



by J. R. R. Tolkien

a BRIEF account of the Book
and its making

By

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TO a majority, perhaps, of those who are familiar with his name, J.R.R. Tolkien means "Hobbits". But many would say rather "Middle-earth", and by this they refer to that great imagined country, peopled by Elves, by Dwarves, by Ents, by men of different cultures, and by Orcs, through which the Fellowship of the Ring passed on its quest; peopled also indeed by Hobbits, in one small region called the Shire. It is a rich landscape, of mountain ranges, plains, forests, rivers, but richest of all in its past: its ancient roads and ruined cities, old battlefields and vast works of stone, named

in many different languages. Yet there are frequent suggestions in *The Lord of the Rings* of an ever deeper past, of lands and cities that cannot be found on the map that accompanies the book: a past nonetheless that some of the persons in the story speak of as having known and seen with their own eyes. Thus Elrond, whose memory reaches back so far as to astound Frodo the Hobbit, speaks to him of "the glory of the Elder Days and the hosts of Beleriand"; and Treebeard the old Ent sings of ancient forests where he once walked — "but now all those lands lie under the wave".

They speak of the lands, cities, and stories of *The Silmarillion*. For *The Silmarillion* is the history of the Elder Days, the First Age of the world, as *The Lord of the Rings* is the history of the ending of the Third; and the greater part of it takes place in that region of Middle-earth that was called Beleriand. Beleriand lay beyond the Blue Mountains, which appear in the extreme northwest of the map to *The Lord of the Rings*; but it was drowned by the sea in the cataclysmic battle in which the First Age came to an end.

The two books are, however, very different; and not the least of the differences is the absence from *The Silmarillion* of the Hobbits and their cheerful, pipe-smoking provinciality, to whom the realities, and the history, of the great world into which they are caught up come as a perpetual surprise and enlargement of their horizons. Even Men do not appear in Middle-earth until the narrative is far advanced. For this is the story above all of the Elves, and it is seen largely through Elvish eyes: their tradition of their origins and their account of their peculiar and separate fate. *The Silmarillion* is indeed the central stock of that great imaginative enterprise from which *The Lord of the Rings* was derived; for the Elves were there from its beginning, and in them are to be discerned some of the primary aesthetic and philosophical convictions of its author.

Again, whereas the entire action of the story of *The Lord of the Rings* takes place within a span of twenty years and possesses great narrative urgency — the pressure and fear of the immediate and unknown event — *The Silmarillion* traverses long ages; and its elegiac air and tone might be described in my father's own words about the Old English poem *Beowulf*, when he wrote that "its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote".

The Silmarillion does indeed begin at the beginning, with the Elvish myth of the creation of the world, and it tells of great wars fought out at the beginning of time, when Morgoth, the power of evil incarnate in the world, sought to wrest the mastery of Middle-earth from the Gods — for in *The Silmarillion* appears a pantheon, scarcely glimpsed in *The Lord of the Rings*, whose powers and natures are uniquely conceived. The story then passes to the birth of the Elves in Middle-earth and their summoning by the Gods to dwell with them in their paradise of Valinor in the far West, beyond the sea. There follows the making of the Silmarils, the jewels of light, greatest of all the achievements of the Elves, and the theft of them by Morgoth; the rebellion of the Elves against the Gods; and their departure from Valinor and return to Middle-earth to wage war against the Dark Lord.

From here on (again to quote from my father's essay on *Beowulf*) "Disaster is foreboded; defeat is the theme". *The Silmarillion* chronicles the ruinous history of the Elves in Beleriand, the failure of their arms and their courage either to regain the Silmarils or to defend what they have achieved, and the destruction one by one of their great redoubts, by fire from without and treachery from within. Through the complex narrative run many interwoven strands: the workings of the curse of the God on the rebellious Elves, and of the blasphemous oath taken by the maker of the Silmarils and his sons, in which they laid claim to them forever; the mysterious operations of the sea-god Ulmo to devise a new hope out of ruin;

and the power for good and evil of the Silmarils themselves.



I have implied that *The Silmarillion* is an essential part of the long story that ended with the departure of the Ringbearers from the Grey Havens in the last chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*. That story began a very long time ago. "In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit" was the beginning of the Hobbits; but it was certainly not the beginning of "the world into which Mr. Baggins strayed", as my father expressed it. The earliest of the tales that afterward became *The Silmarillion* (the story of the Fall of Gondolin) was written during the First World War. Long afterward he recorded that he wrote it "out of my head" during sick-leave from the army in 1917, and he told me once that he began *The Silmarillion* "in army huts, crowded, filled with the noise of gramophones"; indeed some lines of verse in which appear the Seven Names of Gondolin are scribbled on the back of a paper setting out the chain of responsibility in a battalion. This story, and those that followed it during the next years, are still in existence, written rapidly in battered notebooks that are often only decipherable with patience and a magnifying glass.

At the time of his death fifty-six years later it was still unfinished. For nearly twenty years after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954-55 he had continued to work on "the matter of Middle-earth", until it had reached a luxuriance that was beyond his declining energies to order. Thus *The Silmarillion* is at once the precursor of and the sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* — a curious situation, for which he himself, when badgered for a definition of the relation between the two books, coined the highly uncharacteristic word "prequel"!

Nevertheless, *The Silmarillion* as now to be published goes back to those earliest versions in most of the essentials of its conception: the Gods in the West beyond the sea, the secret city of Gondolin hidden behind its encircling mountains, the forest kingdom of Doriath, the stronghold of the Dark Lord in Angband in the North; while many of the legends, the Two Trees of Valinor, whose light was imprisoned in the Silmarils, the first awakening of the Elves in Middle-earth, the stories of Beren and Lúthien and of Túrin Turambar, survived with little really fundamental change from those early writings. As time passed they became a permanent element in my father's mind: they were not as completed things, from which an author passes on to new and separate creations, but sources of imaginative energy throughout his life, a stable body of legend, life-giving, to be explored for new meaning and capable of new interpretation. (When in *The Lord of the Rings* Aragorn on the hill of Weathertop attempted to ease the fear of his companions by telling them the story of Beren and Lúthien, he was indeed telling them an old story, and not one got up to give a fictitious air of antiquity.) And they could lend themselves to different treatments: to longer and shorter versions; to ample poems in various metres, which might again be reduced to prose (as is the case with the story of Beren and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion*); or they could be represented as annals in the learned chronicles of people living long after.

But if this "mythology" became authentically based in an imagined



And they fled North together And
He numbed his pride And suffered her to
ride upon him in the fashion of a steed
Even as the Orcs did at times on great
wolves Thus they made good speed for
Nuan was swift and tireless.

[SILMARILLION P.173/4]

past (to which in later writing the great figures of the Third Age look back with awe) and therefore in a sense detached from himself, it was nevertheless the product of his own imagining — and in great part the imagining of his youth. Moreover, it was never published, and therefore never received a form fixed and irrevocable outside his own manuscripts. Thus he was free, being both creator and interpreter, to develop it, to devise new detail, to suppress old motives and to discover new ones. I say 'discover', because that is how he himself saw it; as he said once, "Always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere; not of 'inventing'." In notes that he wrote as private discussions or 'thinking aloud', he often spoke as if the solution to a problem could best be found by penetrating more deeply into the matter, as if some contradiction could best be resolved in terms of what was already known — far more rarely did he treat his work autocratically, saying "This won't do" or "I must get rid of that". Yet it was subjected to close critical examination, and things wouldn't do, and things were got rid of — but usually by subtle transformation rather than by outright rejection, so that the study of the growth of these legends can seem not unlike that of those of actual peoples, the product of many minds and generations.



By the time of my father's death the amount of writing in existence on the subject of the Three Ages was huge in quantity (since it extended over a lifetime), disordered, more full of beginnings than of ends, and varying in content from heroic verse in the ancient English alliterative metre to severe historical analysis of his own extremely difficult languages: a vast repository and labyrinth of story, of poetry, of philosophy, and of philology. By no means all of this was *The Silmarillion* proper, of course; that had a definite narrative structure. But it was in the process of expansion; 'waves' of revision passing over it had petered out or been overtaken by other waves, leading to frequent lack of coherence, and many parts existed in parallel versions, often divergent at essential turns in the story.

To bring it into publishable form was a task at once utterly absorbing and alarming in its responsibility toward something that is unique. To decide what that form should be was not easy; and for a time I worked toward a book that would show something of this diversity, this unfinished and many-branched growth. But it became clear to me that the result would be so complex as to require much study for its comprehension; and I feared to crush *The Silmarillion* beneath the weight of its own history. I set myself, therefore, to work out a single text, by selection and arrangement. To give even an impression of the way this has been done is scarcely possible in a short space, and it must suffice to say that in the result *The Silmarillion* is emphatically my father's book and in no sense mine. Here and there I had to develop the narrative out of notes and rough drafts; I had to make many choices between competing versions and to make many changes of detail; and in the last few chapters (which had been left almost untouched for many years) I had in places to modify the narrative to make it coherent. But essentially what I have done has been a work of organisation, not of completion.

At the end of the book are given, according to my father's expressed intention, two short separate works. The first of these, *The Downfall of*

Númenor, is an 'Atlantis' legend. The Men that were faithful in the war against Morgoth were granted as reward a great life span on the island of Númenor, set in the seas between Middle-earth and Valinor, the land of the Gods; but they cast away their gift in the attempt to escape from death, being deceived by Sauron, at first the agent of Morgoth and afterward himself the supreme power of evil in the world, the Lord of the Rings. The last king of the Númenoreans sailed with a great armada against Valinor, in an insane attempt to conquer the Undying Lands; but a great chasm opened in the sea, and Númenor on the edge of the rift toppled down into the abyss and was swallowed up. After that cataclysm there was no dwelling-place of the Gods on earth, for Valinor was "taken into the realm of hidden things"; and if Men sailed west over the sea they came no nearer to the land of the Gods, for the world was made round. "And those that sailed furthest but set a girdle about the Earth and returned weary at last to the place of their beginning; and they said: 'All roads are now bent.'" Only to the lingering Elves of Middle-earth was it granted to sail away on the "straight road", and come into the True West.

The second of these short works is called *Of the Rings of Power*. In this is recounted, in the manner of *The Silmarillion*, the great events of the later Ages; and by its inclusion the War of the Rings is placed in the context of the whole history of the Eldar, the High Elves, in Middle-earth. The book thus concludes with a greater finality than does *The Lord of the Rings*, although both end at the same point, with the departure of the white ship from the Grey Havens; for this is indeed the end of the story.

"In the twilight of autumn it sailed out of Mithlond until the seas of the Bent World fell away beneath it, and the winds of the round sky troubled it no more, and borne upon the high airs above the mists of the world it passed into the Ancient West, and an end was come for the Eldar of story and of song."



magic

*Hobbits still dwell in the west of the world.
Treasures there are where the dragons lie curled.
Elves are hidden in the forests of Dawn,
Awaiting a new age, the coming of Morn.
Magic lies, unknown, in Man's midst.
Perhaps heroes still sleep in the east of our minds.*

Gordon MacLellan