

... And What about Zanzibar? Or An Adult Fairy Tale Concerning Tolkien's Biographical Legend¹

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The story of Mabel Tolkien serving as a missionary in Zanzibar before her marriage first appeared in William Ready's 1968 *The Tolkien Relation: A Personal Enquiry* (6). Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond find four inaccuracies in Ready's book: two dates, an Oxford pub name, and Tolkien's mother's missionary work in Zanzibar (C&G 2.110). They surmise that Ready had a "mishearing" of the name of the Bird and Baby pub, and Ready did not take any notes so it is not surprising he confused dates (C&G 2.110). That leaves the story of Mabel Tolkien's missionary work in Zanzibar, a name so unusual that it is not likely to be misheard or mis-remembered.

Tolkien: Cult or Culture?, a similar effort to place Tolkien in the context of his literary and personal history by John S. Ryan, appeared in 1969. Ryan writes that his essays "often contain ... a measure of personal knowledge derived from my close acquaintance with J.R.R. Tolkien when I was a student very close to him in the School of English within the university of Oxford" (*In the Nameless Wood, Explorations in the Philological Hinterland of Tolkien's Literary Creations* ix). This was in the late 1950s, and Ryan later became a professor of folklore and heritage in the School of Arts at the University of New England in New South Wales, Australia. Being a well-trained academic, Ryan carefully notes his sources and from whom he draws quotations. At the beginning of his chapter "Tolkien, the Man and the Scholar," he reports what Tolkien told him about his father, Arthur Tolkien. Ryan continues with: "His mother, equally of West Midland descent, had before her marriage worked as Mabel Suffield with her sisters as a missionary among the women of the Sultan of Zanzibar. She seems to have been a teller of tales" (9). That is, Ryan heard this story directly from Tolkien. On the same page he carefully quotes from a Tolkien newspaper interview and from Ready's book. He independently confirms Ready and also the report of the Zanzibar story in Daniel Grotta-Kurska's 1976 Tolkien biography, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Architect of Middle Earth* based on his interviewing Tolkien in probably 1966 (15). Further, Ryan maintains this same presentation in the 2012 second edition of *Tolkien: Cult or Culture?*³

Scull and Hammond indicate their familiarity with Ryan's 1969 edition by a number of citations, e.g. C&G 1.527, 1.780, 2.371-372, 2.652. If Ryan is a good-enough source for the other quotations in *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, then he should be considered an accurate and reliable informant when reporting this story.

Ready's book appeared in 1968. If the record needed to

be amended, the official biography of 1977 would have done that. Humphrey Carpenter was very likely to have known that Tolkien was displeased with the report about his mother. One of the functions and/or purposes of a commissioned biography is to correct previous records. However, Carpenter does not deny or contradict Ready's report. He says nothing and leaves the reader dangling with his description of Mabel Tolkien as "remarkable." While one can certainly have reservations about the sensational "women of the sultan of Zanzibar," saying that someone was a missionary is hardly scurrilous or a defamation of character.

Ryan's remark that Mabel Tolkien was "a teller of tales" may indicate either Ryan's and/or Tolkien's reservations about the factual basis of this story. This would be consistent with Scull and Hammond's view that the story of Mabel (Tolkien's) service in Zanzibar is "a story wholly without foundation." But whether it is based on fact or not, at least two, if not three, independent reports, all by people who admired Tolkien and in no way wanted to injure his reputation, document that Tolkien told this story.⁵ This essay addresses the context of the Zanzibar story and what it tells us about the interesting and complicated Mabel Suffield Tolkien.

The Fairy Tale

Once upon a time – in the year 1896 - in a little village - its name was Sarehole – there lived a beautiful young widow. Perhaps you have seen her picture in Hilary Tolkien's *Black and White Ogre Country* (65)? Clearly, in her youth she might have turned heads in the street. And she had two adorable, tow-headed, preschool boys with curly hair: double trouble. She lived in housing provided by one of her brothers-in-law, a Thomas Mitton, and she received some spending money from another brother-in-law, Walter Inledon, so she maintained a life style of "genteel poverty" (Bunting, "5 Gracewell, Sarehole" [Sarehole] 8; Carpenter *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* [Bio]24; Grotta Kurska 17).

Such a beautiful woman, living by herself with two small children, would have been the talk of the neighborhood, if not the next three villages, as anyone who has lived in a small town would know. She was educated and cultured, played the piano, knew foreign languages, and had participated in the popular Victorian past time of acting in plays (Gorelik 7; Carpenter 22; Bunting, "Roverandom, an Autobiographical Reading" 4). Obviously, such a woman was in need of a reliable man to take care of her, provide for her, and take a firm hand with her two young sons whom she allowed to wander

seemingly at will and unsupervised (*Bio* 21). Moreover, she might be - as Elvis put it so well - lonely.

Mabel Tolkien was very likely to have followed the strict Victorian etiquette of wearing black for mourning for 2 years after her husband's death plus 6 months of 'half mourning', i.e. the black dress could have more trim and in certain colors like gray or mauve (<http://www.fashion-era.com/mourning-fashion.htm-8/27/2016>). During the first two years of mourning her only expected social activity was church attendance (<http://listverse.com/2013/02/07/10-fascinating-death-facts-from-the-victorian-era>). Queen Victoria set the standard for mourning, and Mabel Tolkien could have continued to wear black like the Queen. Many widows continue to wear their wedding rings. The two years of mourning would have ended in February, 1898, and only then or possibly in August would any gentleman callers appear. Unfortunately, they did not take one thing into their reckoning: they failed to take Mabel Tolkien into account.

We have anecdotes that tell us about some important aspects of Mabel Tolkien's character. She was willful and independent in her courtship with her future husband. She circumvented strict Victorian protocol by exchanging secret letters with her fiancé, Arthur Tolkien, by means of having her younger sister, Jane, pass letters to him on the New Street Station platform in Birmingham (*Bio* 9).³ Given that Mabel was eighteen and her sister was sixteen, they could not have kept this secret for long from their father who was approximately 55. In fact, this exchanging of billet doux only lasted "a few months" (*C&G* 2.1009). Just as Father Francis, Tolkien's guardian, learned of the carefully disguised rendezvous of the teen-aged J.R.R. Tolkien and Edith Bratt, his future wife, in the fall of 1909, it would have been difficult to conceal this clandestine communication from the scrutiny and gossip of Victorian society (*Bio* 41).

The likely outcome of what would have been seen as Mabel's rebellious and defiant behavior that verged on scandal was predictable. John Suffield, her Victorian father, must have acted. He first forbade a formal engagement for two years. But Mabel's flaunting of convention would have fueled gossip and ridicule that would affect the family's reputation and her father's business. No one in the middle-class society of 1888 would have thought this prettily 'romantic', as the fear of pregnancy would have been hovering very near. One has only to think of Edith Bratt's mother, who was seduced by her employer while working as a governess, to know that this was a very likely scenario (*C&G* 2.1012). Similarly, in 1882, an impoverished medical student, Sigmund Freud, and the 20-year old Martha Bernays arranged a secret engagement. When Martha's widowed mother learned of this, within the year the Bernays family decamped from Vienna to the hinterlands of Wandsbek near Hamburg (Burke, 47). Mrs. Bernays was not going to have rumor, innuendo, or the vagaries of hormones besmirch her family and Martha's future. Membership in the middle-class of the nineteenth century was fragile and dependent on good health, hard work, self-discipline, and some luck. An out-of-wedlock pregnancy was one of the

fastest tickets out. To end this John Suffield would have separated the pair just like both Father Morgan, Tolkien's guardian, and Edith Bratt's guardian separated J.R.R. Tolkien and the object of his affection. The proud Mabel Tolkien would have found herself packed off to some relative and out of harm's way. This might have been her older brother, Roland, in Manchester (Morton and Hayes, Gedling 14).⁷ By 1889 Arthur Tolkien had left for South Africa to further his career at Lloyd's Bank, and his own displeased family would have been relieved of any reminders of his indiscretion and surreptitious behavior. It would also allow Mabel to return to her family (*C&G* 2.1009). Further, John Suffield, Mabel's father, would have congratulated himself when Mabel sailed to South Africa to be married in April, 1891. There could be no knowing winks, sly smiles, or noddings of heads when J.R.R. Tolkien was born early in January, 1892. Though the baby was premature, he was not the result of any extra-curricular activities.

While on the 1895 family visit to England, Mabel Tolkien learned of her husband's unexpected death. She was not going to continue to stay under her father's roof and have him set limits or otherwise tell her what to do, especially if there had been the likely humiliation of being shipped off to avoid scandal. It was all very well to stay for a visit, but she quickly arranged for independent quarters with her brother-in-law, T.E. Mitton. With a little extra spending money from Walter Inledon, another brother-in-law, she could splurge on the fancy clothes she preferred for the boys: "the finery of the day: short black velvet coats and knee-length trousers, large round hats with draw-strings, frilly white satin shirts with wide collars and huge red bow ribbons loosely tied at the neck" (Grotta-Kurska 17).

While Mabel Tolkien's means of financial support might be slender, she understood what Virginia Woolf knew: the massive gap between the popular image of the powerful woman in literature and the everyday reality of women's experience:⁵ Woolf wrote:

If woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men ... one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance ... but this is a woman in fiction. In fact ... she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant ... She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger ... in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband (*A Room of One's Own* 46-47).

Mabel Tolkien might live in "genteel poverty," but she was legally independent. No one could now tell her what to do. During her marriage, her husband appeared to dote on her and accommodate her as much as he could (*Bio* 12). She might not be so lucky again. She had no need to compromise her legal status, and whatever the men might think, she was in no rush to marry again.

However, what was she to do? It was the year 1898, and she could not tell a number of men, who presented themselves

as thinking only of her best interests, to “go jump in the lake.” She must think of another way and present a socially acceptable excuse that would rid her of these nuisances and their unwanted attention.

Mabel’s ability to handle another predicament is relevant to how she might have handled this inconvenient situation. She had previously been quite resourceful when faced with another socially awkward embarrassment when she lived in South Africa. When J.R.R. Tolkien was three-years old, the house boy, Isaak, “borrowed” Tolkien “for several days” taking him to his native kraal or village so that Isaak could “proudly show” off the tow-headed, blue eyed boy (Grotta-Kurska 15-16, *Bio* 15). Both Grotta-Kurska and Carpenter report the family was “panic-stricken” and in “turmoil” when they discovered that little J.R.R. Tolkien was gone.

Grotta-Kurska reports that Tolkien remembered this story “with great amusement” (15). Tolkien should be very amused as this story is complete nonsense.

It is certain that Isaak took Tolkien to visit his kraal. However, it is not possible that Isaak did this without the permission or knowledge of his employer or at least Mabel Tolkien, who was in charge of the household. Bloemfontein was the capital of the Orange Free State. The first Pass Law, targeting African workers in the Orange Free State’s rich mine fields of Kimberley and Witwatersrand, went into effect in 1895, the year young Tolkien turned three. This law’s purpose was to control and limit the mobility of Black laborers (Thompson, *A History of South Africa* 121). No male Black African carrying a tow-headed, White, pre-school child would have been allowed to pass without some explanation that would have required a written statement. Residents of Bloemfontein might be familiar with Isaak as a servant of the Tolkiens and might not have been concerned with his escorting young J.R.R. Tolkien around town. However, to reach his village Isaak would have had to use common roads that would have been used by the local Boers. The Boers would not have waited for the slow wheels of justice to turn if they had any reason to believe that there was a Black man who was kidnapping a White child. While Isaak may have been eager to exhibit this amazing child, he was not so stupid or crazy or so reckless as to endanger his life.

Criminal law, unlike civil law, does not require the lodging of a complaint. If Isaak had in fact taken J.R.R. Tolkien without his family’s knowledge, Isaak would have been charged with kidnapping. Any charges would have been dropped later if there were extenuating circumstances. But, is there any reason to believe that either Arthur or Mabel Tolkien, whatever their political views, would have tolerated a servant, whether Black or White, who had kidnapped their child? There could not have been that much difficulty replacing a Black servant. There is nothing to indicate that Mabel Tolkien, who took so much pleasure in her handsome, bright, first child, was so distant and detached from him that his possible loss mattered so little (*Bio* 14).

There are simply too many implausible implications to the story as it stands.

To understand this situation and what it involved, the

conventions of the time regarding servants must be taken into account. It was a well-established custom in England that servants could take young children in their charge to visit their families, with their employer’s permission. Edith Nesbit published *Five Children and It* in 1899, and this story’s success depends on the contrast between an accurate depiction of everyday, typical, middle-class life and the intrusion of fantasy. Nesbit presents the socially accepted, common practice of the maid taking the youngest child home to show her family with her employer’s knowledge.⁶ Assuming that Isaak had indicated how pleased his clan would be to see such a blue-eyed, tow-headed White child, Mabel Tolkien may have chosen to follow the ordinary English custom without regard for how culturally shocking others might find it in the setting of the Orange Free State. Social convention had not seemed very compelling to her during her courtship, and there was no reason for it to be now. She even included the native servants in the family Christmas card from November, 1892 (*Bio* 149). Isaak, as a longstanding victim of Boer discrimination and abuse, would have known to get some kind of written pass or permission to protect himself on his journey to and from his village.

However, when either Arthur Tolkien learned of this *fait accompli* or neighbors learned of it, there would have been horrified reactions. Arthur Tolkien had to take into account the attitudes of his Boer clients. He needed to work very hard as an outsider to cultivate and build new accounts for his English bank in the Orange Free State when there were increasing suspicions and tensions between the Boers and England culminating in the Boer War of 1899-1902 (*Bio* 11-12, 14-15). He could not afford to have other people be offended by his wife’s casual attitude toward a Black African servant and her willingness to entrust their child to a savage and his uncivilized, if not barbaric, tribe. Previously, Mabel had been a business asset as she was quite popular and involved in local theatrics (Gorelik 7). While in private she complained about Bloemfontein life with “its endless social calls, and its tedious dinner-parties,” she understood that this was necessary for her husband’s career (*Bio* 14). Arthur Tolkien would have had to let his wife know that she had jeopardized his business status.

Her recourse was to feign ignorance, innocence, shock, and dramatic emotional upheavals. Arthur Tolkien would have been happy to help her cover her tracks. Of course, they were overjoyed when Isaak returned with young J.R.R. Tolkien. But, they could not fire Isaak nor allow charges to be filed as either way Isaak would have revealed the details of how he was able to explain himself to any strangers he met. Somehow, Arthur Tolkien made sure that the authorities understood this had all been a misunderstanding, and he gave his wife’s reputed “liberal” attitude and “tolerance” toward natives as the reason for deciding that Isaak was not to be dismissed (*Bio* 13). If this occurred when Tolkien was three, this would have occurred early in 1895 as Tolkien’s birthday is January 3.⁸ A scheduled family visit by Mabel Tolkien and the boys to England followed shortly, in April, 1895. Leaving town would let the gossip and the dust settle.

There may have been other social deceptions involved in this episode, but at least this reconstruction will accommodate the facts. A careful consideration shows that Mabel Suffield Tolkien was “a teller of tales.”

Returning to 1898, Mabel Tolkien was living in T.E. Mitton’s cottage at Sarehole. He was a member of the Moseley Baptist Church, and the Baptist Church owned a number of the other units on the property, so a large percent of the other residents were likely to be serious Baptists (“5 Gracewell, Sarehole” 8). Mabel Tolkien’s only social activity of church attendance during her two years of mourning would have established her own respectability (<http://listverse.com/2013/02/07/10-fascinating-death-facts-from-the-victorian-era>). To fit in with her neighbors and in hopes of discouraging and/or shedding some of her importunate suitors, Mabel Tolkien probably stressed her religious background. As far as reducing the flow of admirers, it probably had little effect. However, it may have given her an idea.

If we assume that Mabel Tolkien was gone from Birmingham beginning sometime in 1888 when her father hustled her out of town in order to separate her from Arthur Tolkien, then Mabel Tolkien embroidered on and covered her absence. She announced that she had been gone on missionary work with her sisters to Zanzibar. Her sister Jane had moved to Liverpool in 1896 to teach science in a girls’ high school and did not return to the Birmingham area until 1899 (Burns). Mabel’s older sister, May Incledon, was living with her husband and only appears to have returned to the Moseley area sometime around 1900. With both of her sisters gone in 1898, it would have been difficult for others to check on this story. Mabel Tolkien would be known as a foreign missionary to unenlightened savages gaining the respect and admiration of the pious Baptists. She would be “famous.” It would also send a clear message to all the local gentlemen that as a devout woman she had been places, done things, and had experiences they could not even imagine matching. It probably had the desired effect of deflating their romantic and matrimonial interests.

The Zanzibar story is almost certainly a fabrication. In 1900 Mabel’s younger sister, Jane, ran in the School Board elections on the Church Party ticket. She was an energetic campaigner and addressed meetings, and it would have been easy and obvious for her to highlight any previous religious activities. But there was never a word about any missionary work (Burns).

Mabel Tolkien probably thought little of her successful ruse of religious enthusiasm. However, in 1898 her six-year old son who would remember how deferential and impressed people were with his mother’s missionary credentials. Young J.R.R. Tolkien would have believed this story completely and reveled in her being “famous.” Carpenter states Tolkien’s “real biography is *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*” (260). He draws an explicit parallel between Belladonna Took and Mabel Suffield Tolkien (175). In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf’s unexplained comment, “for the sake of poor Belladonna,” would make sense in the context of Mabel Suffield Tolkien’s later life as seen in Tolkien’s

remark that her death was due to “persecution, poverty, and largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith” (*The Hobbit* [H] 16; *Letters* 354). Tolkien’s memories of the years at Sarehole would always include and be colored by his mother’s social standing on the basis of her supposed religious activities and create the enigmatic reference to “the famous Belladonna Took” (H 12).

The person who was most likely to have dispelled J.R.R. Tolkien’s illusion was his Aunt May Incledon when she and her sister Mabel Tolkien were taking classes to become Catholics in the spring of 1900 (*Bio* 23). Would young J.R.R. Tolkien have mentioned or asked about his aunt’s former missionary activities with his mother and learned they did not exist? However he learned the truth, his admiration for his mother’s cleverness and her ability to spin a story seems to have remained.

The Complicated Mabel Tolkien

Tolkien only spoke of his mother in the most positive and idealized terms: “a gifted lady of great beauty and wit” whose “sole tuition” (except in geometry) “gained [Tolkien] a scholarship to King Edward VI School in Birmingham” and whose death was seen by Tolkien as one of a Catholic martyr (*Letters* 54, 377, 354). Nevertheless, she was more than a two-dimensional, cardboard figure that might have stepped out of a Dickens’ novel.

Carpenter acknowledges that in the official biography he portrayed Tolkien “very much as he saw himself, and leaving out several difficult issues” (“Review: Cover book: Tolkien and the Great War by John Garth”). J.R.R. Tolkien’s literary executor and editor, his son, Christopher Tolkien, required Carpenter, the biographer, to completely rewrite his original draft, and Rayner Unwin, Tolkien’s publisher, confirms this report (249). Carpenter, when talking about how he “castrated” his original draft of the Tolkien biography and “cut out everything which was likely to be contentious,” adds how asking someone to write a biography is “a bit like inviting a private detective to investigate your family secrets” (“Learning about Ourselves” 270, 271). Carpenter’s use of the word “castrated” indicates that what was left out was important and fundamental. Whatever was left would be misleading due to an incomplete context. This includes the story of Tolkien’s mother, Mabel.

Prior to the 1896 move to Sarehole, young J.R.R. Tolkien had been cared for by servants. Given his father’s financial situation, the family had a Black African maid, a Black African house-boy, and a White nurse, who was possibly a wet-nurse for Tolkien in his infancy (*Bio* 13). Consequently, Mabel Tolkien was likely to have been little involved in the labor of everyday childcare. Rose reports that during this time period, children’s “[c]ontact with parents was highly formalized; children were carefully scrubbed and dressed and went down at set times in the day accompanied by the nursemaid to sit and talk politely with mama and papa. In ... medium middle-class homes, where there were fewer intermediary servants, the contact was more spontaneous



... but here too time was likely to be strictly rationed, and there remained a definite framework of discipline” (228). Native African servants would have tended to indulge their charges by giving them constant attention, and they would have been reluctant to cause any expression of anger or displeasure in a White child (Shengold 274). This pattern of having others deal with the daily routine of child care and discipline continued when Mabel Tolkien sailed to England with her two sons in April, 1895 as her husband, Arthur, “engaged a nurse to travel with them” (*Bio* 15). In February, 1896 she still had a nurse to help her with child care because J.R.R. Tolkien “dictated a letter to his father which was written out by the nurse” (*Bio* 16). This situation ended by the summer of 1896 when Mabel Tolkien and her sons moved to Sarehole on a very limited budget which would

have probably precluded the hiring of household help (*Bio* 19-20).

Carpenter writes that when the family moved to Sarehole, “Hilary Tolkien was only two and a half, but soon he was accompanying his elder brother on expeditions across the meadow to the mill” “where they could see the great leather belts and pulleys and shafts, and the men at work” (20). Is it any wonder that the local miller, whom the Tolkien boys called the White Ogre, tried to frighten two pre-school children away from dangerous machinery? They must have been unaccompanied frequently because in his 1991 article, “Tolkien’s shire,” John Ezard reports that George Andrew, “the White Ogre,” the tenant miller’s son, said, “The two of them were perishing little nuisances.” Again, “he used to complain about people picnicking on their land, near all the

machinery. He said the Tolkiens were some of the worst.” (“Exhibition tracks life of young J.R.R. Tolkien,” icbirmingham.icnetwork.co.uk). Grotta-Kurska notes that Tolkien and his brother went for “frequent long walks around the countryside - a practice established and encouraged by his mother” (Grotta-Kurska 17). They were evidently allowed great latitude in roaming, and they were by themselves because Hilary recalls an old farmer, who “would swoop on you and tell you what dreadful things would happen if he ever caught you again, straying off the foot path,” and “I don’t know what he would have done to us if he had managed to catch us having picnics and making fires” in “Bumble Dell” (4). The two of them were alone there when their mother surprised them by using a deep voice (*Bio* 21). Mabel Tolkien certainly read these comments in her son Hilary’s exercise book and she had no concerns about their trespassing, wandering, and possibly endangering themselves on others’ property. This lack of concern with others’ views was consistent with her previous indifference to convention.

There was great freedom in this, both for Mabel and the boys, but this lack of supervision would seem much more of a lower class benign neglect than the kind of more supervised play seen in middle class families, e.g. the kind of supervision seen in *Five Children and It* where the maid is within earshot and can check on the children, though the children may decide to go on unauthorized adventures. One thinks of the contrast in *The Secret Garden* between the lower class child, Dicken, and the strictly supervised Mary and her well-to-do cousin. In *Orphans, Real and Imagined* (1987), Eileen Simpson writes that by “the middle of the nineteenth century, when, with the cult of domesticity, the bourgeois family reached its sentimental peak, . . . middle- and upper-class children were cosseted as never before,” but not by Mabel Tolkien (140). In “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien recalled that he liked “Red Indians . . . there were bows and arrows . . . , and strange languages, and glimpses of an archaic mode of life and, above all, forests in such stories” (134). One wonders if Tolkien’s relatives described his roaming with his brother as acting like the proverbial ‘bunch of wild Indians’. However, Mabel Tolkien’s extended family could do nothing as children were legally the property of their parents and were used by them as personal or family assets (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 348). Young J.R.R. Tolkien was his mother’s possession as she was the sole legal guardian due to her husband’s death.

The terrifying, but not surprising, final result of this laissez-faire mode of parenting appears to have been Hilary’s near drowning. Carpenter dwells only on the mill’s temptations with “the water- wheel turning in its dark cavern” and the pool behind the mill “a dangerous and exciting place” with waters that “suddenly plunged over the sluice to the great wheel below” (20). Hilary Tolkien reveals, “I fell in the mill’s pool once, but my mother was so glad I didn’t get drowned that I wasn’t even scolded” (6). The boys must have been unaccompanied.

But the picture of Mabel Tolkien is even more complicated.

Before her marriage, she had been a governess (Grotta-Kurska, 18).⁹ Mabel Tolkien’s employment as a governess would have been compatible with her family’s investment in education, and this was one of the few socially accepted occupations for a middle-class, not-yet-married woman. While she dispensed with wearisome supervision, she expected model deportment and educational performance. J.R.R. Tolkien was a child his mother could be proud of as he was reading at the age of 4 and soon writing (*Bio* 21). However, with the 1896 move to Sarehole, not only must the distressed widow, Mabel Tolkien, care for and discipline the children herself, but her own expectations of acceptable behavior in children would have been quite different from the indulgences that they had been used to in South Africa from the native servants and perhaps were allowed by doting relatives during the visit in England. Governesses often had a reputation for “viciously strict discipline” (Rose 165). Her dressing her sons in short black velvet coats, large round hats, and frilly white satin shirts would not allow them rambunctious play. She disapproved of young J.R.R. Tolkien’s invented languages as “a useless frivolity taking up time that could be better spent in studying” for his entrance examinations for King Edward VI School, which he failed in November 1899 (Grotta-Kurska 18, Plimmer and Plimmer). He had to buckle down and his notebook, containing his first languages, was destroyed. Given Tolkien’s love of languages, this must have been incredibly painful because 30 years later when he was writing “A Secret Vice” in the early 1930s he recalled this (Bunting, Tolkien’s First Notebook and Its Destruction” 27).

We may also learn something of Mabel Tolkien’s views on teaching children by comparing her to her sister, Jane Suffield Neave, a teacher by training, who took children at her Phoenix Farm for educational activities like mushrooming, country walks, and pointing out constellations (Morton and Hayes 22). While Jane Suffield Neave was “endlessly interesting,” she was capable of “taking a stern view of matters concerning domestic order” (Morton and Hayes 22). As a governess, Mabel was likely to have shared this characteristic of “sternness.”

Generally, people’s expectations of their children are likely to be consistent with their own upbringing unless very conscious, deliberate changes are made. Julian Tolkien, a son of Hilary Tolkien born in the 1930s, recalled in 2001 that they were brought up not to speak unless spoken to (“Related to Tolkien”). Christopher Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien’s son and literary executor, notes that the *The Lost Road*’s character, Albion, has a biography that “is in many respects closely modelled on my father’s own life.” He writes that in a way similar to Albion, his father, frequently addressed his sons as “boy” as “a term of friendship and affection,” as opposed to using “an aloofly schoolmasterish tone” (*The Lost Road* 53). Carpenter’s biography and *The Tolkien Family Album* abundantly indicate J.R.R. Tolkien’s affectionate and empathic attitude toward his children, but addressing her sons with “boy” with an “aloof schoolmasterish tone” would have fit a governess with a “stern view” who only allowed children

to speak when addressed directly (*Bio* 158-161).

Hilary Tolkien is quite matter-of-fact in his old diary about getting a “good thrashing.” During the time he lived in Sarehole, Hilary was 2½ to 6½ years old, and he would have been ill equipped to resist the temptation of pretty flowers, mill ponds, etc (2).¹⁰ Tolkien in his lecture, “On Fairy-stories” wrote that “the years, few but long-seeming, between learning to read and going to school” were “really a sad and troublous time” (135). Tolkien began to read at the age of four, and he began school in 1900 at the age of eight at King Edward VI School, i.e. the years at Sarehole living with his mother (*Bio* 21). Tolkien called this “the longest seeming and most formative part of my life” (*Bio* 24). This “sad and troublous time” could not have been due to financial difficulties or the lack of available extended family. It is likely this refers to physical abuse as the beating of children by both parents and strangers was common, acceptable, and unremarkable at the turn of the 20th century. These ‘thrashings’ or beatings should also be seen in the context of the casual and frequent physical discipline of boys, particularly in the English public schools (Rose 179). The widely existing, accepted belief was that this practice was not only for the child’s good, but also necessary for education (Rose 180). Biblical authority and custom, i.e. “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” supported the physical abuse and exploitation of children, and this was also applied to infants. Physical abuse was not necessarily an indication of disliking a child. People could see themselves as good parents, and be seen by others as good parents, and beat their children. Children were seen as little adults and the “indifference to what we should now see as cruelty to children sprang from ... ignorance of the consequences of maltreatment in youth on the physique and character of the grown man” (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 348, 349).

Not only was Mabel Tolkien a “teller of tales” and “famous,” but she was an independent person who ignored convention in her courtship with her husband, the supervision of her children, and in 1900 joining and remaining in the Catholic Church against all family opposition (*Bio* 23). She was “beautiful and witty,” a stern governess, Tolkien’s guide to what he saw as the only true religion, Catholicism, and she was also the source of his interest in languages, etymology, alphabets, and handwriting (*Letters* 377).¹¹ She was also the beautiful Queen Mab with an “almost idolatrous love” of trees and flowers, his guide to Faërie, the realm of elves and dragons, which he believed in all his life (Grotta-Kurska 19; Bunting, “Fairies, Fairy Queens, and the Character of Guinevere in *The Fall of Arthur*”).

When Tolkien reminisced about his early years with Ready, Ryan, and Grotta-Kurska, he carefully orchestrated the positive memories of his time growing up in Sarehole. He was appalled when he realized Ready had taken note of his referring to his mother’s missionary activities in Zanzibar.¹¹ He was furious, as much as with himself as with Ready, for letting the gullible six-year old J.R.R. Tolkien reveal the “famous” missionary, Mabel Tolkien, and for slipping up on his careful presentation. But the slip about Zanzibar allows

us to have a much more nuanced view of the “remarkable” Mabel Tolkien as well as a glimpse into Tolkien’s *early* life which Carpenter stressed was Tolkien’s source of the “seeds of his imagination. Further experience was not necessary and it was not sought” (126; italics in original). This would be the primary reality upon which Tolkien based his secondary reality or fantasy.¹²

Notes

1. As Tolkien strongly averred that children dislike opinionated, intrusive narrators, this fairy tale is written for adults in hope that they will be more tolerant and forgiving (*Letters* 310, 346). Dimitra Fimi in *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (2009) discusses how Tolkien, like many authors, manage their presentation to promote a certain view of themselves, i.e. a ‘biographical legend’.
2. Jason Fisher in “The Year’s Work in Tolkien Studies 2012” reviews J.S. Ryan’s second edition of *Tolkien: Cult or Culture?* (212-213). He writes that as the 1969 first edition “is no longer easy to find, the new edition is a welcome one.” However, in fact, the 1969 edition is much easier to find than the 2012 one. The only two copies available of the second edition are in two libraries in Australia. I was able to get a copy of Chapter 2 “Tolkien, the Man and the Scholar,” by email from The National Library of Australia. My research found the second edition is not for sale in any Tolkien specialty shop or general bookstore (amazon) though it was only published in 2012. Ryan’s publisher lists no copies as available for sale. All quotations in this paper are from the more readily available 1969 edition.
3. Ready received a letter from Tolkien February 2, 1967 stating: “I dislike being written about, and the results to date have caused me both irritation and distaste. I vetoed being treated in one of the series *Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective* published by Eerdmans. ... I hope you will make it literary ... and not personal. I have no inclination, in fact must refuse, to provide information about myself, family and family origin” (55-56). Having been warned in a letter before his April, 1967 interview with Tolkien, Ready was unlikely to have wanted to offend or alienate a writer, whom he much admired, by asking him forbidden personal questions. If Tolkien talked about his background and retold family stories, then this was a slip on his part. He enjoyed playing to an audience when he declaimed *Beowulf* in a “dramatic performance” in his classes (*Bio* 133). He admitted concerning the BBC filming him in the 1960s: “they got what they wanted and my histrionic temperament (I used to like ‘acting’) betrayed me into playing ball (the ball desired) to my own undoing” (C&G 1.711).
3. This independence is also seen in Mabel’s other two sisters. Her older sister, May, who attempted to join the Catholic Church with Mabel, was thwarted by her husband, but showed her independent thinking by becoming active in the International Club for Psychological Research (Priestman 36). Her younger sister, Jane, obtained a university degree and ran successfully for the local school board at the turn of the century. After her brief marriage to Edwin Neave, the widowed Jane became a landowner and a farmer, a rather unconventional and pioneering role for a woman in 1911 (Morton and Hayes 18).
4. The ‘Ronald’ in J.R.R. Tolkien’s name is unusual and has never been explained like his name John and Reuel (*Letters* 398). ‘Ronald’ is a scrambling of ‘Roland’, an anagram of Mabel’s brother’s name. Mabel Tolkien’s father, John Suffield, was known for his jokes, puns, and doggerel, and was likely to have encouraged his children to play with language (*Tolkien’s Gedling, 1914, The Birth of a Legend* 12).
5. Virginia Woolf was a victim of sexual abuse by her two older step-brothers so she understood the lack of protection that women had in her society. The Stephens family certainly knew of this abuse and could do nothing to intervene or protect her (Terr, 230-231).
6. In *Five children and It* one child asks where the baby is and Jane says that Martha, the maid, “is going to take him to Rochester to see her cousins. Mother said she might. She’s dressing him now ... in his very best coat and hat.” Cyril adds “Servants *do* like taking babies to see their relations ... I’ve noticed it before - especially in their best things” (31).
7. Tolkien reports this story as it was told to him and he contributes no memories of his own. However, by November, 1894 he can recall some

memories of the train trip and being by the sea (*Bio* 15). He also had memories from Christmas of 1894, i.e. the drooping eucalyptus tree (*Letters* 213). It is surprising that he has memories from this early, but Tolkien strongly defended these and his visual memory was excellent, i.e. "My memory is mainly pictorial" (*Letters* 343). His lack of memory for something so unusual as a trip to a native village suggests that it occurred before November, 1894 and therefore when he was two, as opposed to three as reported by Grotta-Kurska. If that is correct and the "kidnapping" occurred when Tolkien was two, it may have contributed to the decision for Mabel Tolkien to take the boys in November, 1894 to the coast near Cape Town reportedly to have young J.R.R. Tolkien spend time in cooler air for the sake of his health (*Bio* 15). That is, again, leaving town to let the furor die down. While the 1895 Pass Law would not have been in effect yet, it codified long-standing Boer attitudes to the native population.

8. Hammond and Scull confirm this is true from a communication from Priscilla Tolkien (under March 17, 2010 1018- 1020) (2/09/2014), www.hammondandscull.com/addenda/guide-by-date.html.
9. The likelihood of harsh punishment during the time in Sarehole may also be supported by other considerations. Tolkien's spring 1915 poem *You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play* features the two children of the title who are described as "a dark child and a fair." Also, there are fairies who visit "lonely children and whisper to them at dusk in early bed by nightlight and candle-flame, or comfort those that weep" (*BLT1* 20). While Ronald remained fair like his early picture, Hilary changed to "look more and more like his father" (*Bio* 23). This must partly refer to Hilary's darker hair because Arthur Tolkien, his father, has dark hair in the picture in the Carpenter biography (149). Tolkien was also fascinated with the Kullervo story from the Kalevala. This story focuses on child abuse and its long-term effects on a child, and Tolkien saw this as particularly relevant to the treatment of his younger brother Hilary (See Bunting, "1904: Tolkien, Trauma, and Its Anniversaries" 68-72).
10. See note 7 for how his maternal grandfather, John Suffield, contributed to his love of playing with language.
11. Tolkien wrote the President of the Tolkien Society of America that he wanted the membership to know that the forthcoming William Ready "biography" "is bogus." "Ready has neither the authority nor the knowledge to write such a book" (C&G 1.722) However, elsewhere he acknowledged Ready as a "genuine (and intelligent) liker of my works" (C&G 1.715).
12. "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not slavery to it" (OFS 144). "Fantasy is made out of the Primary World" (OFS 147).

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