

# WHOSE HEAD ON THE PENNY?

by S. FERGUSON



MOST of us have invented a country, perhaps a philosophically constructed "Republic" or "Utopia", perhaps just a fictional world of our own. The country we invent will reflect our thoughts, just as the 'Lord of the Rings' and 'The Silmarillion' reveal Tolkien's ideas and ideals.

Inventing a country - or what is equivalent - writing a fantasy or science-fiction story, creates certain problems.

In writing a fantasy story we need to invent a certain amount. A few 'alien' versions of everyday necessities - such as currency or weights and measures - are sufficient to tell the reader that the story is not an everyday one; but invent too many words or new ideas and we risk pushing our story too far away from our audience for them to treat it as anything more than 'just' fiction.

In this article I wish to look at one aspect of the fantasy world (or secondary world, if you prefer): the metrology, and its role in the 'Lord of the Rings' in particular. Why metrology? Perhaps for no better reason than that metrication is upon us. For better or for worse our world is being changed, like it or not; it is not simply another necessary change; it creates a barrier between the past and the future.

Fantasy writers sometimes mention metrology; Burroughs, on Barsoom, provided footnotes on the measure used on Mars, on the time-units, and also on the measures on Venus. Not all writers go to this extreme; some mention time-units to make the point that a non-decimal system is being used, others may say nothing at all, taking it for granted that the metric system is in universal use. For Burroughs the use of metrology showed the similarity of his humanoids to those on Earth, and the unit he chose, the "ad" of 11.694, is near enough a foot to seem familiar, and yet sufficiently different to seem alien. To do this he presupposed a division of the Martian circumference by 360 degrees.

In the average science-fiction story Metrication is taken for granted (see '1984' for instance), even to the extent of the day being decimalised!! At the moment, though we are becoming more aware of metric units, they are still sufficiently strange when used in a story to make that story seem a little 'alien' to us. Yet in perhaps twenty years or so, our traditional Imperial units will seem just as strange to us as are the metric units now. To many of our present

school-children the inch is either an old measure or something they have never heard of.

In some science-fiction stories, on the other hand, perhaps as a reaction to the metric system, some writers have suggested that the world of the future will use arithmetic based on twelves instead of tens (see Wells' 'The Sleeper Wakes' for an early example). That may well be, and ignoring the pros and cons of the situation, we recognise that it is the use of something different or unfamiliar which takes the story out of our everyday world and environment (and in any case, arithmetical matters should always be relegated to the appendix, as appendix D of the 'Lord of the Rings').

In these latter stories we come across another problem - not just the one of inventing too much - the problem of inventing unfamiliar worlds. Invent a new counting system if you will, its very strangeness will perhaps alienate the reader and make him reject the whole story. For example, apart from the words "dozen", "gross", "score", and "great-gross" we have no special number-names for bases other than ten. And if we invent too many words we shall also have to provide a glossary!

What does Tolkien do? Firstly, he invents no new units of measure. Consistent with his statements in 'On Fairy Stories' that secondary worlds must command secondary belief, if there are any units indigenous to Middle-earth, then he neither uses them, nor does he tell us about them - unless by chance, some of them happen to be the same; and even that we do not know. He is content (in appendix D) to make some comment on the uses of sixes and twelves by the Eldar, thus incidentally revealing their superior intelligence, but he does not labour the point.

And yet there are hints in the text that the units in the original which he has translated were not the same as those used in the translation. In Book I Page 10, we are told that the Hobbits were from 2 to 4 ft "of our measure"; this use of the word "our" suggests the Hobbits used something different. Did they have their own "foot" unit? Or did they adopt the units of the people they settled amongst, just as they did the language? And if the Hobbits did indeed have their own system, why does Tolkien tell us nothing at all about it?"

This latter question, and the others, may be answered when we remember that the 'Lord of the Rings' is described as a translation. Consider the units that Tolkien mentions: leagues, fathoms, ells, feet, silver pennies; they are all units which are familiar to us, even though not all of them are still in use. They are also all "old" units, part of a system which just "grew up", being neither planned in advance nor constructed to an arbitrary set of rules. We can be sure that Middle-earth did not have the Imperial system; but it surely had one that grew up in the way that the Imperial system did. The units have been translated into units following a similar historical pattern. In the same way that Tolkien adjusts the language to make it familiar to us, bringing the flavour of Westron close to English, so he presents us with English words and concepts when it comes to numbers, weights, measures and money. As Kocher points out, the audience needs to recognise a great deal of themselves and the world of their everyday experience if they are to accept the story. In the creation of a fantasy world, as also in a translation, it is important to make the reader feel at home as far as possible, while in the

creation of the science-fiction world many a writer thinks it necessary to make the reader feel that he is a wholly alien environment. Tolkien makes the reader feel at home; he is at pains to do so; what better units to use than those with which we are familiar, which are part of our heritage and culture and which make us feel the scene is set in our not-too-distant past?

Yet, having said that, I should point out that the units are only mentioned when it is important. In Book I P.191, for example, we learn that the Hobbits used silver pennies; yet the reason they are mentioned is that Tolkien wishes to tell us the size of the profit that the rascally Ferny wished to make on the pony, Bill. Tolkien does not tell us any other prices; we are left to guess at the bargain price Bag End went for, and at the price of a pint at the 'Prancing Pony'! Consider, too, the only place where measures are mentioned: in Book II Page 212/5 Frodo's estimate of the height of the cliff is 18 fathoms; Sam estimates his rope at 30 ells. The use of measurement is important, and an essential part of the story; the units are traditional ones - fathoms for depth and ells for lengths.

At this point someone might suggest that it is immaterial what units were used; would it really matter if Sam gave his estimate in metres? He could certainly give it in metres, but it is highly unlikely he would have used metres when paying out the line for measuring. The metre would intrude as it is not a natural or historical unit to use. How would you measure out a rope? How was it done? You take one end in your right hand, stretch out your right arm; then you can mark off a yard with your left hand at your nose. Now Sam was a Hobbit; he was not as tall as we are; the same method of measurement would present a length-unit less than a yard. If we take Sam as being 4 ft tall, the natural length for him to use would be about 45" - the (old English) ell. By being true to the method historically used, Tolkien needs units derived by such practical methods.

As a further example of a unit intruding, as would the metre in the example given above, by being historically incorrect - you may have come across 'The Cold Flame' by James Reeves, a new version of the 'Tinderbox' by the Brothers Grimm. In it the old soldier is pensioned off and has received a silver dollar for 25 years of service: "One silver dollar, one hundred pennies, fourpence a year..." he muses. Now unless the story is about wars that took place after the creation of the US dollar (the first Western decimal unit), the "hundred" is all wrong. The German Thaler (from which comes the word 'dollar') was divided into 360 pennies until the 1870's - and after that into 300 pennies, later being replaced by the mark; and the old Spanish dollar was divided into 8 or 16. If the story is meant to be set in a period more than 100 years ago (as it appears to be) then the division of the "silver dollar" would have to be non-decimal.

So far so good; Tolkien uses units with which he and we are familiar. And yet, for how long will they remain familiar? How long will it be before the "Hundredweight Feast" will require a footnote because people have forgotten that 1 cwt equals 112 lb or even because they no longer know what a hundred-weight was? Will they need a footnote to feel the outrage of the Gross of guests at Bilbo and Frodo's joint celebration of 144 years?

Now if Imperial units give way to Metric and in a short time the imperial seem remote and strange, what should one do about it? At the same time we



might note that the same problem faces a translator who wishes to turn Tolkien's work into some other language.

I have recently read a copy of 'Der Kleine Hobbit', a German translation of 'The Hobbit' (DTV-Junior books). For yards the translator has used metres, but he uses miles (Meilen) for distances, feet (Füsse) for heights and ells (Ellen) for widths. In some cases the choice of unit mentioned is dictated by the idioms of the language. Idioms preserve old units (think of a few proverbs) and I have yet to see an idiom in any language or any piece of poetry which used a metric unit. But what should a translator do to remain true to Tolkien's ideas?

All countries used to have an indigenous system of weights and measures before using Imperial or Metric, and in some places bits of these old systems are still used. We find many a use of pre-metric units in French and Spanish literature, and in France itself some of the pre-metric units are still in use on the quiet; but to what extent should a translator of the 'Lord of the Rings' use them?

Should we assume that everyone is familiar with our system - after all, though the Germans call their metre-rule an 'inch-stick', if they nowadays talk about inches they mean ours, not theirs; the French measure aircraft separation levels in feet - ours, not the old pieds. Of course the translator could simply put everything in metric (the more familiar for his readers); but faced also with the problem of getting jokes like Baranduin and Brandywine across, he might decide to leave the English names and units and put footnotes.

The German translator of 'The Hobbit' seems to have chosen a sensible compromise; he has used metres where he thought it necessary to get a unit close to a yard, and for the rest he has let the natural idiom of the language choose the unit for him. But then, English and German are very close in structure. What should a French translator do? It seems to me that the use of metric units makes the story seem too recent (the metre was invented after the French Revolution). The further you go back in time, the fewer the units there are with a decimal structure since binary and dozenal structures were far more useful in the market-place. Yet if the translator chooses indigenous pre-metric measure, he might make the story too remote.

There is one final point that arises out of this discussion. It strikes me as typical of Tolkien that he has not just used units familiar to us, but that he has used units that have evolved over the years and which have stood the test of time. I cannot believe that he would be in favour of the wholesale destruction of a system of weights and measures which has proved convenient for all of us over the years. We should conserve our units of measurement as we wish to conserve and preserve other parts of our heritage and culture.

The head on the penny? Ah, yes. The Hobbits used silver pennies, and a gold piece is mentioned in Book I Page 277, but since Book I Page 18 tells us there had been no King for nearly a thousand years... whose head was on the penny?