



# THE BIOGRAPHY

PRISCILLA TOLKIEN



find biography in general one of the most fascinating forms of history, but a biography of somebody living in one's own time, and in particular one closely related to oneself may increase one's understanding, not only of that person but also of oneself and of the mould which in some areas at least was shared in them.

In recent years I have seldom read a biography that so completely satisfied me, that I realise now, more than ever before, what an immensely complex task such a work is for the author. He or she has to combine both a scholarly pursuit of truth, an historian's grasp of the significance of events and their meaning to people in the story, and both a warm and shrewd appreciation of a person, whether known to the author or not. I think it essential that a good biographer should have a liking for, as well as an interest in, the person who is the object of his study, but he should not idealize or worship him. It seems clear from some biographies published in recent years that the authors disliked their people, and part of the motive in writing the books would appear destructive.

Humphrey Carpenter seems to me to have begun from a very helpful position, in that he had met my father, had enjoyed his company, and for a number of years had enjoyed and appreciated my father's books. But he had not met him so often that he stood so close as to be unable to see him, and admirer of my father's books though he is, he is not fanatical about him on his writings. From working with him intermittently over a period of many months, while he was both preparing for and actually writing the biography, I came to understand a little better the considerable task that he had to create an interesting and enjoyable book out of such a mass of material: written evidence from letters and other documents, personal evidence from in particular my brothers and myself, and other members of the family, a great number of friends, colleagues and former students, who supplied both facts and personal memories and impressions.

Humphrey Carpenter seemed to me to be able to combine energy, hard

work, administrative competence and sensitivity. Last, but perhaps most important of all, he showed humility; the more he knew - and he came to have a very detailed knowledge of my father's life and work - the less he felt he knew. This impressed me very much and has taught me much about the art of biography: ultimately there is the mystery that cannot be solved. We can not know another person completely, and perhaps it is particularly difficult to do so when that person has a public as well as a private life, and is by temperament, training and occupation both a scholar and a creative artist. Much has been written about the biography itself and I have taken great pleasure in many of the appreciative comments that have been made. I enjoy and respect the biography itself, and if I say that I find it an essentially readable book I mean this as a true compliment.

After all, if you do not enjoy reading the book you will care less about its scholarly virtues and you will be unlikely to read it a second time.

Finally, I would like to mention two comments from friends of mine, neither of whom knew my parents well, but had met them on one or more occasions.

The first is from a friend who had read and enjoyed my father's books. She wrote to me after reading the biography: "I think he's done a very good job and conveys the feel of your father in a very authentic way. The sort of person you've described and I've met, and who married your mother, and who wrote 'The Lord of the Rings', became one comprehensible being as I read."

The other is from a friend who has tried but regretfully cannot enjoy my father's books, but whose motive in reading the book was his interest in him as a person, and in the family. He said he found the biography totally absorbing.

Such comments made from very different viewpoints seem to me to say clearly that this is INDEED a very good biography.

