

'Africa... always moves me deeply': Tolkien in Bloemfontein

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Does the world need an article on the Tolkien family's stay in South Africa? After all, Humphrey Carpenter described this period in much detail in his seminal biography of the Professor.

Fair enough. But Carpenter relied mostly on Mabel and Arthur's letters in his research. He hardly used South African sources, including archival materials.

Besides, a few interesting studies have appeared in South Africa since Carpenter's book saw the light, some in the Afrikaans language. Most of these studies mention Tolkien in passing, but they reveal some important facts. I intend to bring them to your attention in this essay – and also to mention how Tolkien is commemorated in the city of Bloemfontein today.

In March 1891, Mabel Suffield, the future mother of J R R Tolkien, sailed from England to South Africa. At the Cape of Good Hope, she was going to marry a man she had last seen around 3 years ago.

Arthur Tolkien, her fiancé, had proposed to her when he was still living in Birmingham. Mabel accepted, undeterred by the age difference: she was thirteen years the younger.

But it was too early to make wedding plans. Arthur's job at the bank wouldn't allow him to support a wife and children. To improve his situation, he was prepared to seek employment in the colonies. Though his engagement with Mabel had already been announced, Arthur joined the staff of the Bank of Africa at the Cape.

Plentiful deposits of diamonds were being mined in the Cape Colony. South Africa became a new Ophir. But in the early 1880s, the local economy succumbed to a major depression caused by a collapse of the price of diamonds.

The British-controlled Bank of Africa had been deeply involved in long-time funding of the diamond-mining

industry, so the crisis affected it badly. The number of branches dwindled.¹

Only the discovery of gold in the Transvaal in 1886 helped to improve the fortunes of the banking sector. The Bank of Africa started to pay dividends again and, more importantly for Arthur, it significantly raised salaries in an attempt to attract and retain skilled employees.

In late 1890, the bank posted Arthur to the Orange Free State, as Manager of the Bloemfontein branch. He was given a six-room flat and a good wage. At last, he was ready to invite Mabel to join him in South Africa.

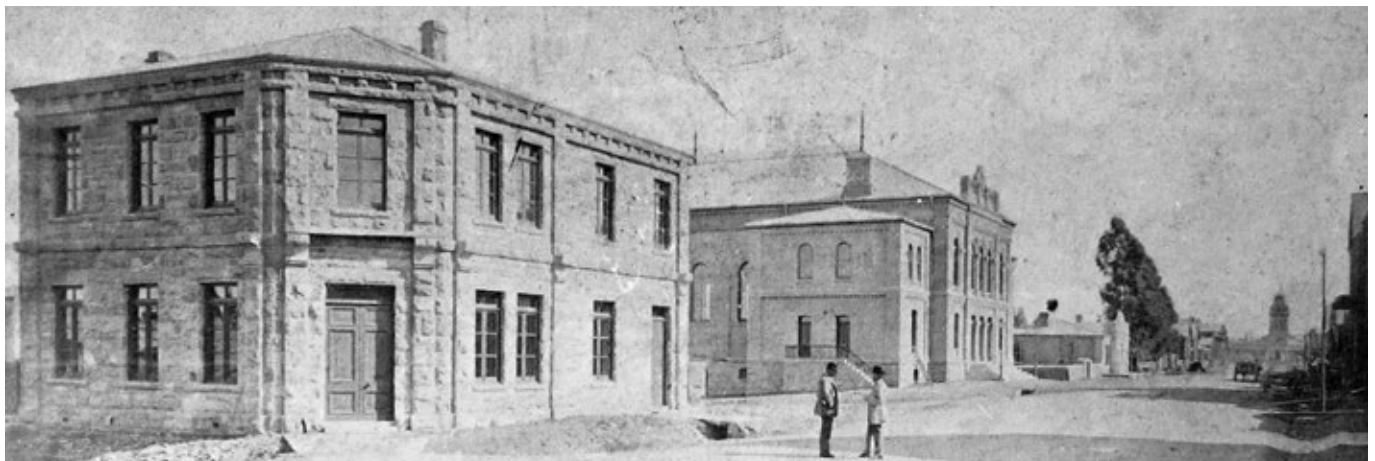
They were married in the Cathedral Church of St George the Martyr in Cape Town on 16 April 1891. The neo-classical building on the corner of Wale and Adderley Streets no longer exists. The current cathedral, designed by Sir Herbert Baker, was erected on the same site.

When they reached the capital of the Free State, after a 32-hour train journey, Mabel was not impressed. 'Owlin' Wilderness!... Horrid Waste!' she wrote to her family of Bloemfontein.²

'From the station front to East Burger Street, there was bare veld, with the exception of an iron shanty or two', recounted a British traveller who visited the town shortly after Mabel's arrival. 'Most of the shops had their own *stoeps* (verandas), and the roads were lit by oil lamps, which emphasized the darkness.'³

The Boer capital, with its population of 3,500, resembled a small provincial town. Wind blew through the streets, raising clouds of dust, from the vast treeless expanses less than half a kilometre from the central Market Square. In the veld, rheboks (antelopes) ran, and game was abundant.

In the centre of Bloemfontein, on the corner of Maitland Street (now renamed Charlotte Maxeke Street) and West



The corner of Maitland and West Burger with the Bank of Africa in the foreground (1880s). (Barron Morl. Free State Provincial Archives, no. VA 5289.)

Burger Streets, the bank had put up a double-storey flagstone building with large windows and a garden.

Bank House stood opposite a Wesleyan church and right next to the Town Hall. The latter, according to the British traveller, 'was the most prominent feature of [the Bloemfontein centre], as a double-storeyed building.'³

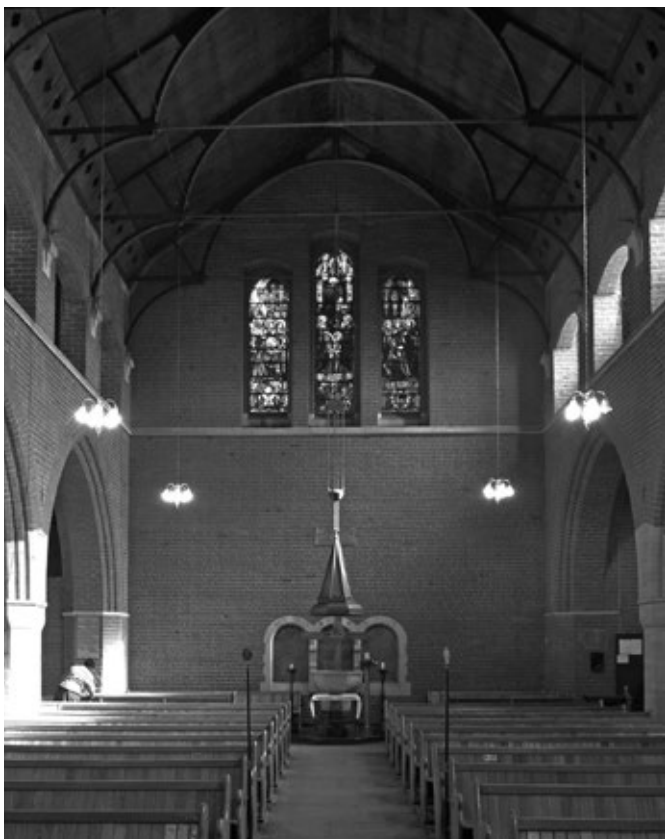
The Tolkien family occupied the flat on the first floor, above the bank premises. Humphrey Carpenter noted that it 'was to be Mabel's first and only home with Arthur.'²

BIRTH,—TOLKIEN,—On Sunday, the 3rd inst., at the Bank House, Maitland-street, Bloemfontein, the Wife of ARTHUR REUEL TOLKIEN, of a Son. b

Notice of Ronald Tolkien's birth. (The Friend of the Free State, 5 January 1892.)

Mabel and Arthur's first child was born at Bank House on 3 January 1892. He was baptised in the Anglican Cathedral of St Andrew and St Michael, the oldest church in Bloemfontein. The parents chose to christen him John Ronald Reuel. The third name sounded so unusual that the vicar misspelt it in the baptismal register.

The boy's godparents were Edith May Incedon, Mabel's sister, who had arrived from England; George Edward Jelf, Assistant Master at St Andrew's College, a local public school for boys; and Tom Hadley, Mabel's brother-in-law.



The interior of the Anglican Cathedral, Bloemfontein, facing towards the front. (Boris Gorelik, 2014.)

In November, the Tolkiens took the earliest known picture of Ronald. The family posed in the garden of Bank House, 'by our vines', as Mabel noted on the photo print she sent to her parents in Birmingham.

In the photograph, we see Ronald in the arms of an Afrikaner nurse who looked after him.

'My cradle-tongue was English (with a dashing of Afrikaans); The Professor remembered in his article 'English and Welsh'⁴ half a century later. Apparently, his nurse taught him words and phrases of her native language.

The servants, standing in the background, could also speak Afrikaans, like everyone who grew up in Bloemfontein. Isaak, the 'house boy', took such liking to Ronald that he brought the infant to his village and proudly showed to his kin. The parents, who knew nothing of this, were shocked by the sudden disappearance of the baby. Still, they forgave the servant when he brought Ronald back the next day. In gratitude to his employer – and the Queen – the servant named his own son 'Isaak Mister Tolkien Victor'.

Much later, when Ronald was learning to walk in the garden, he stepped on a tarantula spider,⁵ quite possibly a baboon spider, a common African variety. [Letter 217] It bit his foot, which no doubt caused the boy much pain: this species can inflict deep wounds with its long fangs. The nurse saved him from further suffering by sucking out the poison, which is mildly toxic to human beings.

When Ronald grew up, he could recall his running in terror through the long grass in the yard, but the encounter with the spider had faded from his memory. 'I can only say that I remember nothing about it, should not know it if I had not been told,' he wrote of this incident, 'and I do not dislike spiders particularly, and have no urge to kill them. I usually rescue those whom I find in the bath!'⁵ [Letter 163]

Researchers have claimed that this experience prompted Tolkien to include episodes featuring evil spirits in the form of huge venomous arachnids. In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, we read of battles with the horrifying giant Spiders, Shelob and Ungoliant. When asked to comment on this theory, the Professor didn't confirm it, saying only that the commentators were 'welcome to the notion'.

In Bloemfontein, Arthur Tolkien was always busy. He studied Dutch, the official language of the Free State, and met prospective clients at the club on Market Square, of which he was a member. He also served as treasurer of the Anglican cathedral's finance board. The priest called Arthur 'one of our good, devoted business men' and hoped to interest him in missionary work.⁶ The number of black Anglicans in Bloemfontein was growing rapidly at that time.

But Arthur dedicated most of his time to his managerial duties. This was a challenging period for the Bank of Africa in the Free State.

Under Arthur's predecessor, the bank's business in the Boer republic had dropped by nearly 80 per cent within six years.⁷ Arthur had to make up for the lost time and money and also keep the existing clients. His institution was losing ground to the National Bank of the Orange Free State, the only competitor in the country.

With her husband away from home most of the day, Mabel had to satisfy herself with the company of other Bloemfontein residents, both Afrikaners and English. For instance, she performed in amateur plays staged by the Fischers and the Fichardts, two of the most prominent families in the republic.⁸

The local society, the climate, with its scorching hot summers and freezing cold winters, and the general atmosphere of Bloemfontein annoyed Mabel. But she saw that her husband didn't seem to be looking forward to the 'home leave', when the family would be able to return to Birmingham.

'I think I shall do well in this country', Arthur wrote to his father, 'and do not think I should settle down well in England again for a permanency.'⁹

In February 1894, Mabel gave birth to her second son, Hilary. The boy was doing much better than Ronald. Although the Bloemfontein climate was considered beneficial, and quite a few British people settled in the Free State for health reasons, Ronald just didn't seem to thrive there. Perhaps, as a prematurely born child, he tended to be weak and sickly.

Ronald suffered from fever and the heat during a severe drought that arrived in the Free State. It was decided that Mabel should take the boys for a holiday on the sea. And in November 1894, when Ronald was less than three years old, they travelled to the ocean coast, near Cape Town.

'Tolkien insisted that he had a particularly strong impression of his time at the seaside', recounted Prof Arne Zettersten. 'I showed that I was a little sceptical, but Tolkien was very determined on the matter.'¹⁰

Soon after Mabel and the boys returned from their holiday, they started to prepare for the voyage to Britain. Arthur was unable to go with them: he had to stay in Bloemfontein to attend to important matters. The Free State economy was growing rapidly. Also, the diamond industry, the core of the Bank of Africa's business, was booming again. Meanwhile, the National Bank continued to expand, and Arthur needed to take countermeasures.

He promised to Mabel that he would follow her and the boys to England soon.

'Years later,' wrote the Professor's children, John and Priscilla, 'Ronald described to us the powerful sense he had during the preparations for that voyage of the weight of emotion between his parents at the coming separation. He retained an image of extraordinary clarity of his father painting 'A.R. Tolkien' on their cabin trunk, an item that Ronald kept and treasured in memory of his father.'¹¹

Overall, Ronald spent just over three years in Bloemfontein. In early April 1895, Mabel, Hilary and he departed for England.

In Birmingham, they waited for Arthur for months, but something always prevented him from taking the leave. In November, they learnt that he had developed 'rheumatic fever'. There was no way he could go to England in this state.

Karel Schoeman, the author of the most comprehensive history of Bloemfontein, suggested that Arthur Tolkien had contracted an acute infectious disease. If so, most likely, it

was enteric fever, a class of fevers that includes typhoid.¹²

At the time, the capital of the Free State didn't have a proper sewer system. Sources of drinking water were heavily polluted. No wonder that infections of the gastrointestinal tract were widespread. Since 1893, epidemics broke out annually, claiming up to thirty lives per month. During the Boer War, in March 1900, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tended to hundreds of enteric casualties among the British troops in Bloemfontein, as volunteer infantry doctor.¹³

Months passed, but Arthur Tolkien still wouldn't recover. In January 1896, Mabel decided to return to South Africa alone to nurse him back to health. Ronald dictated a letter that he wished her to deliver to his father. This was perhaps the first text authored by him.

Ronald's letter has survived because it was never sent. On 15 February, while Mabel was still in England, the news came that her husband had passed away. He was only forty

DEATH OF MR. A. R. TOLKIEN.

We deeply regret to record the death, on Saturday last of Mr. A. R. Tolkien, the respected and capable manager of the Bank of Africa. The cause of death was the only too prevalent scourge of typhoid fever. About three weeks before his death, Mr. Tolkien, who was then unwell, and undoubtedly in the incipient stages of the disease, though without of course knowing it, went out to Mr. Style's farm in the Conquered Territory to try what a change of air would do. He remained there about ten days, and returned here on the 5th inst. with the disease clearly upon him, and his medical attendant, Dr. Stollreither, at once saw that he was seriously ill. With unremitting care and attention he improved, and it was hoped that he would pull through, but unfortunately early on Saturday morning perforation, and peritonitis ensued, followed by total collapse, and he expired about four o'clock in the afternoon; the Dean of Bloemfontein, his nurse, Sister Flora, and Mr. van Zyl, accountant of the Bank being present.

Mr. Tolkien was a native of Birmingham, and only forty years old at the time of his death. He had been manager of the Bank of Africa here for the past six years, and had won golden opinions by his many estimable qualities. He was an active and useful member of the Church of England in this city.

The funeral took place on Sunday afternoon and was numerously attended. There was a full choral service in the Cathedral.

What adds to the sadness of this melancholy termination of a useful life, is the fact that Mrs. Tolkien and her two young children are absent on a visit to her friends in England. She was to have sailed early next month. All Bloemfontein will sincerely sympathise with the afflicted widow and fatherless children so sadly bereaved.

Arthur Tolkien's obituary, *The Friend*, 18 February 1896. The *Friend* no longer exists, the final issue having been produced in 1982.

years old. The Anglican congregation buried him the following day.

Mabel could no longer afford the long voyage to South Africa, even to visit his grave. Nor did she intend to live in the Free State.

She wrote a letter to the Bloemfontein Board of Executors, asking them to sell things from their Bank House flat, 'I hope they will fetch enough to clear all debts at Bloemfontein and here.'¹⁴ Among their auctioned possessions were a piano, a Japanese vase and a Japanese tea set, two assegais (African spears) and two baby carriages.

According to Arthur's estate file at the Free State Provincial Archives, after all his debts in Bloemfontein were paid, Mabel was due to receive nearly £1500 as inheritance.¹⁴

Ronald's health had improved in England. As he was growing up, impressions of the West Midlands mingled with his memories of South Africa.

In a 1971 interview for the BBC, Tolkien said that he had 'a perfectly clear, vivid picture of a house that I now know is in fact a beautifully worked out pastiche of my own home in Bloemfontein and my grandmother's house in Birmingham. I can still remember going down the road in Birmingham and wondering what had happened to the big gallery, what happened to the balcony.'¹⁵

Tolkien grew to love the English countryside, where he 'first became aware of things'. But his childhood recollections of 'a hot parched country', of an African Christmas, 'blazing sun, drawn curtain and a drooping eucalyptus' remained with him for the rest of his life.

Prof Zettersten, a friend of Tolkien's, often spoke to the writer about his earliest memories. He found them very significant and influential because Tolkien, a creator of fantastic realms, very rarely travelled outside of England:

'A lively and receptive child like Ronald Tolkien would always have been affected by his surroundings, not least by his capacity to observe and compare at many levels ... The importance of Tolkien's African memories should not be underestimated ...'

Tolkien wanted to revisit South Africa. In 1920, he even applied for a professorship of English Literature at the University of Cape Town, the oldest in the Sub-Saharan Africa. The mining empire of De Beers sponsored this position.¹⁶

His application was approved, but, in the end, he had to decline the offer for family reasons and retained his post as reader at the University of Leeds. Soon, Tolkien was appointed professor at Oxford.

In 1944, his youngest son Christopher, who had enlisted in the Royal Air Force, was dispatched to South Africa to undergo training in Kroonstad (Orange Free State; 200 km from Bloemfontein) and Standerton (Transvaal). Tolkien had resumed his work on *The Lord of the Rings* earlier that year and sent chapters from the future book to his son in Africa.

In a letter of 25 May, he told Christopher that he wished he could travel to the country of his birth. He wrote about his constant 'curious sense of reminiscence about any stories of Africa, which always moves me deeply. Strange that you, my dearest, should have gone back there...'¹⁵ [Letter 71]

When Christopher described to him the dry, dusty, 'satan-licked' veld that he saw everywhere, The Professor replied (on 12 August) that it 'only increases the longing I have always felt to see it again. Much though I love and admire little lanes and hedges and rustling trees and the soft rolling contours of a rich *champain*, the thing that that stirs me most and comes nearest to heart's satisfaction for me is space, and I would be willing to barter barrenness for it; indeed I think I like barrenness itself, whenever I have seen it.'¹⁵ [Letter 78]

Tolkien never returned to South Africa. Nowadays, he wouldn't have recognised Bloemfontein. The town has turned into a city, the judicial capital of South Africa, spreading over 236 km². The population has grown seventy times since the day he last saw this place.

Most of the 19th-century buildings in the centre have been demolished. There's not much left in Bloemfontein that has any relation to the Tolkien family's stay.

The Bank of Africa, an imperial institution, went out of favour with the local public after the unification of South Africa in 1910. It was overtaken by the National Bank of South Africa, which, through further consolidation, merged into Barclays in 1926. Its direct descendant in this country is the First National Bank (FNB).

Bank House on the corner of Maitland and West Burger was purchased by the firm of James Brister, 'complete house furnishers' as the new sign over the door announced. In 1920, the Bradlows brothers, Russian Jews who arrived in South Africa two years after Tolkien's departure, bought the property for their countrywide retail group.¹⁵ The 'Bradlows Furniture Emporium' opened its doors in the former banking hall.

In 1930, the Bradlows replaced the old 'bank building' with a new art deco-inspired structure. It has survived and still houses a Bradlows shop.



The corner of Maitland and West Burger. (Boris Gorelik, 2014.)

The National Monuments Council affixed a bronze plaque to the wall in commemoration of Tolkien. The plaque was stolen for scrap metal, rescued but eventually removed by authorities. Nowadays, nothing indicates that Bloemfontein's most famous son was born on this site.

J R R Tolkien expressed his concern about the condition of his father's grave in a letter to Christopher of 24 April 1944⁵ [Letter 63]: 'I have never done anything about it, but I believe my mother has a stone-cross put up or sent out ... If not, it will be lost now, prob[ably], unless there are any records ...'

His worst suspicions proved to be true. The grave was considered lost for a long time.

Arthur Tolkien was buried just over the hill from the Cathedral, in what is now the President Brand Cemetery. It's known as the oldest in the city, with tombs of heads of state. The apartheid-era President John Vorster was laid to rest there as well.

The grave was unmarked, so Tolkien enthusiasts couldn't locate it. Finally, in January 1992, just before the visit of the Professor's family to Bloemfontein for The Tolkien Centenary celebrations, City Librarian Dux van der Walt initiated the search for Arthur's burying place.

'I heard that there was a chance that cemetery registers could be found at the municipality', recounts Van der Walt. 'I went to their offices, and an official hauled an old dilapidated book from underneath the counter. With his enthusiastic help, we could trace the grave.'

The Tolkien Trust put up a tombstone. It was consecrated during Priscilla Tolkien's next visit, in 1996.

As almost everywhere in South African cities, this cemetery is in a poor state. Most gravestones are untended, knocked down or missing altogether. Arthur Tolkien's gravestone is apparently looked after. But it's not easy to find: there are no pointers or guides to show you the way.



Arthur Tolkien's grave. (Boris Gorelik, 2014.)

Anyhow, only Tolkien fanatics would come here. The area is considered to be unsafe.

At the Anglican Cathedral, you'll find the only tangible evidence of J R R Tolkien's association with the city. In the neo-gothic nave, there's a large ornate font, carved out of sandstone, on a marble base. Installed approximately in



(L to R) Priscilla Tolkien, her cousin Una Cooper and JRR Tolkien's granddaughter Joanna (Joan) sitting by Arthur's (new) gravestone prior to its consecration in 1996. (Dux Van der Walt 1996.) (By kind permission.)

1880, it is covered by a heavy wooden dome suspended from the steel beams under the roof. Both Ronald and Hilary Tolkien were baptised in this font.

There are no other authentic Tolkien sites in Bloemfontein.

Curiously enough, the city's status as Tolkien's birthplace is perhaps Bloemfontein's biggest secret. *The Rough Guide to*



The font in the Anglican Cathedral, Bloemfontein. (Boris Gorelik, 2014.)

South Africa points out, quite fairly, that the local authorities seem 'curiously reluctant to publicize' this fact.

At the National Museum in Bloemfontein, among the extensive permanent exhibition on local history, you'll easily notice Zola Budd's running shoes and a cast of her feet (she's also locally born). Or the stands with a description of the birth of the African National Congress and its rival pro-apartheid National Party, both of which were founded here. But it may take you a while to spot a photo of Tolkien and the two-sentence summary of his life and achievements in an overfull display dedicated to local personalities.

The award-winning Hobbit Hotel in President Steyn Avenue will probably give you the biggest dose of 'Tolkieniana'. It was established by Jake Uys, the founder of the country's only Tolkien society (now defunct). They even have the bronze plaque from the Bradlows building, the only historical attribute here. Still, the charming hotel receives its fair share of tourists. Many of them believe, incorrectly of course, that this was Tolkien's birthplace.

The general feeling in Bloemfontein is that Tolkien never looked back after he left South Africa. It is believed that the fact that he was born in Bloemfontein has no particular meaning for him, since he only spent the first three years of his life there.

But I hope that my article has shown you that South Africa still had a special place in Tolkien's heart.

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The Anglican Cathedral, Bloemfontein, where JRR Tolkien was baptised in 1892. (Boris Gorelik, 2014.)