homogeneous whole, though. Christopher Tolkien is drawing a map in his garage of the country to the west of the Ered Luin, where most of the book's action takes place. You must have a map to set everything, just as Tolkien himself did in "The Lord of the Rings". Tolkien kept on making changes to "The Silmarillion" over the years. The High Elves become increasingly "dornish" in character in the later revisions. Mr. Unwin felt that Tolkien's creative powers in his seventies were not so great as those in his sixties, those in his sixties not so great as those in his fifties, and so on. Since Tolkien's last revisions of "The Silmarillion" were not complete, the "last-but-one" version will most likely be published. Maybe, when it is finished, "The Lord of the Rings" will have to be

revised yet again, in the light of the contents! Conceivably, there might one day be a variorum "Silmarillion", but that must lie far in the future. Certainly, with all the work that needs to be done on it, it will not be quickly published. Mr. Unwin thanked the Tolkien Society for inviting him, and sat down to applause. ((In the early part of his talk, he mentioned the fact that Tolkien always liked to work in the converted garage of whatever house he was living in, even when it had a proper study.))

Next to speak was Mr. Austin Olney of Houghton Mifflin, Tolkien's American publishers. He said that though they liked to publish good books, they had to publish books that would sell. It was this tension that affected their selection of "The Lord of the Rings" in the first place. He read out the final sections of the reports of their own reader, (who was then, and is now, a grey-haired young lady ((?)).) of "The Lord of the Rings" when they were considering publishing it, and her general opinion was that, though the book might not sell well, it was magnificent and should be published. The gaps between the publication of the separate volumes were reminiscent of the old movie serials where Pearl White was left tied to the railway line in the path of the oncoming express train at the end of the episode!

Sheets for 1500 copies of the first volume were imported to the U. S. A.. At first, the book did not sell too well, confirming their worst fears; they lost some, though not too much, money on it. And then, about fifteen years afterwards, there was the "explosion", and "The Lord of the Rings" became the best-selling book of that type, in paperback, ever. Then there was the matter of the controversy with Ace Books ((hisses and boos from the audience)): Mr. Olney thought it very gratifying that it was purely in the face of moral pressure that Ace Books were made to retreat step by step on this matter. Mr. Olney sat down to applause.

In an informal talk afterwards, Mr. Unwin made a number of points, as follows:

Sauron is indeed a Vala, a fallen angel, subordinate to Morgoth; his name changes during the course of the story.

He had read some parts of "The Silmarillion", but not all of it.

"The Silmarillion" would be published first outside Britain "over my dead body."

The trouble with saying anything about the cosmogony of Middle-earth was that Tolkien couldn't make up his mind about it, especially regarding whether it was round or flat. He changed it quite recently, but this would have meant rewriting much of the book, a quite impossible task.

In its later revisions, "The Silmarillion" became overlaid with a great deal of theological material, wherein Tolkien expressed his views on a number of matters, e.g. divorce, thus getting away from the story.

The Creation story is beautifully written.

The manuscript of "Mr. Bliss" was mentioned; it has coloured illustrations by Tolkien.

The first edition of "The Lord of the Rings" could still be legally printed in

America; it was the changes to the text of this edition that were now copyright.

The current paperback edition of "The Lord of the Rings" could not be made any larger, that is, with the appendices, simply because of the physical limitations of the machinery involved. The complete three-volume paperback edition would have the same format and size of the current paperback "Hobbit", or would be the next size up.

"The Silmarillion" covered not just the First Age of Middle-earth, but the Second Age as well.

"The Silmarillion" was written in a very "high" style, of which "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen" is an example. There is no comic relief in the form of hobbits; nor are there any ents, or Tom Bombadil.

The endpaper map of Middle-earth was redrawn by Christopher Tolkien from his father's original map since, even by then, Tolkien's hand had become rather shaky.

There might be a Tolkien Calendar for the year when "The Silmarillion" is published, as Tolkien did paint some pictures for that work.

As it is now February, they will be pulping those 1974 Tolkien Calendars they have left; but we could have them if we liked!

He recalled that he had had a headache at the end of a day spent with Professor Tolkien, simply from the effort of trying to keep up with what he said!

Tolkien felt rather guilty about selling the manuscript of "The Lord of the Rings" to Marquette; he kept the manuscript hidden away for a time.

One time, Tolkien was given an honour of some sort by his college at Oxford, so he thought he would "honour the honour" by giving the manuscript of "The Hobbit" to the college library. He meant to give them a parcel he had with HOBBIT marked on it which, he thought, contained the manuscript. However, upon opening it, at the last moment, he found that it was something else entirely! The cocktail party for the occasion had to go on as planned, but the college people were very upset at losing such a valuable manuscript.

Tolkien would write things on the edges of crosswords. It was from some scraps of newspaper that the heraldic devices on the 1974 Tolkien Calendar were taken. However, some others cannot be reproduced because the newsprint would show through from the other side.

Some parts of the manuscript of "The Silmarillion" were yellowing with age.

Some parts of the story of "The Silmarillion" are told in great detail, others are given very quickly.

A biography of Tolkien, for which Rayner Unwin was lengthily interviewed, is to be broadcast in twelve half-hourly parts, repeated three times, between six and half-past eight on Friday mornings on Radio Oxford.

Allen and Unwin did not publish Kocher's book, though they were offered it, since they felt that to do so would be to give their imprimatur. Kocher's book was the "best of a bad lot".

Mr. Unwin was sceptical about "The Silmarillion" having being previously offered to Allen and Unwin, after "The Hobbit", although he couldn't be certain as they kept

no note of rejected books. He felt sure that it was "The Lord of the Rings" that had been rejected. After that, Tolkien had tried Collins, but they wanted some changes made that Tolkien refused to carry out; after that, he put the manuscript away.

The picture shown in a photograph in the book, C. S. Lewis: Images of his World", by C. S. Milby and Douglas Gilbert is not by Tolkien, Mr. Unwin thinks, as Tolkien never did portraits. ((This drawing looks very much like Gandalf.))

Miss Joy Hill ("Call me Joy") recalled that when she once visited Tolkien with a lot of presents from admirers dangling by straps from her arms, he said, "You look like a Christmas tree" when she took off her outer cloak. The number of letters to him had fallen off in recent years, she said. She found that, in winter, people tended to write him very sad and despondent letters.

In a subsequent talk, Mr. Unwin made some further points:

In the Japanese edition of "The Hobbit", the orcs were drawn to resemble caucasians.

"The Silmarillion" was a very much overwritten manuscript. If Tolkien had gone on revising the book, it would never have been finished.

There were references to what he intended for the contents of "The Silmarillion" in letters written by Tolkien in the Great War, which should prove useful during the present editing of the book; some other letters were far from useful, though.

The letters he wrote in his twenties were in beautiful handwriting, although Christopher Tolkien's was even better. Tolkien's handwriting declined over the years, and was almost illegible when it had been written at speed.

Tolkien wrote a lot of "The Silmarillion" in verse initially, in order to clear things in his mind, but it was all later changed to prose.

In collating "The Silmarillion", a check had to be kept on the time-scale, so that people could be born at the proper time after they had been sired!

A lot of names had been changed in the manuscript, and, sometimes, entirely new names were introduced, which confused things further.

Christopher Tolkien was by far the best qualified person to do the job. Only someone who had "lived" with it for years could hope to edit it for publication.

There are a great many other small bits and pieces by Tolkien, but many of them, e.g. "Goblin Feet", are not very good.

Mr. Unwin agreed that in a hundred years' time, Tolkien's laundry bills would sell for vast sums at Christies'.

A great deal of what is written about Tolkien in popular articles is very misleading.

Tolkien was a brilliant conversationalist, but he had the confusing habit of sometimes talking about himself in the third person.

The report concerning "The New Shadow", a sequel to "The Lord of the Rings", may well be based on a misunderstanding of something that Tolkien said.

The "Fragment of the 'Book of Mazarbul' (which Gimli finds in Moria)", shown at the Earls Court World Book Fair, was one of three, on which Tolkien had written a

scholarly treatise; and perhaps the unpublished "The Fall of Arthur", a pseudo-Malory piece, might be included in a book of mediaeval imitations, as a follow up to the volume of mediaeval translations; but not for some time. It was best that Christopher Tolkien be allowed to concentrate on "The Silmarillion"; he already had his professorial duties to do.

One time, Tolkien took out a postcard, bought in Germany perhaps, maybe when he was in his twenties, that had on it a picture of an old man with a long white beard, wearing a tall hat. Tolkien said: "That's Gandalf!" and immediately put it back in the box-file he had taken it from. It must still be in there somewhere, waiting to be found!

Even Allen and Unwin no longer have a copy of the first edition of "The Hobbit".

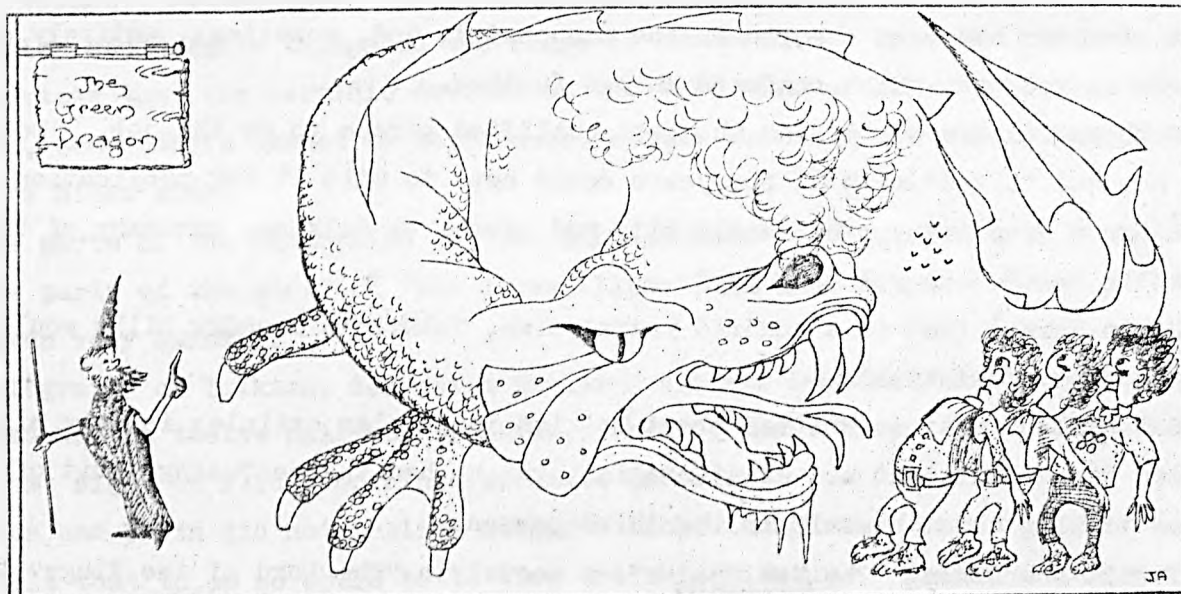
The legalities pertaining to Tolkien's copyright, as laid down in his will, would probably take about three years to sort out, which time will be needed anyway to edit "The Silmarillion".

Allen and Unwin will not be bringing out Houghton Mifflin's "deluxe" version of "The Hobbit". Mr. Olney now having left, Mr. Unwin said that he wouldn't do it the way they had done it anyway.

On leaving, Mr. Olney said that the "Hough-" in Houghton Mifflin rhymed with "hoe", the gardening implement.

Mr. Unwin estimated that "The Silmarillion" would cost about £4 in present-day money when it was published.

----- Charles E. Noad -----



"Trust, boy, trust."