

TOLKIEN'S WALK

(AN UNEXPECTED PERSONAL LINK WITH TOLKIEN)

A hundred years ago, members of a Birmingham family named Warner lived at No. 19 Beaufort Road, Edgbaston. (The firm 'Currie & Warner' is still flourishing in Birmingham's old Jewellery quarter). Looking across the road towards No. 6 ('Inglesant'), Mrs. Warner would remark, "Joseph's still scribbling!" Late into the night the oil lamp bore witness that, in his front parlour, Joseph Henry Shorthouse was writing 'John Inglesant'.

It was a remarkable achievement. Shorthouse had never known good health or received regular schooling. He had a terrible stammer and suffered from alarming epileptic fits. When I first came to Ladywood twenty years ago, Miss Elsie Warner, a brave old lady in a wheeled-chair, would imitate for me her mother's imitation of Shorthouse's amazing elocution. In those days, the house 'Inglesant' was still there. Now there is not even a plaque to mark where it stood.

However, the fits and stammer did not prevent Shorthouse from running his improbable business successfully. He owned a factory in Great Charles Street, Birmingham, which made, mainly, sulphuric acid.

In addition, Shorthouse was elected People's Warden at his parish Church, St. John's Ladywood; he was (with others) instrumental in founding the first school for Ladywood children (St. John's school) which is still flourishing, though in a new building.

In those days, a few Edgbaston streets, including Beaufort Road, were part of the poorer parish of Ladywood.

It is difficult to say if "John Inglesant" is still as readable as the Victorians found it. There is a good deal of philosophical mysticism in the book, which is rather verbose. This is a pity. There are many excellencies and two dramatic climaxes of great power. Probably, the story needs to be rescued by a sympathetic editor. It tells of a servant of Charles I who shared the ebb and flow of his master's fortunes. His brother is murdered. He goes on royal service to France and Italy and brings the murderer to account in his own strange way. There are fascinating descriptions of renaissance Italy. The author is at home with French, Latin, Greek and Italian.

The story of the book's publication is remarkable. It lay in manuscript in a drawer, neglected for years, about a thousand pages of long-hand. In 1880, Shorthouse brought it out again: 100 copies (now valuable) were published at the author's expense. The book was much admired by a discerning few. So Shorthouse sent it to Messrs. Smith, Elder, who returned it. It was "not the sort of book" they "cared to publish". However, a Birmingham schoolmaster admired the book enough to send the copy to a Mr. Johnson at Oxford; he showed it to Mrs. Humphrey Ward. She took it to Mr. Alexander MacMillan. Dubiously, Messrs. MacMillan agreed to publish the book at their own expense. An incredibly wise printer printed more copies than were ordered. To the surprise of the publisher, the demand was overwhelming.

In its first years, 9,000 copies of "John Inglesant" were sold. In the 19th Century, 80,000 copies were sold and the book was reprinted every year until its MacMillan 'Caravan' edition in 1930.

Now for the link with Tolkien. As a child, Tolkien lived at 26 Oliver Road, Ladywood with his widowed mother and his brother. This was a few hundred yards from 'Inglesant' a house the boy passed often on his way to the famous and beautiful Oratory Church, for he was a devout Catholic. Incidentally, at the Oratory, Tolkien must have seen the manuscript of Newman's 'Gerontius', which is on permanent display there, including the superb Hymn and poem 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height'. On the way to the Oratory, Tolkien glanced with interest at Shorthouse's church, St. John's Ladywood, a fine Victorian Gothic building, still here though threatened by dry-rot in the lower roof. (We are still struggling to save it). Strange that so much is linked in such a small area!

Soon, Tolkien's mother was taken ill and went to hospital, where she died. In his last letter to me, Tolkien wrote, "From this predicament we were rescued, in 1904, by Fr. Francis Morgan of the Oratory".

'Digs' were found for the boys at 1, Duchess Road, nearby. (There is no plaque, though American tourists often come here on a Tolkien pilgrimage. How I wish that the last few yards of Beaufort Road, which are as he remembered it, could be sub-titled 'Tolkien's Walk').

Tolkien wrote, shortly before his death, that this home (No. 1. Duchess Road) "is of supreme importance in my personal history". He does not say why, but I have here a book about 'John Inglesant' to which Tolkien refers in the next paragraph. The book (a gift from Tolkien) is one of my treasures. I used to send my own scribblings to him; sparrow's eggs to an eagle, but the eagle was always most kind and gracious about them!

The implication is clear. No. 1 Duchess Road, was within sight of the house 'Inglesant'. On his way to the Oratory, Tolkien had to pass the house where the Victorian best-seller (Mr. Gladstone was once photographed while reading it) was written. Is there, here, an unknown early influence on Tolkien?

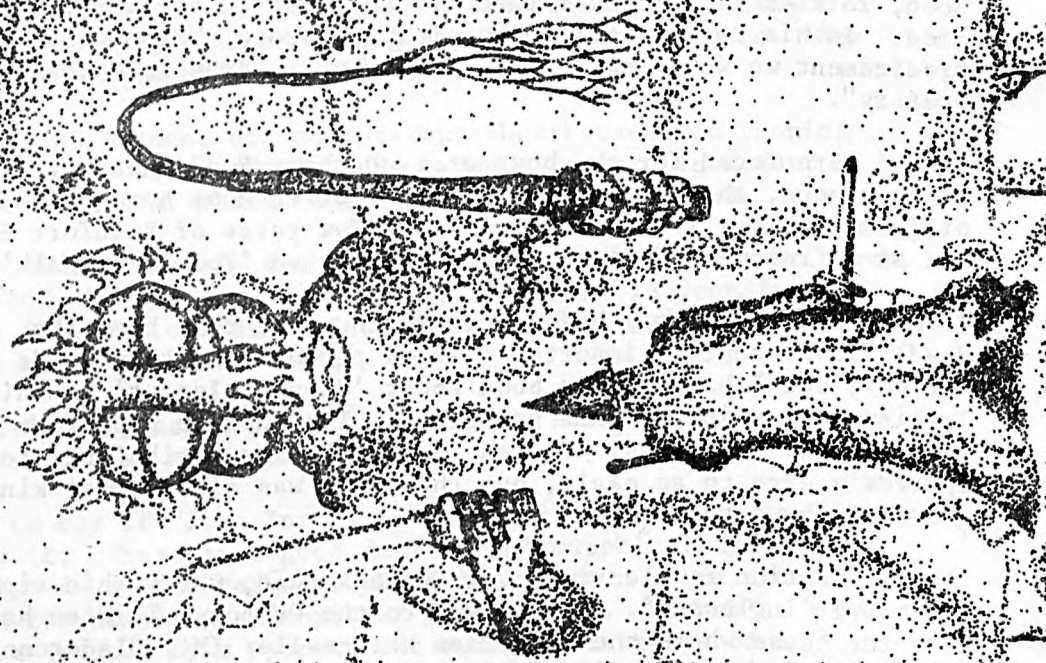
I think there may be. The book Tolkien sent me says that Shorthouse used, in 'John Inglesant', real places and people, but the renaissance Italy he described were as he thought they ought to be rather than as they were. In 'John Inglesant', in fact, we have an imaginary world in which, however, the battle between good and evil has a terrible reality. There are "strange satyr faces that leer at us from the fringes of the wood" in the 'resplendent kingdoms of Shorthouse's imagination'.

Shorthouse actually used his experience of abnormal states of consciousness 'which, apart from Dostoevsky, have no parallel in literature'. One is reminded of Frodo's journey to Mount Doom.

I feel sure that in the boy Tolkien's daily walk past the house 'Inglesant' we have a clue to an unnoticed influence, but one of which the great man himself was aware.

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The
Bridge of
Khaæd-dôm



M. H. S. '75