

OBITUARY

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PROFESSOR J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Creator of Hobbits and inventor of a new mythology

"Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, C. B. E., Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford from 1925 to 1945, and from 1945 to 1959 Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, died yesterday at the age of 81.

He was the author of 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings', two much loved and immensely popular books, which sold millions of copies and have been translated into scores of languages. He was created C.B.E. last year.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892, at Bloemfontein, South Africa, where his father died in 1896. The family returned to England, where Tolkien's early years were passed in what was then Worcestershire country, though now buried in the red brick of outer Birmingham.

He was taught by his mother, from whom he derived all his bent and early knowledge, linguistic, romantic and naturalist. To his descent through her, from the Suffields (originally of Evesham) he used to attribute that love for the Western Marches which manifested itself alike in Mercian studies (his primary philological interest) and in the elvish or "hobbit" strain in his imagination. In those days he had an "almost idolatrous" love of trees and flowers and a hunger for Arthurian romance, classical mythology, and especially George MacDonald.

In 1903 he went with a scholarship (gained by his mother's teaching) to King Edward's School, Birmingham, of which he reported much good and little evil. His form master, George Brewerton (a "fierce teacher"), introduced him to Chaucer in the correct pronunciation and lent him an Anglo-Saxon grammar; and R.W. Reynolds introduced him to literary criticism. In 1900 he had already, with his mother and brother, been received into the Church of Rome, and on his mother's death in 1904 Fr Francis Morgan, of the Birmingham Oratory, became his guardian. Of Fr Morgan Tolkien always spoke with the warmest gratitude and affection.

In 1910 he won an exhibition at Exeter College, Oxford. By the high standards of King Edward's School the award was tolerable rather than praise-worthy, and indeed, Tolkien used to describe himself as "one of the idlest boys Gilson (the Headmaster) ever had". But in "idleness" in his case meant private and unaided studies in Gothic, Anglo-Saxon and Welsh, and the first attempt at inventing a language - of which more hereafter.

He came into residence in 1911. Dr. Jackson was still Rector and the College had no resident classical tutor until the appointment of E. A. Barber. He came too

late to be of much help and Tolkien took only a 2nd in Honour Moderations, having somewhat neglected his studies in favour of "Old Norse, festivity, and classical philology." "My love for the classics," he said once, "took ten years to recover from lectures on Cicero and Demosthenes."

It was at this period that he first came under the influence of Joseph Wright; and he was now busily engaged on the invention of the "Elvish language". This was no arbitrary gibberish but a really possible tongue with consistent roots, sound laws and inflexions, into which he poured all his imaginative powers; and strange as the exercise may seem it was undoubtedly the source of that unparalleled richness and concreteness which later distinguished him from all other philologists. He had been inside language. He had not gone far with his invention before he discovered that every language presupposes a mythology; and at once began to fill in the mythology presupposed by Elvish.

In 1915 he took a First in English. Sisam and Craigie had been his tutors and Napier his professor. Immediately after Schools he entered the Lancashire Fusiliers. In 1916 he married Edith Bratt, whom he had known since boyhood. In 1918 he was back in Oxford, invalided out of the Army, and began to teach for the English School; E. V. Gordon was among his first pupils.

From 1920 to 1925 he worked at Leeds, first as Reader in English and later as Professor of English Language. George Gordon, E. V. Gordon and Lascelles Abercrombie were his colleagues, and some of his best work was done in building up a flourishing department of English Philology from small beginnings.

In 1925 he succeeded Craigie at Oxford as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, and in 1945 vacated that chair to become Merton Professor of English Language and Literature.

His Middle English Vocabulary had appeared in 1922. His edition of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' (in collaboration with E. V. Gordon) followed in 1925; 'Beowulf'; 'The Monsters and the Critics' in 1937; his Andrew Lang Lectures (on Fairy Tales) 1939. He became an Hon. D Litt of University College, Dublin, and of Liege in 1954.

His most extensive researches were in the West Midland dialect from the Anglo-Saxon period to that of the 'Ancrene Riwe'; in this work his most distinguished pupil was Professor d'Ardenne. He retired from the Merton professorship on reaching the age limit in 1959 and was later elected an emeritus fellow of the college.

During the years 1925 - 35 he was, more than any other single man, responsible for closing the old rift between "literature" and "philology" in English studies at Oxford and thus giving the existing school its characteristic temper. His

unique insight at once into the language of poetry and into the poetry of language qualified him for this task.

Thus the private language and its offshoot, the private mythology, were directly connected with some of the most highly practical results he achieved, while they continued in private to burgeon into tales and poems which seldom reached print, though they might have won him fame in almost any period but the twentieth century.

'The Hobbit' (1937) was in origin a fragment from this cycle adapted for juvenile tastes but with one all important novelty, the Hobbits themselves. It is doubtful how far he realised that these comfort-loving, unambitious, and (in aspiration) unheroic creatures embodied what he loved best in the English character and saw most endangered by the growth of "subtopia", bureaucracy, journalism, and industrialisation.

They soon demanded to be united with his heroic myth on a far deeper level than 'The Hobbit' had allowed, and by 1936 he was at work on his great romance 'The Lord of the Rings', published in three volumes (1954 and 1955) and often reprinted and translated. The ironic destiny which links the humble happiness of Hobbits to the decision of vast issues which they would gladly ignore, and which even makes civilisation itself momentarily dependent on their latent and reluctant courage, is its central theme. It has no allegory.

These things were not devised to reflect any particular situation in the real world. It was the other way round; real events began, horribly, to conform to the pattern he had freely invented. Hence those who heard the growing work read chapter by chapter in the months that followed the fall of France found it as relevant, as stern, and as tonic, as Churchill's promise of blood, sweat and tears. It cut right across all contemporary canons of criticism, and its success, when published, surprised and delighted the author and his friends.

Tolkien's spirited farce, 'Farmer Giles of Ham' (1954) was work of a wholly different type.

Only a tithe of the poems, translations, articles, lectures and notes in which his multifarious interest found expression ever reached the printer. His standard of self-criticism was high and the mere suggestion of publication usually set him upon a revision, in the course of which so many new ideas occurred to him that where his friends had hoped for the final text of an old work they actually got the first draft of a new one.

He was a man of "cronies" rather than of general society and was always best after midnight (he had a Johnsonian horror of going to bed) and in some small circle of intimates where the tone was at once Bohemian, literary, and Christian (for he was profoundly religious).

He has been described as "the best and worst talker in Oxford" - worst for the rapidity and indistinctness of his speech, and best for the penetration, learning, humour and "race" of what he said. C. L. Wrenn, R. B. McCallum of Pembroke, H. V. D. Lyson of Merton, C. S. Lewis of Magdalen and Charles Williams were among those who most often made his audience (and interrupters) on such occasions.

