



## ABLE TALK

### A Transcript of the After-dinner speeches at the 1976 Annual General Meeting of the Tolkien Society

On February the 22nd 1976, the Tolkien Society held its Annual General Meeting, at Hampstead Old Town Hall, London. Present as guests of honour at the Dinner were Miss Priscilla Tolkien, daughter of the late Professor Tolkien, and Mr. Humphrey Carpenter, his official biographer. This is a transcript of the speeches as given by those guests, and various members of the Tolkien Society Committee, faithfully recorded on a tape-recorder by Howard Rosenblum.

Mr. Stuart Clark, until recently Editor of 'Amon Hen', started the proceedings by proposing a toast to Miss Priscilla Tolkien. "Mr. Chairman, friends - um - what are really the aims of the society? Stop and consider. They're really to further the enjoyment of the works of one remarkable man. That man is of course John Tolkien. The society has blossomed from a very small bud of eight or nine people to something now of three hundred people, scattered across the globe. We were fortunate that the Professor himself was gracious enough to accept the post of Honourary President, and we are equally fortunate that his descendants have been gracious enough to accept honorary membership of the Society, and I know you all agree, we are deeply honoured tonight to have Miss Tolkien with us as our guest. It, to me anyway, gives a great sense of belonging to a fraternity. We are all devoted to the writings of one man. He may have departed from us, but I am certain he is here in spirit, and in a way he is here through his daughter. Miss Tolkien has been exceptionally kind to us for two years at her home in Oxford. It must be a terrible shock to find

twenty-five to thirty people descending on your home (subdued guffaws), and then to actually ask them to come back and do the same thing next year must be absolutely staggering. I mean I find it bad enough having 6 or 7. What it must be like to have thirty people sitting, standing or lying round your lounge, and a bit like Bilbo, it must be awful to come down next morning and see the mountains of washing-up (more laughter), and it is, if you can withdraw yourself back 15, 20 or even 30 years ago to when you were fairly young, (lots more laughter), when I say fairly young I mean seven or eight (giggling), when some things were particularly special, when Christmas was special. Some things were magical - going to see Father Christmas in the Grotto was for a number of years always special - then through a friend of mine I discovered 'The Lord of the Rings'. In a way I was transported back to those days when I was seven or eight. I found myself in a special world, everything was ordered, pleasant, homely and comfortable, and it was something I could identify with. I still feel that when I am reading 'The Lord of the Rings'; isn't it incredible that one man could have thought of all that. For this reason, for this dedication to the incredible imagination of one person, for this reason we are gathered into a society. We meet, as Punch put it, to chew over the works of the master. As I said, we are unfortunate not to have the Professor amongst us. I know he is here in spirit. In one way he is here in the flesh through his family. I ask you all, to join with me in drinking a real bumper toast to Miss Priscilla Tolkien."

A toast was then drunk by the assembled company to Miss Tolkien, and Mrs. Vera Chapman presented a bouquet that she had made herself, to Miss Tolkien.

Miss Priscilla Tolkien then stood up and spoke to the gathered multitude. "I am very overcome. That is the most beautiful bouquet. Ladies and gentlemen, friends above all, I think I know you all now. I know you all by sight, and I know most of you by name. I am delighted to be here. I think that - you know, I was just thinking of a funny story connected with my father, and you might like to hear it because I am not frightfully good at making speeches, and am not very used to it, and this is really true. I know it's a truism to say 'Unaccustomed as I am', I really am, (chuckles). It came

into my mind like a flash as dear Stuart was talking. It reminded me of a figure from our childhood. My brothers would be able to tell you more about this figure than I could. I was too young to remember him. He was a strange character, I know nothing about him except that he appeared in and out of houses and friends that my family knew in Oxford. His name was Oscar, and he had a sort of glamour about him because he seemed fairly sort of foreign and interestingly strange. He was very tall and apparently he was very shy. So you always saw him, and on all social occasions whenever he was met with, he always used to say, 'Oh, what do I do, what do I say?', and he became a sort of family joke, and my brothers and I used to always make jokes about it. If we didn't know quite what to do, or we didn't feel quite up to what to say, we used to say, 'What do I do, what do I say?'

Many years passed, many many years and my brothers had all gone away and I had grown up by this time, and many years later, my friend Humphrey Carpenter here will be able to say the exact date, but I think it was in 1950-something, when my father went to Liège, to Belgium."

"51 or 52 I think", Mr. Carpenter supplied.

"At least I am in the right decade", continued Miss Tolkien. "He went to Belgium, the first of his sort of travels after the war, to get an honorary degree at the University of Liège and he had a nice time, and you know, he was treated very kindly and enjoyed himself. He went to some rather grand function in Liège, where they were entertained I think by the Mayor in what had been a palace. My father described this in great detail, and they went up the great staircase; now my father was actually a very shy man, and this was just after the war, and he wasn't used to this kind of function. He was conscious of the fact that he'd had his evening clothes rather a long time, and that everybody else looked rather grand. He was feeling rather shy, and as he was going up the stairs waiting to be announced by the gentleman on the door, coming down the staircase already as though he had already had the party was a superb figure, in full evening dress, with lots of medals and orders, looking grand, and with a very very beautiful lady on his arm. My father thought 'I know that man', and he thought 'Oscar!' Of course he was a Belgian and he had not seen

him all these years. As Oscar passed him with the beautiful lady, let's say a countess with jewels in her hair, my father swears that he heard him say to her, "Qu'est-ce que qu'on dit ?" (much laughter).

So, with not so much shyness now, because I know you all now and you have made me so welcome, but I really do wonder what I should say to do justice to the occasion. You are really so kind, and so hospitable, and I do appreciate it so much. I think this is a particularly nice occasion. It's like being an extension of being in a combination of your homes, because it is all absolutely lovely food which you have prepared yourselves, and gorgeous drink which you have selected and bought, and lovely decorations, and all the trouble you have taken, and all the posters and decorations, and everything. I enormously appreciate it. As Stuart says, of course one is deeply sad because my father is not here personally. I entirely agree with Stuart as I am sure he is here in spirit. If he were actually able to be here, I am sure he would echo anything that I would say about appreciation. I think it extremely significant that it was called 'The Fellowship of the Ring'. He was an enormously gregarious and friendly person. He loved good food and drink. I mean, as he said himself, he was very much a Hobbit. An occasion like this would give him great pleasure. I think the Society is very heart-warming to me and the other members of the family. I am deeply touched that my father's memory is honoured in this way. Not only on a very splendid occasion like this, but on all the days in between when we don't meet. The fact that you meet together and discuss his works, and the fact that you are all deeply touched by his works, is an enormous comfort to me. That gives me very great pleasure, and it gives me very special pleasure to be your guest here tonight. I do thank you so much and I look forward greatly - I have perhaps certain in common with Bilbo, after all I do have Hobbit blood in me, but may I hasten to add that I am absolutely delighted whether it's 25, 30 or 35 who cross my doorstep, and if I do at times appear to be a little flustered, I can assure you that there is always plum cake in the larder (laughter), and thank you very much."

After applause verging on a standing ovation, Mr. Jon Simons, the Chairman of the Society, rose and spoke to the meeting - briefly, as befits the speeches of all Chairmen, (apart from this, a slight throat infection had made it painful to talk loudly for too long.)

"Thank you very much indeed, Priscilla. (croaking)  
My voice is going. I now call upon Miss Jessica Kemball-Cook to propose  
the toast to our other honoured guest, Mr. Humphrey Carpenter. Thank you."

Miss Jessica Kemball-Cook, the newly-elected Secretary of the Society, then addressed the meeting. "Ladies and gentlemen, my voice is going too. Well, I'm the newest member on the Committee, and I was going to say I was the youngest member on the committee, but I'm afraid some people might disagree with me (laughter). I will say this, that when I read 'The Lord of the Rings', I think I was younger than any of you. When I read 'The Fellowship of the Ring', I read it when it first came out. I was about six at the time, and I had read everything in my father's house, and he had seen the reviews. People said, "This great long book", so he thought, "I'll bring something home for Jessica that will stop her in her tracks." So he brought home this great long book, and I got through it, and found there was a cliff-hanger ending. So I asked, you see, if I could read the next, and of course they hadn't come out yet. When they did, he talked to his friends and they said, "It's far too frightening for a girl of six to read. She'll have to wait until she joins the public library"(laughter). Of course they never had it in the junior library, so I had to wait for five years until I had joined the senior library, so that I could find out what happened, who went over the falls, and what happened to Boromir and Aragorn at the end of volume one. So I don't know how long Humphrey Carpenter has been acquainted with 'The Lord of the Rings', maybe he read it when he was six. I don't know. However, I'll tell you, those who don't know, a little about him. When he was a school teacher, he helped to produce an opera called 'The Hobbit', which was very well reviewed and which Tolkien himself attended. Secondly, he went to work on the radio, and produced the radio programme about Tolkien which most have heard, and some of us haven't got on tape, at least not legally we haven't, (laughter), and now, of course, he is the authorised biographer for Allen and Unwin of Tolkien's biography, and when I found out all this, I immediately wrote to him and I asked him to join the Society, and to be a guest at our Dinner. So now he will tell you some more about himself, for himself. I am very proud to ask you to drink a toast to our honoured guest, Mr. Humphrey Carpenter."

A toast was then drunk by the assembled company to Mr. Carpenter, who then spoke. "Qu'est-ce qu'on dit, what does one say?" (laughter) "This is a remarkable occasion for me, if only that it is the first occasion ever yet that I have had a toast drunk to me. I feel that it has been drunk in proxy, in that I have only acquired this toast through your Honourary President in perpetuo. Well, to answer Jessica's question, Mr. Chairman, Miss Tolkien, Miss newly-elected Secretary, to whom my congratulations. It was almost the same circumstances. I was on holiday with my parents in Wales at, I think, about the same time. I won't compare ages (laughter). It might be invidious to one or the other of us. My mother had something of the same idea as your father had. "This would be a book to keep him quiet." It had the same result, the same cliff-hanger, and I, like many Oxford children of the same time, besieged the public library, until at first volume II and then much later volume III came out. So a long association with the books began.

Well, I feel doubly honoured tonight, not only to be invited as a very new member of the Society, but also to be asked to speak, which I think is scarcely fair, since my only currency, or to put it more crudely, my only interest value to you, rests on a book that has not yet been published, but I hope will be soon. However, I am very delighted to be here, and I am much flattered to be asked to speak. I feel I know many of you very well already, not as well as Priscilla does through seeing you on her doorstep. At least, through seeing your names in your magazine which I have enjoyed reading very much for the last 2 or 3 issues which I have seen. It's of course understandable that I should find fellow Tolkien enthusiasts here. It's delightful also in Howie, my neighbour (and committee-member without portfolio), to find a fellow enthusiast for a number of things, folk-music, concertina-playing and real ale. (laughter) Which suggests that the Tolkien net spreads far and wide indeed. Well, as you know, I've been engaged in the very fortunate position for the last few months, of being engaged on the research and the writing of a biography of Professor Tolkien. They have, I think, been almost without question and certainly without doubt, the happiest months of my life so far. It's been a totally absorbing project. Physically absorbing because I have been able to devote my entire working time to it; which has meant, on the whole, 8 to 10 hours a day, 5 or 6

or even occasionally 7 days a week, sometimes even more ! It has also been mentally absorbing, as you'd imagine. It has also been I suppose, you could say spiritually absorbing, as I found myself buried deeper and deeper in the work. I'd almost begun to live it, and also to sleep it. There has been more than one occasion when I have had some very strange dreams which have risen from researches into the family papers. I won't go into the dreams now, they'd be too fantastic even for these surroundings.

Well, now before I reveal any more intimate secrets. I think I should turn aside for the moment to express my thanks. I'm sure you realise that the compiling and the writing of this biography would have been out of the question, entirely impossible, without the kindness and the support of Professor Tolkien's family, his sons and daughter. It's very nice to see Priscilla here this evening to share this marvellous feast with us, and incidentally nobody, I think this is a great omission, has yet drunk the health of those who prepared tonight's meal. I know how much trouble they have put into it, we'll prepare for a toast at the end of my speech.

Priscilla and her brothers have, since I have begun work on the book 18 months ago, shown me the most extra-ordinary degree of kindness. I think you'll understand what I mean, when I say that it is no easy matter to talk about one's own family. They have all sat down with me or written to me, or have taken time and have now sat down to read the type-script which I have prepared for their perusal. They have taken endless trouble. So if the biography, when it's published, meets with your approval and enthusiasm as I hope it will, when it's published in the Autumn, and like 'The Silmarillion' it may well be one of those books which goes on and on, and never quite appears, but I hope that both will be in print soon. Well, if and when it appears, I hope you will give at least as much, if not more, credit than to me, to Priscilla and to her brothers John, Michael and Christopher. To whom it is really due, because without them it would have been entirely impossible.

Well, how did I go about it ? I found it a very daunting task. I had known Professor Tolkien a very little, and I had

some knowledge of the outlines of his career from the radio programme. I realised when I embarked on the project that I would have to sift through literally thousands of letters. I mean thousands. A number of very closely-written diaries, and a pile of manuscripts, which took up so much space that it requires more than 100 box-files to store it, and that does not include those at Marquette in the U.S.A.. This task was a pleasure, an enormous pleasure, and a matter of absorbing interest, and that fact I think will come as no surprise to you. You know very well what a lively correspondent Professor Tolkien was. He was, I think, one of the last great letter-writers in the great English tradition of letter-writers. I hope one day his letters will be in print so that people can appreciate what he did in this respect.

Well, that was the main part of my task: sifting hour by hour, day by day, and eventually month by month, through an enormous pile of this fascinating correspondence. Many highlights stand out from it. I think the most memorable was the deciphering of one of his most substantial diaries, which was a very bulky volume, covering the years 1919 to 1933 and it records major events in his own life and the life of his family between these years. You'll perhaps be interested, though not entirely surprised, when I tell you that the greater part of it was written in the Tengwar of Fëanor. Which means that it presents somewhat of a daunting sight even to the people who are used to the Fëanorian script, and I nursed a private and very real fear that when it was transcribed, this diary would be entirely composed in Quenya or Sindarin (laughter), which I'm afraid made me quail a little at the prospect of beginning to transcribe it. Well, fortunately, I have a very enterprising wife, Mary, who kindly took over this stage of the work. She began laboriously to transcribe from the Fëanorian, and the first results were not encouraging. She copied out a passage, which, when it was read, said 'Ige avups moking folent', and we both stared at this for some time - 'Ige avups moking folent' - until we saw that it read 'I gave up smoking for Lent' (much laughter); at this point the door opened, and much was found to be entirely intelligible.

Well, not all my researches involved paperwork. I have been fortunate enough to meet and interview many members of Professor



Tolkien's family and his close friends. The most notable amongst these, and I think it is not invidious to select in this case, was Mr. Hilary Tolkien, the Professor's younger brother who, as you may well know, spent all his working life as a fruit-farmer in the Vale of Evesham, which of course was that part of the country which nurtured the roots of their mother's family, the Suffields. Hilary Tolkien was, as I soon discovered, a thoroughly down-to-earth person who didn't waste words, but what words he did give forth were well worth listening to, and writing down. I think I might say, may I not, that he was a true Hobbit ?"

"Absolutely yes !" replied Miss Tolkien.

"Well", continued Mr. Carpenter. "Hilary's personal recollections of their childhood at Sarehole gave me much delight, and I think provided a very valuable core for the first part of the book. I'm only sorry that he has not lived to see the book published. He in fact died only a few weeks ago, and he was laid to rest in the soil at Evesham, the soil that he had personally cultivated for nearly 50 years. Well, as to the friends, there have been of course many whose acquaintance I have been delighted to make. Among these, again I think it is not invidious to pick out, none more so than Mr. Christopher Wiseman, who is a remarkable man who was a very close friend of Ronald Tolkien in his schooldays. In fact he was the only close friend who survived the First World War. You may remember in his introduction to the revised edition of 'The Lord of the Rings', the reference to "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead." Well, Christopher Wiseman was the one surviving schoolfriend who himself is still very much surviving. He's in his 80's, but he's in good health, and he lives on the South Coast. He was a headmaster, and he entered with great enthusiasm on the task of talking to me, and corresponding and dredging up from memory his recollections of schooldays in Birmingham. I say dredging, but he had no difficulty in bringing alive for me the tremendous warmth of the friendships and associations which sprang up at King Edward's School, which, I think, when you read the biography, contributed a great deal to the chronicles of Middle-Earth.

Well, Christopher Wiseman entered with much enthusiasm on the task of talking to me, and I also think he has played a very big part in the writing of the biography.

Well, I could tell you a good deal more, all about my visit to Marquette, which was of course in the U.S.A. (Editor's note - for those who are unaware of the relationship of Marquette to the Professor - it is here that the original written manuscripts of 'The Lord of the Rings' is deposited) to study the manuscripts. This was very chilly physically, because the temperature seemed to be about minus 10, the winds howling down from Lake Michigan, though I had a very warm welcome in all respects. My searches in the Public Record Office here in London, in Somerset House, to unravel the family history of the Tolkiens and the Suffields, and not the least my delighted perusal of the Professor's working notes for many of his stories, and there is a remarkable piece of paper which says "Make Bilbo's ring the One Ruling Ring." On that piece of paper I suppose you might say the who of 'The Lord of the Rings' is founded. Well, all this I hope you'll read when the biography comes out. These are after all the mere bones, the mechanics of the biography. It's the finished book that matters, and when, or rather if, it's published in the Autumn I hope you'll find something of interest in it. Indeed I dare to hope it may even do a little to add to your enjoyment of Professor Tolkien's books. As the business of writing it, it has certainly done so to mine.

So may I conclude first of all with the renewed thanks to you for inviting me here this evening, and with the hope that when at last you read the biography you may consider that it is not unworthy as a tribute to a very remarkable man whose memory and whose books we are gathered to honour tonight. May I finally suggest that we drink a toast to all those who have prepared the splendid and excellent dinner. To the dinner preparers, the Committee and others !"

The whole company rose and drank a toast, and Miss Tolkien ended by saying "Thank you !"

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Editor: May I take this point to thank Miss Tolkien, Mr. Carpenter, Miss Kembell-Cook and Mr. Clark for their permission to include their speeches in this report, but especially to Mr. Howard Rosenblum, who recorded the whole evening on his magic talking machine, and who sat down and patiently transcribed all the conflicting noises clearly and legibly into the written word. Thank you.