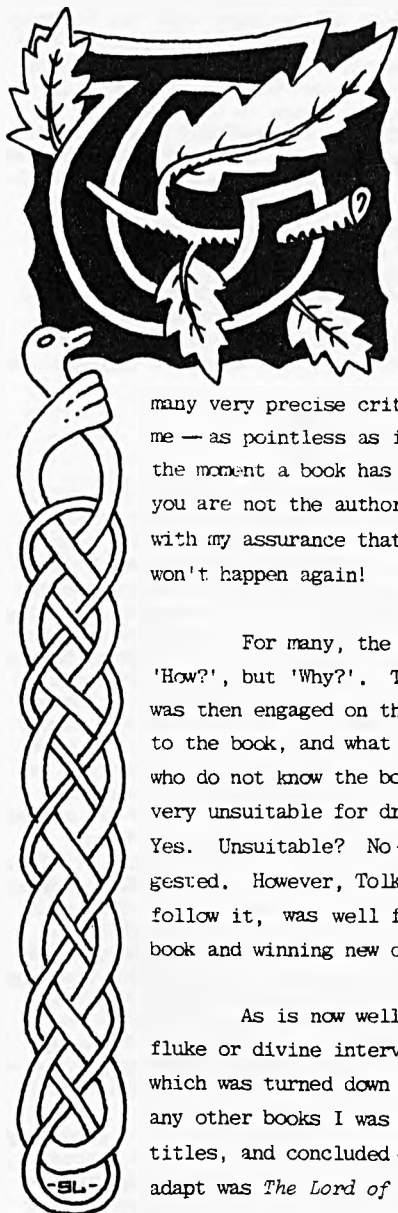




the choices of master sibley

BRIAN SIBLEY



oo late now! Too late to do anything about the errors, omissions and missed opportunities. Too late to regularize the pronunciation of 'Isildur', or to reinstate Tom Bombadil, or to re-stage Gandalf's battle with the Balrog for the benefit of those who didn't understand it. And, being too late for such things, it is probably a good time — or as good a time as any is ever likely to be — to look back, across the Sundering Months to the making — or, if you loathed it — the marring of *The Lord of the Rings* serial.

What follows, however, is not *The Confessions of a Radio Adaptor*, and will not give any very clear apologies or excuses in response to the many very precise criticisms that have been levelled against the series. To do so would be — for me — as pointless as it would be painful. The misprints and grammatical gaffes which materialise the moment a book has rolled off the press can be discovered with a crow of delight only so long as you are not the author. It is the same with a radio script. So my critics must content themselves with my assurance that their arrows have found their mark, and my promise that the same mistakes won't happen again!

For many, the real question about putting *The Lord of the Rings* on radio, has not been 'How?', but 'Why?'. Tolkien would have agreed with them. Writing, in 1956, to Terence Tiller who was then engaged on the first radio version, Tolkien asked "why this sort of treatment is accorded to the book, and what value it has... For myself, I do not believe that many, if any, listeners who do not know the book will thread the plot or grasp at all what is going on... Here is a book very unsuitable for dramatic or semi-dramatic representation." (*Letters*, p.254-255.) Difficult? Yes. Unsuitable? No — or so everything I knew about the medium as a writer and as a listener suggested. However, Tolkien's fear that those who did not already know the book would not be able to follow it, was well founded; and, in the end, my vain hope of pleasing existing admirers of the book and winning new ones for it, proved vain indeed.

As is now well known, I acquired the task (depending on your theology) by luck, accident, fluke or divine intervention. Having suggested a radio adaptation of Frank Baker's *Miss Hargreaves* which was turned down (a previous recording being still in existence), I was asked if there were any other books I was interested in serializing. In reply, I submitted a list of some half-a-dozen titles, and concluded — as a scarcely serious post-script — that the book I would really like to adapt was *The Lord of the Rings*! By some plan of Ilúvatar — or, maybe, Melkor! — my letter arrived

at the very moment that the BBC were entering into secret negotiations with Saul Zaentz for the acquisition of the radio rights to the book!

The idea of doing *The Lord of the Rings* as a dramatized radio serial was the brain-child of Aubrey Singer, the Managing Director of Radio; and the fact that the child was successfully delivered was due almost entirely to Richard Imison, Head of the Drama Script Unit, who fought long and hard to secure the rights to the book and sufficient freedom for the adaptors to work without the intervention of American movie executives who believed they held a kind of sacred trust to ensure that the book wasn't mishandled! Amusingly, however, it was only when the negotiations were complete that it was discovered — to everyone's surprise and some people's embarrassment — that the radio rights were not actually the property of Saul Zaentz at all, but were still owned by George Allen & Unwin!

With the deal finally signed, I was invited to prepare a detailed synopsis (it eventually ran to nearly forty pages) showing how the book could be treated in 26 half-hour episodes. This presented the first of the many hurdles that had to be surmounted in the months which followed. Tolkien was not particularly sympathetic to drama — or, indeed, to radio,* — and it is not surprising to find that the book lacks any kind of conventional dramatic structure. For example, the events it deals with are not told sequentially, and the author makes no attempt to balance narrative and dialogue in the way that a radio dramatist must do. The first decision which I took, therefore, was to rearrange the story-line in as near chronological order as was dramatically feasible. In doing this, I constantly consulted Tolkien's 'The Tale of Years' (Appendix B to *The Return of the King*). This meant, for instance, that Gandalf's meeting with Radagast, his imprisonment by Saruman and rescue by Gwaihir, were transferred from the already over-burdened chapter dealing with the Council of Elrond; and were augmented with an 'invented' scene describing Gandalf's visit to Eorlas in search of aid (an event which Gandalf mentions, but fails fully to report). There were advantages and disadvantages to such rearrangements: the advantage, in the example quoted, was that three major characters — Théoden, Saruman and Gríma — were all introduced within three episodes of the series beginning; the disadvantage was the loss of mystery surrounding Gandalf's failure to return to the Shire (though the treachery of Saruman provided a thrilling climax to Episode 3).

Subsequently, I have learned that Tolkien would most certainly *not* have approved this action, since he complained bitterly, in 1958, when the same method was being adopted on a proposed film synopsis. Speaking of the division of the book's narrative into "two main branches", Tolkien wrote: "*It is essential that these two branches should each be treated in coherent sequence [Tolkien's stress] both to render them intelligible as a story, and because they are totally different in tone and scenery. Jumbling them together entirely destroys these things*" (*Letters* p.275). However, with episodes of just thirty minutes each, it would have been impossible to dramatize the book in this way, since listeners would have heard nothing for weeks of the Ring-bearers (whom Tolkien himself considered as constituting the 'Primary Action'), and would have been constantly shuttled back and forth across Middle-earth, and through time, every few episodes. Tolkien's ready

admission that he lacked any real experience of the medium, emboldens me to add that if the serial had followed the format of the book, it would have been little short of a dramatic and artistic catastrophe.



The restructuring complete, I proceeded to sub-divide the material into units that would dramatically juxtapose the exploits of the various characters: a complex problem, particularly following the breaking of the Fellowship. As with the confrontation in Orthanc, I tried to find a cliff-hanger, or a moment of great excitement, with which to conclude each episode. Whilst scarcely a subtle device, I felt it an essential one if we were to hold an audience over so long a period.

At the same time, I decided that a Narrator would have to be used, since there were far too many changes of location to be coped with without the authoritative presence of a story-teller. Consideration was given to using one or more of the characters as a narrator, but since no one character is present in all scenes, and since only Sam could fulfil the rôle of historian (which would also indicate his survival) such ideas were soon abandoned. I also hoped to avoid the criticism which Tolkien had made of the 1955 dramatization, when he wrote that it had placed "too great an emphasis on dialogue (mostly with the settings removed)." (*Letters*, p. 255); although, when lack of time demanded cuts, it was, sadly, nearly always the Narrator who first felt the editor's razor-blade: thereby losing much of the narrative material Tolkien least wanted to be lost.



Thirteen hours is a long time, but still scarcely long enough for the full telling of the story of the War of the Ring. As a result, some cuts had to be made: Tom Bombadil, Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wights were early victims, since the threat of the Black Riders to the safety of the Ring would have been replaced, for at least one episode, by a very different, elemental kind of threat to the hobbits themselves. The debate about the wisdom of this decision could be argued through whole issues of *Mallorn* (and may well be, since those who tamper with the Word put themselves in danger of the most intricately argued condemnation!); but the fact remains, if Tom and Co. had not been cut, something else would have had to go instead. Other casualties (of varying severity) were Fatty Bolger, Gildor, Galdor, Glóin, the Southrons and the Oliphaunt, Ghān-buri-Ghān, Círdan (who has only four words to speak), the Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth (have a look next time you read the book and see just how little he has to say for himself, and you may understand how difficult it would have been — and how much time and additional dialogue it would have taken — to establish him as a new character just at the time when everybody is fighting for their lives!), Bregalad, Beregon and — much later in the scripting process — that delightful pair of Orcs on the Gorgoroth Road.

As well as cuts, there had to be a good many compressions (as, for example, in the Ent chapters), some rearrangement of detail (as in having Pippin look in the palantír while still at Isengard), and

*For his condemnation of the BBC's 1955 radio production of *LoTR*, and his views on the book's general unsuitability for dramatization, see *The Letters of J.R.R.T.*

several additional scenes and expansions of existing dialogue. Without doubt, the additions to the original proved the most controversial factor in my handling of the series, and a word or two might help in explaining why I considered them necessary.

Here are just a few facts about the first appearances in the book of some of the major characters (page numbers refer to the one-volume paperback edition): Frodo does not speak until p.48 ("Has he [Bilbo] gone?"); Sam and Frodo do not appear together until the eavesdropping scene on p.76; Merry has only two sentences until he meets his companions at the ferry on p.110; and Gollum does not speak — apart from his reported exchange with Déagol — until p.638!

In order to resolve such difficulties — which would clearly be more of a problem for listeners who did not know the book — it seemed necessary to invent some passages of dialogue. A scene was written in which Sam delivers replies to the party invitations to Bilbo and Frodo at Bag End, and another in order to establish Merry before he sets out for Crickhollow. And, as no-one can have failed to notice, the first episode began with the arrest of Gollum on the borders of Mordor and his subsequent interrogation in Barad-dûr (an event reported by Gandalf and referred to in *Unfinished Tales*).

Here, for comparison, is the Merry/Frodo passage from the book and the script:

On September 20th, two covered carts went off laden to Buckland, conveying the furniture and goods that Frodo had not sold... The thought that he [Frodo] would so soon have to part with his young friends weighed on his heart. He wondered how he would break it to them...

The next morning they were busy packing another cart with the remainder of the luggage. Merry took charge of this, and drove off with Fatty... "Someone must get there and warm the house before you arrive," said Merry. "Well, see you later — the day after tomorrow, if you don't go to sleep on the way!"

(*LotR*, p.80-81)

FRODO: Well, Merry, is everything ready?
MERRY: Yes: two cart-loads yesterday, full to overflowing, and now another one. I'm beginning to wonder if your new home will be big enough!
FRODO: Well, I've sold everything I could bear parting with to Lobelia, but some things I just had to take to remind me of Bilbo and Bag End...
MERRY: Well, I'd best be off... If I leave now I can get to Crickhollow and warm the house before you arrive — that is, if you're quite sure you want to walk rather than go by cart...
FRODO: Quite sure.
MERRY: Then I'll see you the day after tomorrow — if you don't go to sleep on the way!
FRODO: (LAUGHING) I'll try not to!
(CART STARTS OFF, THEN STOPS)
MERRY: (CALLING BACK) I'll tell you one thing, Frodo, you had better settle when you get to Buckland, because I for one am not helping you move back again!
FRODO: What on earth makes you think Lobelia would ever sell Bag End back to me?!
(CART STARTS OFF ONCE MORE)
MERRY: She might — at a profit! Farewell, Frodo — and good walking!
(CART DRIVES OFF)

FRODO: (TO HIMSELF) Poor Merry, what will you say when you learn the truth of all this?
(FADE)

Without offering any serious defence of additions of mock-Tolkien such as this, the astute reader will observe that, as well as helping establish Merry's light-hearted personality (he does not appear again until two episodes later), a variety of information is conveyed, ranging from details of where they are going and to whom Bag End has been sold, to a gentle reminder of the existence of Bilbo who left at the end of the previous episode.

Similar problems occur throughout the book. There are often a large number of characters present in a scene who do not make any contribution to the conversations taking place. When reading the book it matters very little if, for some pages, Gimli or Legolas don't speak, but on radio a silent character is a non-existent character. These difficulties come thickest at the end of the book: the struggle at the Crack of Doom between Frodo and Gollum is, we are told, enacted in silence (except for the odd hiss or two), which is hardly helpful to the would-be dramatist, and the final partings of the many characters are woefully short of dialogue. Consider, for example, Frodo's farewell to Sam: "Then Frodo kissed Merry and Pippin, and last of all Sam, and went aboard..." Something more was needed for the final parting of the two heroes whose adventures we have followed for twenty-six weeks. Simple lines were given to Bilbo, Merry and Pippin, and for Sam and Frodo some dialogue was transferred from a page before:

FRODO: Sam...
SAM: Oh, Mr. Frodo, I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire for years and years, after all you have done.
FRODO: So I thought, too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you, Sam. You will be the most famous gardener in history, and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the story goes on...
SAM: Oh, Mr. Frodo, my dear... my dear...
(THEY KISS)
GANDALF: Now... Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil!

Curiously, perhaps, the 'additions' which appear to have attracted the most criticism were the visit of the Black Riders to Isengard, and the waylaying of Gríma Wormtongue: which just goes to show how many people have yet to read *Unfinished Tales*! The other major inclusions from secondary Tolkien sources (apart from a few small references from *The Silmarillion*) were an extract from the 'Riddles' episode in *The Hobbit*, and the poster-poem 'Bilbo's Last Song', which was substituted for the prose description of the passing of the Ring-bearers given in the book. "If details are

to be added to an already crowded picture," Tolkien told those prospective film-makers in 1958, "they should at least fit the world described." (Letters, p.272.) This, too, was my belief and motivating principle.



Another important decision which had to be taken was the way in which the 26 episodes were divided between myself and my co-adaptor, Michael Bakewell. Should we do alternate episodes (a not-too-serious proposal!), or should one of us do episodes one to thirteen and the other the remainder? I considered the latter course too frustrating for both the one who started and the one who had to take over half-way through the series. Michael — an extremely gifted and experienced radio writer — helped resolve the problem by generously suggesting that I should take which episodes I would like most, and give him the rest! However, my final decision was not an altogether selfish one: I was anxious for Michael to write the episodes involving battles, since I knew that he had handled comparably difficult material in working on the radio version of *War and Peace* (though, as will be guessed, it was hard to part with almost all the scenes of the beloved Gollum!). For myself, I took the first and last five episodes and those featuring Treebeard and the Ents.

And so work began in earnest for both of us. With occasional meetings with each other and the directors, Jane Morgan and Penny Leicester, we separately ploughed our individual furrows, exchanging scripts to get each other's comments and every now and again ringing one another up to trade material in those episodes where one of us took over the story from the other.



The problems encountered at this stage were legion: How do you deal with those heavily explanatory passages like 'The Shadow of the Past' and 'The Council of Elrond'? How do you convey the terror of the Watcher in the Water without having the Narrator give a Test Match commentary on the action? How do you handle the complexities of the Battle of Helm's Deep? How do you give flesh to sketchy characters like Arwen, who never speaks until p.1010, or Eowyn, who says absolutely nothing throughout the meeting of Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli with Théoden? How do you deal briefly, yet dramatically, with the protracted skirmishes that comprise the Scouring of the Shire — particularly when everything following the fall of Mordor (some 95 pages of the book) has to be encompassed within the last three episodes? Or, come to that, how do you begin the series in the first place without the benefit of the author's Prologue?

This last question resulted in what seemed like an endless series of re-writes in which I tried to convey, as simply as possible, a coherent précis of the former history of the Ring, without giving away the crucial fact that Gollum's ring was the One Ring of Sauron. Eventually, the following version was arrived at which proved (just about) acceptable to writer, directors and the critical eye of Christopher Tolkien, who read and commented on all the episodes:

(MUSIC)

NARRATOR:

Long years ago in the Second Age of Middle-earth, the Elven-smiths of Erebor forged rings of great power. Then the Dark Lord Sauron forged One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom in the Land of Mordor. This Ring he made to rule the others and their power was bound up with it, so that they should last only so long as it too should last.

And from that time, war never ceased between Sauron and the Elves. Three rings they hid from him, but the others he gathered into his hands, hoping to make himself master of all things.

Then was an Alliance made against the Dark Lord, and Sauron was for that time vanquished. But at length, his dark shadow stretched forth once more and he again sought for mastery over the Rings of Power.

One ring had come into the possession of Gollum, a slimy creature as dark as darkness, who kept it secret unto himself in the nethermost depths of the mines beneath the Misty Mountains.

There it was hidden, even from the searching eye of Sauron — the Lord of the Rings.

(OPENING CREDITS)

Long years Gollum possessed his ring before it left him and passed to another.

Gollum sought unceasingly to recover it; and without realizing what power drew him on, he made his way step by step and mile by mile to Mordor...

(EXTERIOR)

GOLLUM: Preciouss, preciouss, we've losst the preciouss! After all those ageses it's gone! It was our birthday present, and it's losst!

Curse uss and crush uss, but we'll never find it again! No, no... Gollum, gollum...

Which is how the series came to begin in so very different a way to the original book.



The scripts begun in March 1980, were completed — if not finalized — in September; while, at the same time, Stephen Oliver was working on his superb musical score. With the exception of re-writes (the Battle of Bywater was re-scripted between the rehearsal and recording of Episode 26), the work then passed out of the writers' hands and into the

[Continued on p.33]

hands of those who were to bring it to life in front of the microphone: directors, actors, musicians, technicians and editors; for, like all radio drama — and all the theatrical arts — *The Lord of the Rings* as it finally emerged from the stereos and transistors of the nation for twenty-six weeks, is a tribute to the combined skills and talents of a group of people almost as numerous as the hosts of Mordor!

As for me, no programme I have ever worked on has given me more headaches, heartaches, pleasures and delights than *The Lord of the Rings*. And nothing I have ever done has won for me so many friends — and so many foes!

"Final query:" wrote Tolkien to Terence Tiller in 1956 (*Letters*, p.255), "Can a tale not conceived dramatically but (for lack of a more precise term) epically, be dramatized — unless the dramatizer is given or takes liberties, as an independent person? I feel you have had a very hard task." Hard? Certainly! Worthwhile? Well, that is for others now to say...



Extracts from the radio dramatization of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are the copyright property of Brian Sibley, © 1980, 1981.



the Dream

*This world I dwell in, home to me,
Is dark with pain and endless fear.
The night has come, in dreams I see
The mists and shadows drawing near.*

*Five figures are there, pale and tall,
Their eyes are cold, their faces white.
On me their piercing glance does fall;
A knife in darkness glitters bright.*

*Around my neck is hung a weight,
Upon a slender chain of gold.
That which they both desire and hate,
The Ring of Power that I hold.*

*My shoulder burns, a piercing pain
Flows through my arm and down my side.
I cry strange words — I cry again,
The darkness fades, the mists have died.*

*And in my hand a crystal fair
Gleams softly in the glowing light
Of rising sun, no clouds are there
To mar the morning, sweet and bright.*

*But in a corner of my mind
I know a shadow's lurking still
Until, in distant lands, I find
A place where I can rest at will.*

Margaret Thomson

[REVIEW of *LETTERS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN*,
continued from p.30]

editions of 'Alice' are now very valuable".

For some Tolkien Society members reading through these letters, there may come a strange feeling when the 'sixties and 'seventies are reached: "this is where we came in". It was in that period that 'Tolkien fandom' really got under way, and when a good many of his present readers first read his stories. His own reactions to all this were mixed: gratefulness for the cash and that the type of writing of which *The Lord of the Rings* happened to be representative was popular; but resentment at the intrusions into his privacy.

Among the last things recorded is the death of his wife Edith in 1971. In a poignant passage he writes: "But now she has gone before Beren, leaving him indeed one-handed, but he has no power to move the inexorable Mandos..." — a passage which, if nothing else, should demonstrate that Tolkien's private mythology was no mere frivolity, but something that touched him at his heart.

The present volume of letters, it hardly needs saying, is required reading for anyone with the least serious interest in Tolkien. Humphrey Carpenter has performed his editor's job with a blend of unobtrusiveness and thoroughness that greatly enhances the book's value. The only complaint that can be made is that the book is far too short...

Charles Noad