

Stars in the sky as an emblem of hope against Morgoth”, these lines having been written (according to Christopher Tolkien) on 1–6 April 1928. This predates by two years the following description of Varda’s creation of the Big Dipper which is found in the Quenta:


And high above the North, a challenge unto Morgoth, she set the crown of Seven mighty Stars to swing, the emblem of the Gods, and sign of Morgoth’s doom. Many names have these been called; but in the old days of the North both Elves and Men called them the Burning Briar, and some the Sickle of the Gods.

The Big Dipper is referenced again in the *Lay*, when Lúthien heals Beren of an arrow shot by Feanor’s sons:

Then sprang about the darkened North
The Sickle of the Gods, and forth
Each star there stared in stony night
Radiant, glistening cold and white.

But on the ground there is a glow,
A spark of red that leaps below:
Under woven boughs beside a fire
Of crackling wood and sputtering briar
There Beren lies in drowsing deep

Note the use of briar to reference a burning bush in this case, an interesting play on the reference to the Big Dipper, here called the Sickle of the Gods.

In Tolkien’s poetry, as in his prose, we see him paying considerable attention to astronomical artistry and realism, reflecting both his own astronomical knowledge, and what one could expect from the educated reader of his day. However, given the overall decrease of common astronomical knowledge and experience in stargazing found in Western culture today (at least in part due to the rampant light pollution of the modern world), these references in Tolkien’s works are becoming increasingly obscure to his audience. 

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A recollection of Tolkien: Canon Gerard Hanlon

DANIEL HELEN AND MORGAN THOMSEN

With the surge in popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1960s, particularly with its widespread success in America, Tolkien fandom came into its own. But although Tolkien was content that his book had been so well received, he did not understand why people caused such a fuss about him. He found the American cult reaction somewhat perplexing, but the ‘Frodo Lives’ and ‘Gandalf for President’ lapel badges did not nearly bother him as much as the continual stream of visitors to his house, the requests for interviews from journalists, or the inconsiderate times at which his fans would make telephone calls. 76 Sandfield Road no longer held the promise of the peace and quiet that the professor and his wife needed. Indeed the house was too large for the elderly Tolkien and Edith to keep up with all the housework. Therefore in 1968 they decided to leave Oxford and move to a bungalow in Poole, near Bournemouth.

The move was imminent when, on the afternoon of 17 June, Tolkien injured his leg in a fall as he was running down the stairs. He was picked up off the floor and taken to the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, where even the hospital staff were in awe of his presence. That evening he met a young priest, Father (now Canon) Gerard Hanlon, who had been ordained not long previously on 18 March 1967, and who was serving as a curate at a parish in Headington, Oxford. He was also the Roman Catholic chaplain to the Nuffield and it was under these circumstances that Canon

Hanlon came to meet J. R. R. Tolkien. Daniel Helen asked Canon Hanlon for his recollections.

Before you first met J. R. R. Tolkien, what did you know about him? Had you read any of his books?

Well, not a great deal. While I was a student at Oscott [St Mary’s College, Oscott, is a Roman Catholic seminary in the Archdiocese of Birmingham], Tolkien was the thing to read and those who did that sort of thing read it. I must confess I tried but got nowhere with it, so I didn’t bother. But he was certainly one of the cult people to read in those times.

When did you first meet Tolkien?

I was a curate in a parish in Headington in Oxford, and I was the chaplain to the Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital, which was a pleasant job. I met him one evening, I think it was the day he arrived, in the hospital. He had a poorly knee and he’d come to have it put right. There was a great commotion, he was in the private ward, and there was a great commotion at the end of the ward. So I enquired of the sister, ‘Who’s that?’

She said, ‘That’s Professor Tolkien,’ in a hallowed tone.

And I said, ‘Oh, he’s one of mine!’ So I went down to see him after all the herds of people had gone and we had a little chat. I asked, ‘Would you like Holy Communion, professor?’

And he said, ‘Oh, yes please.’ And that was the beginning of our very short relationship.

The first night he was there I think I started the



conversation by saying, ‘You’re popular tonight, professor.’

And he said, ‘Yes!’

At the middle of the conversation he asked me, ‘Have you read any of my books?’

And I said, ‘I could lie my way out of that one, professor, but I read a hundred pages of the first one and couldn’t understand head or tail of it! So I gave up.’

‘Good for you!’ he said, ‘at least you’re an honest young man. You know, there are so many people I’ve met who you know haven’t read my books but they’re so, you know, “oh of course, you’re wonderful.” They haven’t read the first page, but you’re honest!’

‘Thank God for that!’ I said.

How often did you meet?

Because I liked him he had Holy Communion most mornings, about four or five times during the week. I couldn’t do it on Sundays or at weekends, of course. [Note that Canon Hanlon did not celebrate Mass with Tolkien; it was a Communion service.]

What was it like giving Holy Communion to Tolkien?

Well, he was a very pious gentleman, but it was one of the most amusing things in my life. I started the service, as we could in those days, in English, to give him Holy Communion and he automatically responded in Latin. So I stopped halfway through and said, ‘Excuse me, professor, are you the Emeritus Professor of English?’

‘I am, I am father, yes,’ he said.

So I asked, ‘Well why are you speaking Latin?’

‘Because I like to pray to God in Latin,’ he replied.

How important do you think Tolkien’s faith was to him?

Oh, tremendously important. He was a committed

Christian and a committed Catholic, and his faith meant everything to him. His faith came from the core of his being. And he didn’t lay it on the counter for you and say, ‘that’s it boys’. But you knew that all the glory that he had meant nothing except his faith.

Did you keep in touch after he left hospital?

Not really, no. I was a chaplain to a hospital. Therefore I saw endless people come in, have their operations and go home again. And soon after he came out of hospital, I think within six months, he had sold his house and moved down to Bournemouth. It was very sad for him, he didn’t want to go, but he couldn’t stand the pressure.

How do you think Tolkien felt about and dealt with fame?

Well, he hated it, in one sense. He and his wife hated fame because they were lovely simple people, in the real sense of the word ‘simple’. Do you know how his books came to be written? They were bedtime stories; he said to me, ‘My children, thank God, they were so acute that they would very quickly stop me the following evening and say, “Dad, we had that bit last night!”’ So rather than fall into that trap every night, he wrote it all down on scraps of paper so he had the papers to follow. And bit by bit all these scraps of paper amounted on his desk and it was that that formed the bedrock of his novels.

So it was something for themselves, as I was saying, being written on scraps of paper for his children. The papers were all collected and before long the first of the books came out, and the American television people loved him. I think he enjoyed the finished product but I think basically he hated all that went with it. Oxford is the city of the sweeping spires — even now [Oxford is known as the ‘city of the dreaming spires’, after a line from Matthew Arnold’s poem *Thyrsis*]. So you get what it’s like forty/forty-five years ago. This sort of thing wasn’t akin to the intellectual world of the day, but he had to live with it.

What put him off, and his wife particularly, was that he couldn’t do anything in public. As soon as he came out of his lodgings, in the college (I don’t know where he was), but as soon as he came out of the college there was an American helicopter hovering as low as it would dare so they could film him every time he walked A to B, or B to C or whatever. He knew he was being filmed and he hated that.

What was your overall impression of Tolkien?

I was just delighted to meet him. It was wonderful to see a man in so much of the world, was a man of immense dignity and power and erudition. It was lovely to see the man at his very core, which was a very simple, happy, a lovely marriage, lovely couple. But sadly, at the end, driven from his beloved Oxford because they couldn’t cope with the publicity. It was very sad in many ways, but he was a stoic old man so I think he settled into wherever he went to quite well. And after that, of course, I lost touch with him. Although, of course, he had a priest who, I think it was his youngest son, who was a priest of the Birmingham diocese, so every time we bumped into each other I used to enquire how he was and

all the rest of it. [Canon Hanlon is here referring to the eldest of Tolkien's four children, Father John Francis Reuel Tolkien (1917–2003), who was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in February 1946.] Three weeks of a most enjoyable relationship ended very quickly.

I was blessed by having the ability to meet him because he was such a nice, nice man. You could sense the depth of the man. He was very deep in his religion and his faith, as well as in his own subject matter. He really was a major player, but like all good major players it's always good to point at the boy next door and say, 'well, follow him, he's better than me'. It's a wonderful attitude. If it was me, I would be taking all they could offer, put it in the bank straight away! But that wasn't his style. He was a lovely man.

Commentary

Canon Hanlon's recollection reflects much of what is already known about Tolkien. This is worth commenting on, but there are also some points of detail which need to be considered and clarified.

The liturgical reforms of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s permitted the use of the vernacular in religious services. Canon Hanlon was not alone in noticing Tolkien's continued use of the old Latin responses. In the 1992 documentary *J.R.R.T.: A Film Portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1992), Father John Tolkien said of his father's faith:

It's one of those things that if you have something like that you can't sort of say particularly where it comes out, I think. It pervaded all his thinking and beliefs and everything else. So I think he was very much, always the Christian. And [he] didn't like the changes in the Church. He opposed them all. And, of course, he very strongly couldn't see any point in abandoning Latin because he spoke Latin. And he had his little, his tiny little missal, which he'd always had. I don't know how long he had it. I have it actually. He used to struggle using the Latin missal with the English Mass.

In an article for *The Mail on Sunday*, Simon Tolkien also recalled a similar experience:

I vividly remember going to church with him in Bournemouth. He was a devout Roman Catholic and it was soon after the Church had changed the liturgy from Latin to English. My Grandfather obviously didn't agree with this and made all the responses very loudly in Latin while the rest of the congregation answered in English. I found the whole experience quite excruciating, but my Grandfather was oblivious. He simply had to do what he believed to be right.

Simon Tolkien, 'My Grandfather', *The Mail on Sunday* 58–59 (23 February 2003)

Canon Hanlon's comments also raise the interesting question of how Tolkien's 'books came to be written'. Studies into the development of the writing of *The Hobbit* have found that it is too simplistic to say that it emerged directly from Tolkien making notes while telling 'bedtime stories' to his children, but it certainly played an important part. Based

on Michael Tolkien's recollection, Christopher Tolkien has written a corroborating account from his father's telling of what became *The Hobbit*:

I was greatly concerned with petty consistency as the story unfolded, and that on one occasion I interrupted: 'Last time, you said Bilbo's front door was blue, and you said Thorin had a golden tassel on his hood, but you've just said that Bilbo's front door was green and that Thorin's hood was silver', at which my father muttered 'Damn the boy', and then strode across the room to his desk to make a note.

Foreword to *The Hobbit*, 50th anniversary edn, vi–vii (Unwin Hyman, 1987).

Based on the scant and sometimes conflicting evidence, detailed analyses of how (and when) *The Hobbit* came into being have been offered by Douglas A. Anderson (see *J. R. R. Tolkien, The Annotated Hobbit Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. D. A. Anderson, pp. 2–12), Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (see C. Scull and W. G. Hammond *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide* pp. 386–388), and John D. Rateliff (see J. D. Rateliff *The History of The Hobbit: Part One: Mr. Baggins* pp. xi–xx).

The final point that needs to be addressed is the notion that an American news helicopter stalked Tolkien as he went about his daily life in Oxford. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull have commented that "it seems odd that an American news crew would hire a helicopter to film Tolkien in that way, the cost would have been substantial compared with the news value" (private correspondence). Instead Canon Hanlon is more likely to be referring to one particular incident; a helicopter was used by the BBC for *Tolkien in Oxford*, which was recorded 5–9 February 1968. Tolkien mentioned this in a letter to Donald Swann: "I was not lifted up in a helicopter, though I am surprised one was not substituted for an eagle" (Letter 301). Therefore it is possible that Canon Hanlon has conflated the story of this helicopter (and Tolkien's aversion for *Tolkien in Oxford*) with Tolkien's dislike of the American cult reaction to his works.

Given the brief time that they knew each other, it is striking how much of an impression Tolkien left on Canon Hanlon. Even though much of what Hanlon recalled has long been known, this insight offers a small but interesting perspective of Tolkien in his later life. We can see a man whose good nature and beliefs persevered as he struggled to understand the trappings of literary success. His lifelong commitment to his Catholic faith shines through, a "faith [which] came from the core of his being".

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