

J. R. R. Tolkien and the Spanish civil war

JOSÉ MANUEL FERRÁNDEZ BRU

When historical events are analysed from a distance and evaluated according to contemporary parameters rather than to the circumstances in which they developed, it is easy to reach the wrong conclusions — or, at least, to get a distorted view of the different attitudes of the participants and witnesses of those events.

A clear example is the matter of J. R. R. Tolkien's stance during the Spanish civil war, culminating in his discreet moral support for the nationalist side, the insurgents led by General Francisco Franco who toppled the republican regime after three years of fratricidal struggle between 1936 and 1939.

A simplistic view of the matter might inspire a perverted syllogism: this support, combined with the character and nature of Franco's movement, implies that, in the political arena, Tolkien was a fascist. Such reasoning is baseless. In this paper, I shall concentrate on the question of why Tolkien's position was not inspired by political motives, nor by affinities with extreme right-wing ideas. Priscilla Tolkien, the author's daughter, born in 1929, commented that the "whole period of the civil war cast a great shadow over my father's life and is a powerful and lasting memory from my childhood"¹.

Surely an essential aspect in these feelings was his sentimental link with Spain formed by his personal ties with his guardian, Father Francis Morgan. Priscilla Tolkien recalls her father "saying how terrible it would have been for Father Francis if he had been alive after the onset of the Spanish civil war". Father Morgan died in 1935, 13 months before the war broke out.

It is important to remember that Tolkien was received into the Catholic Church when he was a child, and his mother, instrumental to this conversion, died shortly after, leaving Father Morgan as his guardian. Father Morgan thus became Tolkien's main adult reference until he began his studies at Oxford and, after his coming of age, Morgan remained as an important figure in his life. He was a frequent visitor of the Tolkien family in Leeds (where Tolkien got his first job as professor) as well as in Oxford.

Morgan was born in Spain in 1857 in El Puerto de Santa Maria, Andalusia. His Spanish ancestry came from his mother's side. His mother, Maria Manuela Osborne, was born into the Osborne Sherry dynasty. Francis was sent to study in England at the Birmingham Oratory School led by the future Cardinal John Henry Newman. After leaving school, he briefly attended the Catholic University of Louvain, and then returned to the Oratory where he was

ordained in 1883. He met the Tolkien family around 1902, some months after they had been received into the Roman Catholic Church.

Morgan travelled to Spain almost every year until he became too old to do so. His last remaining brother, Augustus, died in late 1932, after which his nephews from Osborne branch became his closest family in Spain and he kept up a fluent correspondence with one of them, Antonio Osborne. In addition to discussing matters related to the legacy of Augustus, Antonio kept him up to date with the increasingly turbulent events in Spain (many of the letters are preserved in Osborne Archive).

After the proclamation of the Second Republic in April 1931, Spain had been unable to maintain any political stability: strikes, riots and episodes of violence against the Catholic Church were frequent. On 1 October 1931, the newspaper *El Socialista* summarized the position of the left-wing parties: "The Roman Church ... has added to our history the stigma of a tradition of bigotry, intransigence and barbarity, and must be destroyed."

A reflection of this situation is seen in a letter from Antonio Osborne dated 10 January 1933, written not long after a spate of arson attacks on churches and convents all over the country.

Now, more than ever, I would visit you, but things are not easy in poor Spain. The situation is getting worse! Thank God, we can not complain as neither the burnings of temples nor the great revolutionary strikes have been noticed in El Puerto de Santa Maria. (ref. 2)

Morgan's reply shows that the worsening news from his homeland marked his last years with sadness.

I think a lot of poor Spain: I pray for her daily, incessantly. I know the poor Queen came to London for a short time. You are quite right that the elections were very poorly conducted, as I read in a book called *The Fall of a Throne*. (ref. 3)

In brief, he mentions the visit to London of the exiled Spanish Queen, Victoria Eugenie, and his opinions regarding *The Fall of a Throne*. His affinity with this book, written by Alvaro Alcalá Galiano, brings significant (indirect) information about his personal ideology and his intimate belief about how differently municipal elections (whose result implied the departure of King Alfonso XIII and the proclamation of the republic) could have been managed.

Morgan was strongly affected by events in his home

country, and surely shared his thoughts with Tolkien — which might explain, at least in part, Tolkien's grief on the outbreak of the civil war. Tolkien's found few supporters of the nationalist cause in Oxford. Even his close friend C. S. Lewis (despite his indifference to political life⁴) was opposed to the uprising. In fact, Tolkien reproached him years later for his staunch opposition to Franco (*Letters* 83).

C.S.L.'s reactions were odd. Nothing is a greater tribute to Red propaganda than the fact that he (who knows they are in all other subjects liars and traducers) believes all that is said against Franco, and nothing that is said for him. Even Churchill's open speech in Parliament⁵ left him unshaken.

In Britain, support for the republican side was widespread. It was a widely shared (and maybe rather simplistic) thought that the republic represented the legal government in a struggle against the obscurantism of the 'traditional' Spain represented by landowners, the army and the Catholic Church. But the republican regime was overshadowed by the chaotic social situation in Spain, with a drift in its policies towards the extreme left and with a meagre response to violence against these traditional interests, especially the Catholic Church.

Tolkien's support for the Franco movement rested precisely on his perception of him as the champion of the Catholic Church against the communist menace. Hence, Tolkien's position was a consequence of his Catholicism. Indeed, Catholics thought the insurgents vindicated traditional values and defended the Catholic Church against the dangers of communism and secularism — in Britain, only Catholics supported Franco's movement en masse⁶.

Catholic religious leaders approached the issue in a similar way. In Oxford, for example, the distinguished Jesuit Martin D'Arcy, and Ronald Knox, Chaplain to the University of Oxford, publicly supported the nationalist cause. However, the clearest evidence of the official position of the British Catholic Church come from the statements of the highest Catholic authority in Great Britain at that time, the Archbishop of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley⁷, who in 1939 — with the Spanish war about to end — wrote in a letter to Franco⁸: "I look upon you as the great defender of the true Spain, the country of Catholic principles where Catholic social justice and charity will be applied for the common good under a firm peace-loving government."

The tone of this letter might easily give a false impression of its author. Arthur Hinsley, was called the 'hammer of dictators' in the Second World War because of his criticisms of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. He was admired by Winston Churchill, who appreciated his ability to connect with British society during the most difficult moments of the Second World War.

These opinions reflected not only a philosophical issue about what principles should prevail in Spain but also the painful reality of a bloody religious persecution. Neutral British historians such as Hugh Thomas or Stanley Payne pointed out this period as the historical era of greater hatred

against the religion and described the persecution of the Catholic Church as the greatest that ever happened in Europe.

British Catholics, harassed for centuries, considered the attitudes of their compatriots almost as outrageous as the attacks on the Church in Spain. Tolkien was quite explicit in this regard (*Letters* 83):

But hatred of our church is after all the real only final foundation of the C of E — so deep laid that it remains even when all the superstructure seems removed (C.S.L. for instance reveres the Blessed Sacrament, and admires nuns!). Yet if a Lutheran is put in jail he is up in arms; but if Catholic priests are slaughtered — he disbelieves it (and I daresay really thinks they asked for it).

The support of British Catholics for the 'rebels' in Spain was hard for others to understand, given that it was all too easy to link political alliance with Franco — and thus fascism — with religious concerns and the fear of communism. Catholics, however, were quite clear on the distinction. As Evelyn Waugh (an Anglo-Catholic) wrote⁹: "If I were a Spaniard I should be fighting for General Franco ... I am not a fascist nor shall I become one unless it were the only alternative to Marxism."

However, support for Franco meant rejection from the intellectual community, as happened to Francis de Zulueta, regius professor of law at All Souls College between 1919 and 1948 — and Priscilla Tolkien's godfather. Zulueta was born in 1878 of Spanish and Irish ancestry. He was a naturalized British subject and lived in Oxford for most of his life. His father, Pedro de Zulueta, was son of the second Earl of Torre-Díaz, also called Pedro, a Basque businessman who settled in London. His mother was Laura Sheil, daughter of the late governor of Persia, Justin Sheil, and sister of Father Denis Sheil a priest of the Birmingham Oratory, whom Tolkien knew.

The only sister of Pedro de Zulueta (Francis's father) married Rafael Merry del Val, a nobleman and a diplomatic supporter of Alfonso XIII. They had four children (cousins, therefore, of Francis de Zulueta). The eldest son, Alfonso, was Spanish ambassador to London between 1913 and 1931 (until the Second Republic was established in Spain). His brother Rafael chose an ecclesiastical career and became the Cardinal Merry del Val, a Vatican official during the papacy of Pius X. The Cardinal died in 1930, but his brother Alfonso and especially his eldest son, Pablo, were very much involved in Franco's uprising.

At Oxford, meanwhile, Francis de Zulueta's prestige suffered from his colleagues' general disapproval of his support for the nationalist side (and, after the war, his support for the Franco regime). The rumour spread that de Zulueta was a fascist aristocrat who considered his Oxford colleagues as plebeians. The truth was rather different, exemplified by his help for several German Jewish professors persecuted by the nazi regime, such as Fritz Schulz and especially David Daube, who developed a deep friendship with Zulueta.

But the rejection and disdain of Zulueta were undoubtedly

smaller than those suffered by other intellectuals such as the poet Roy Campbell, whom Tolkien met in 1944, as described in a letter to his son Christopher (*Letters* 83).

Specifically Tolkien cites *The Flaming Terrapin*, published in 1924, which got Campbell immediate recognition in the British poetry scene, and *Flowering Rifle*, published in 1939, which received a very different reception among critics. Campbell's support for Franco was certainly detrimental to this book's reception, and Campbell's own image was seriously damaged¹⁰.

Campbell was born in 1901 in South Africa where he lived before going to the University of Oxford in 1919. There he met people like T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Robert Graves and, after the success of *The Flaming Terrapin*, the Bloomsbury group led by Virginia Woolf. However, after a painful dispute with them he left England, going first to France and later to Spain, where he arrived several months before the onset of the civil war.

In the letter (*Letters* 83), Tolkien confuses some information about him, saying for example that he became Catholic in Barcelona. Campbell did indeed live in Barcelona, but settled in Altea, a small town on the coast near Alicante. There he was received into the Catholic Church. In mid-1935 he moved to Toledo and Campbell established a cordial relationship with the Carmelite monks of that town.

When the civil war began, the monks secretly confided to Campbell several manuscripts from St John of the Cross kept in the library of the convent, probably thinking his status as foreigner gave him some immunity. It was a justified fear because only a month later all the members of the community were killed and the library was burned.

The impact of these assassinations, added to his own ideas, led Campbell to support the cause of the insurgents and he tried to enlist in the army of Franco. However, he never fought, nor belonged to any armed unit, although he toured Spain during the war. Pablo Merry del Val¹¹ persuaded him to remain civilian because he was more valuable as a propagandist figure than as a combatant: the nationalist cause needed 'pens, not swords'.

His explicit support for Franco movement aroused suspicion, and he was often labelled a 'fascist'. In fact, Tolkien seems compelled to explain the loyalty of the poet based on his later actions arguing (*Letters* 83) "he is a patriotic man, and has fought for the B. Army since".

Both Tolkien and Campbell had a declared animosity towards supporters of leftist ideas, and Tolkien's sketch of Campbell concludes by drawing a comparison with the red intellectuals, which clearly reveals his dislike towards communism (*Letters* 83): "How unlike the Left — the 'corduroy panzers' who fled to America (Auden among them who with his friends¹² got R.C.'s works 'banned' by the Birmingham T. Council!)."

Tolkien's own political opinions were, however, more metaphysical than orthodox. Tolkien sought to explain them to his son Christopher in a letter written during the Second World War (*Letters* 52): "My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood,

meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs) — or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy. I would arrest anybody who uses the word State."

His aversion to state control (and also the fact that communism was violently opposed to all religions, but particularly to the Catholic Church) led Tolkien to consider the communism as a terrible and harmful approach, and even during the Second World War he described the Soviet leader Josef Stalin, at the time allied with Britain, as (*Letters* 53) "a bloodthirsty old murderer". Moreover he declared (*Letters* 181) "I am not a 'socialist' in any sense — being averse to 'planning' (as must be plain) most of all because the 'planners', when they acquire power, become so bad."

If not in the field of political theory, some could reductively argue that his imaginary world is connected with the 'Nordic' basis of nazi model because Tolkien recreates typical elements taken from North European traditional culture. Tolkien explicitly denied it and he scorned the nazi *Nordic nonsense* and its attitude (*Letters* 49) "ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light".

However, critics of the second half of the twentieth century censured Tolkien, either directly or indirectly, as did the socialist critic Fred Inglis, who wrote¹³: "Tolkien is no Fascist, but that his great myth may be said, as Wagner's was, to prefigure the genuine ideals and nobilities of which Fascism is the dark negation."

Regarding such arguments we can only appeal to the many examples present in the cosmogony of Tolkien contradicting similar criticisms, because the archetypes in Tolkien's works differ from these parameters¹⁴. At the same time, analysing them closely we can arrive at the opposite conclusion:

Tolkien always denied that Mordor was intended as a representation of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia, but was quite aware of its "applicability" to the death camps and the gulags, to fascism and communism — as well as to other, more subtle or fragmentary manifestations of the same spirit¹⁵.

Perhaps in the balance could lay the most appropriate view to define the genuine 'political Tolkien':

So Tolkien himself can be classed as an anarchist, libertarian, and/or conservative ... In a consistently pre-modern way, Tolkien was neither liberal nor socialist, nor even necessarily democrat; but neither is there even a whiff of 'blood and soil' fascism. (ref. 16)

Thus anarchist, libertarian or conservative (but not fascist), Tolkien was undoubtedly a man committed to his ideas, particularly with the religious beliefs he had acquired in his childhood, and obviously this background contributed to the establishment of Tolkien's own ideology.

Even more, although Tolkien had strong individualistic ideas and opinions that were antithetical with totalitarianism, the religious persecution in Spain was crucial to his support to Franco movement. Maybe, at first sight, his attitude after

the outbreak of the Spanish war may produce disagreement but, in his historical and social context, it denotes coherence.

On the other hand, discussing a situation as complex as that in Spain during the 1930s pays no regard to current ideas of political correctness and we have to take into account that it was not simply an issue of good and evil. Privately, the Spanish civil war greatly affected Tolkien and the way he behaved agreed with his own convictions. This should suffice.

José Manuel Ferrández Bru is founder member and former president of the Spanish Tolkien Society, he has published numerous articles about Tolkien but always in Spanish. He has a special interest on the author's connection with Spain through Fr Morgan and other people.

1. From the author's correspondence with Priscilla Tolkien.
2. Antonio Osborne's letter to Francis Morgan (original in Spanish), 10 January 1933; Osborne Archive.
3. Francis Morgan's letter to Antonio Osborne (original in Spanish), 10 May 1933; Osborne Archive.
4. Related with the Spanish war, a student asked him for a donation to support the republican cause and Lewis told him that he never donated money "to anything that had a directly political implication". West, J. G. Politics from the Shadowlands: C. S. Lewis on Earthly Government in *Policy Review* 68, 68–70 (1994).
5. On 24 May 1944, Churchill gave a speech in the House of Commons supporting the Franco regime, showing his gratitude for its neutrality in the Second World War, which he considered a great service to the allies.
6. Curiously the British fascist groups never were strong sympathizers of Franco's cause. Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists, stated arrogantly: "No British blood should be shed on behalf Spain." Buchanan, T. *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* 90 (Cambridge University Press, 1997). p 90

7. Tolkien had an additional link with Archbishop Hinsley. Hinsley appointed to David Mathew as Auxiliary Bishop, who was the brother of Tolkien's good friend Fr Gervase Mathew, a Dominican scholar who lived in Oxford working in Blackfriars College. Both, Gervase and David had spent his childhood in Lyme Regis. In this town, Tolkien knew them from a visit with Fr Morgan, who was a friend of the family, when all they were children.
8. Aspden, K. *Fortress Church: The English Roman Catholic Bishops and Politics, 1903–63* 89 (Gracewing, 2002).
9. Pearce, J. *Unafraid of Virginia Woolf: The Friends and Enemies of Roy Campbell* 257, 271 (ISI Books 2004).
10. C. S. Lewis was a merciless critic of Campbell (although Tolkien points to extraliterary arguments in order to justify the severity of his criticism such as "there is a good deal of Ulster still left in C.S.L. if hidden from himself" (*Letters* 83)).
11. Pablo Merry del Val, quoted above, was the son of Alfonso Merry del Val, cousin of Francis de Zulueta. In the Spanish war he served as head of press of the insurgents' government.
12. Tolkien refers to a group of poets that flourished in the context of the University of Oxford in the early 1930s, known as the Auden generation. This group of young poets led by W. H. Auden and made up by Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNiece belonged to the first generation of British attracted to Marxism. Interestingly despite their different attitude towards Spanish war and considering the fact that Tolkien criticized the Auden's departure to America during the Second World War, they developed a cordial friendship several years later. On the other hand, their relationship breaks up with the myth of the Tolkien's intolerance because Auden was a leftist sympathizer and a declared homosexual.
13. Inglis, F. Gentility and powerlessness: Tolkien and the new class in *This Far Land: J. R. R. Tolkien* (ed. Giddings, R.) 24–45 (Barnes and Noble, 1983).
14. Although several critics insist on a supposed apology of racial superiority in Tolkien (for example, because of his portraits of the elves or the men of Númenor) there is an unquestionable sample closely linked to the background of this work: the civil war in Gondor, in which a desire of racial purity leads to despotism and destruction.
15. Caldecott, S. *Secret Fire: The Spiritual Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* 2 (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003).
16. Curry, P. *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity* 38 (Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

There and Back Again and other travel books of the 1930s

DALE NELSON

Often overlooked by Tolkien's admirers is the fact that the interwar years were the golden age of the British travel book, when civilians could still cross frontiers relatively freely and "Mr. Peter Fleming went to the Gobi Desert, Mr. Graham Greene to the Liberian hinterland; Robert Byron ... to the ruins of Persia"¹. It paid publishers to print travel books. Sometimes readers forget that Tolkien gave his 1937 classic *The Hobbit* the subtitle *There and Back Again*, and that "There and Back Again" is the main title chosen by Bilbo for his reminiscences — his subtitle being 'A Hobbit's Holiday'. *The Hobbit* has been discussed as a quest story indebted to medieval sagas and poetry, as a parable of maturation and, of course, as a children's adventure tale, but it also uses characteristics of the contemporary popular travel writing.

Restricting our attention just to the 1930s, we find

evocative titles that could have been applied to Bilbo's eventful journey: *Remote People* (Evelyn Waugh, 1931), *Strange Wonders: Tales of Travel* (Christopher Sykes, 1937) and *The Lawless Roads* (Graham Greene, 1939), a title that Tolkien could have used for Chapter 2, referring to the Lone-lands that Bilbo and his companions enter when the Shire is long left behind. Just missing the interwar period was *Far Away and Long Ago* (W. H. Hudson, 1918). Those titles are romantic enough. However, in keeping with the somewhat deflationary tone of much interwar travel writing are titles such as *One's Company: A Journey to China* (Peter Fleming, 1934), *Ninety-Two Days: The Account of a Tropical Journey through British Guiana and Part of Brazil* (Waugh, 1934) and *Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal* (J. R. Ackerley, 1932). Like these titles, Bilbo's own modest titles for his proposed memoirs, *There and Back Again: A Hobbit's Holiday*, would