

Questing for 'Tygers': a historical archaeological landscape investigation of J. R. R. Tolkien's real Middle-earth

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Thror's Map and the map of Wilderland in *The Hobbit* [add] nothing to the story but decoration and a 'Here be tygers' feel of quaintness. (ref. 1)

Recent, thought provoking observations by Shippey² and Lacon³ regarding restricted research agendas and unanswered questions, suggest that, 54 years after the first publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien studies — as led, for the most part, by scholars of English Literature and of Medievalism⁴ — may be approaching a state of cognitive impasse. Why might this be? According to J. R. R. Tolkien⁵: "Many young Americans [and, subsequently, academic and general readers of many other nationalities] are involved in the stories in a way that I'm not."

Many of those seeking to discover, and cross Tolkien's 'bridge of time'⁶ in search of real Middle-earth sources and inspirations, seem predisposed to focus upon specific, favourite — invariably early medieval and fantastic — aspects of this author's multifaceted whole, and to disregard so much of the rest. Dare one suggest that too much fantasy, not enough fact be identified as the fatal flaw in Tolkien studies as currently practised? Although it is, of course, reasonable to concentrate one's attention on certain preferred — safe — issues or topics², Tolkien scholars should, from time to time, be prepared to abandon their comfort zones. Those who express sincere aspirations to pass beyond the Edge of the Wild, to locate, enter and explore Tolkien's sub-created Wilderland, must be willing and able to think, research — and walk — past five decades of academic and popular paradigm; to get involved in Tolkien's stories in the ways that he was, himself.

This paper was conceived, in the first instance, as a brief preamble to an ongoing, unorthodox exercise in literature-led, historical archaeological landscape investigation and interpretation. Thus, I will — at this time — resist the customary practice of specifying the identities and locations of a corpus of apparently random Tolkienesque hill forts, burial mounds, standing stones, ancient trees or familiar place-names that may 'remind' one of Middle-earth. Given the fluid nature of this investigation and the innovative, practical methodology it seeks to develop, detailed disclosures of techniques and places would, I fear, be premature. The initial purpose of this paper is to encourage free-thinking Tolkien scholars to consider, explore and exploit the potential of multidisciplinary modes of thought; to reflect upon unorthodox ideas and hypotheses; to seek out unrecognized or misunderstood sources of information; and to develop fresh research agendas — to break Tolkien studies free of what

might be termed 'the Beowulf paradigm'. To illustrate the potential of a proactive, historical archaeological approach to Middle-earth source investigation, and, hopefully, whet appetites for what will follow, I propose to incorporate historically and archaeologically informed — but not geographically sensitive — original reinterpretations of Tolkien's Minas Ithil/Morgul and Orodruin/Mount Doom.

The Questing for 'Tygers' project, initiated in December 2005, comprises a versatile, historical archaeological landscape investigation methodology specifically developed to investigate and interpret Tolkien's convoluted, peculiar, but invariably methodical form of literary composition — an early form of cultural landscape investigation. The Questing for 'Tygers' methodology — an unorthodox evolution of otherwise orthodox historical archaeological practice — requires that candidate Middle-earth locations, once identified and validated by close, desk-top analysis and pedestrian field survey, be reported and discussed in detail — and in a strict, linear progression. Although certain facets of this methodology are eminently suitable for reportage in short papers and articles, books provide a more appropriate medium for the presentation of extended, detailed discussions and interpretations. My ultimate goal? Two reasonably priced, combined commentary and trail guides: the first following Bilbo's trek to the Lonely Mountain; the second following Frodo to Mordor. It is my intention that these volumes should refocus popular, academic and critical attention upon Tolkien and his Middle-earth fantasy travel sagas, as Michael Ward's radical *Planet Narnia* (2008) hypothesis has succeeded in refreshing and redirecting C. S. Lewis/Narnia scholarship.

In search of landscape

Efe Levent has suggested that the fantasy genre, of which J. R. R. Tolkien was a pioneer "has long been a no-go zone for every self-respecting scholar of literature"⁷. Such academic disengagements can present interesting research opportunities to nonconformist, original thinkers from other disciplines. Ruth Lacon has identified a number of deliciously thorny issues that may benefit from a robust, multidisciplinary — pedestrian — approach to Middle-earth source investigation. An approach that will break with established Tolkien studies practice by identifying, then separating primary historical, archaeological, geographical and cultural source evidence from secondary, unreliable, fantasy transformations; to divide the meat from the mushrooms. Consider this: 50 years have passed since the first publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, yet most Tolkien

source investigators seeking to understand and explore the expansive, rural, three-dimensional, tangible landscapes of Middle-earth seem confined in perpetuity to the suburbanized, two-dimensional backdrops of southern Birmingham. So, Lacon asks: why does Tolkien cover his source tracks so thoroughly? How may we access the deeper patterns of Tolkien's creative process? What is Tolkien's thinking with regard to history? How does Tolkien transform existing source material into his own storylines and plots? And finally³: why does the heroic poem *Beowulf* seem to exert so little influence upon Tolkien's Middle-earth writings? Lacon's excellent questions will guide this ongoing project.

And so we shoulder our backpacks, grasp our sticks, and step into the Road ...

The compost heap

I have long been intrigued by Tolkien's oft quoted "leaf-mould of the mind" metaphor⁸, and troubled by his biographer's confident assertion that: "one learns little by raking through a compost heap to see what dead plants originally went into it"⁹.

A nice, juicy, stratified midden represents an invaluable archaeological resource. A midden, if excavated and analysed with care and close attention to detail, can yield abundant information. This informed approach to finds recovery is equally applicable to orthodox field archaeological excavations as it is to unorthodox literary source excavations — such as Tolkien's mental 'compost heap'. The excavator is required to know where to look, how to look, and what to look for.

Tolkien "deplored the feeble modern understanding of English names, English places, [and] English culture"¹⁰. It is not inconceivable that Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, in part, to test this "feeble modern understanding" hypothesis upon his literary friends and, subsequently, the academic and general readers of his published Middle-earth travel tales. Thus, Tolkien's *Hobbit* writings, like C. S. Lewis's secretive, planet-inspired Narnia cycle¹¹, may incorporate a complex, source-based riddle-game¹². Tolkien challenges his readers to disprove his hypothesis by asking them: 'Where is my Middle-earth?'

Tolkien, who might be described as an enthusiastic day-walker¹³, wrote out his Middle-earth fantasy travel stories for oral presentation to the Inklings. When 'at home', the Inklings gathered in to read aloud — then criticize — one another's submissions. However, certain poetically minded Inklings liked to embark upon extended, literary-creative tramping tours/pedestrian-poetic pub crawls — for the duration of which they entitled themselves "The Cretaceous Perambulators"¹⁴. Thus, Tolkien seems to have written, delivered orally and eventually published two elaborate fantasy tramping tales intended to appeal to an informed, literary-minded tramping audience. It would seem that the sometime perambulating Inklings failed to recognize Tolkien's tramping point? Levent observes that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* read like maps⁷. Indeed they do. However, in both

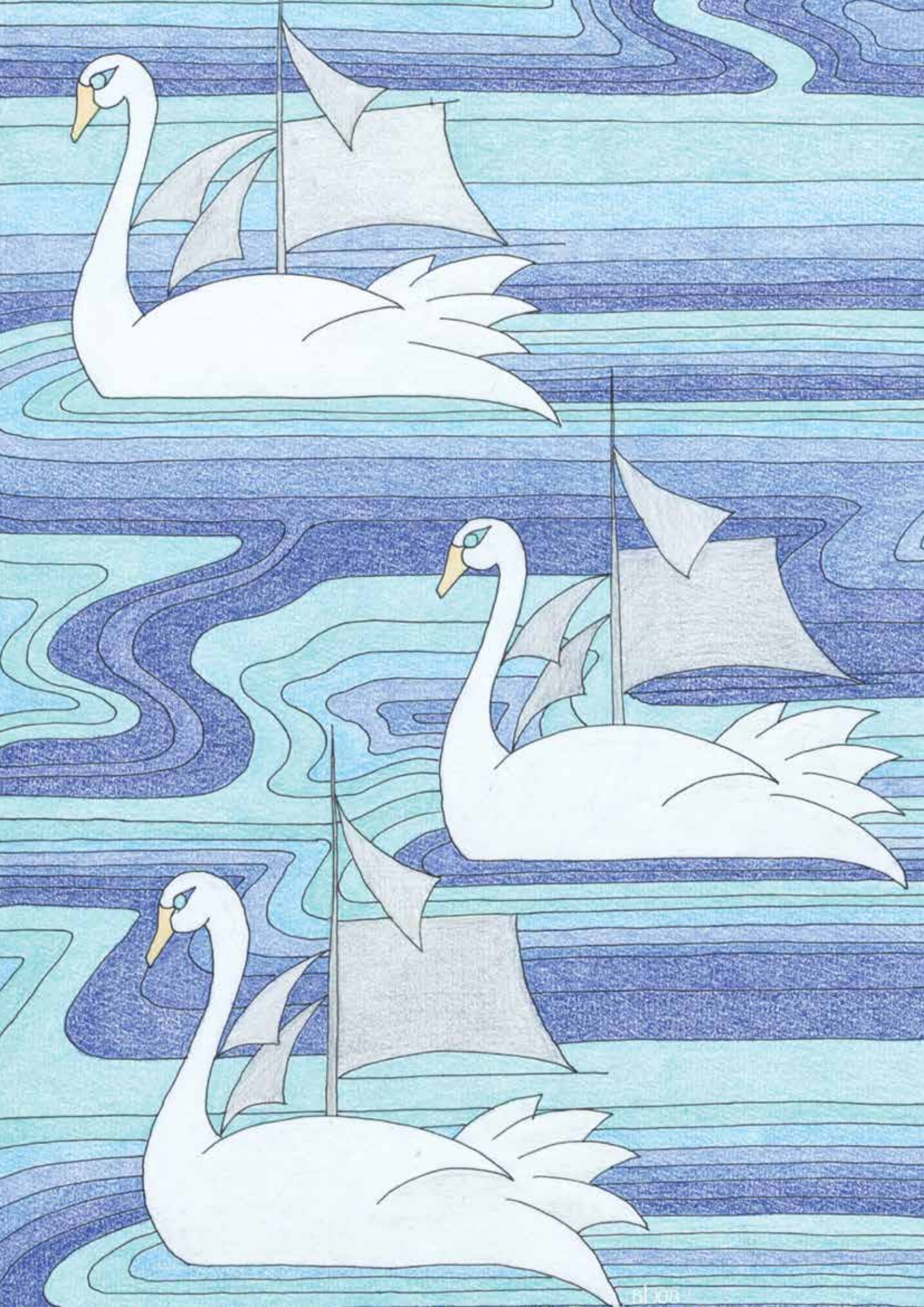
written style and content, Tolkien's Middle-earth walking sagas repay even closer comparison with popular, contemporary (1920s–1940s) accounts of long-distance, cross-country walking, cycling and motoring tours conducted within the British Isles. Tours undertaken by a generation of generally forgotten travel wordsmiths including H. V. Morton, S. P. B. Mais, H. H. Symonds and A. J. Brown.

Consider this: two of the traditional objectives of a bona fide tramping expedition were the keeping of a detailed daily journal and the preparation of rough sketch maps depicting the route followed¹⁵. As a perfectionist thinker and author, Tolkien had to get his facts right. Ongoing, verifiable archaeological field survey, guided by close textual, cartographic and place-name analyses, indicates that Tolkien — probably travelling to and from his starting and finishing points by railway — day-walked the routes, and visited and researched the places he described and mapped in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Readers wishing to chase inspirational 'tygers' across Tolkien's real fantasy landscapes have no choice but to lace up their boots and put in the academic and pedestrian 'hard yards'.

With apologies to L. P. Hartley, Middle-earth is, like the past, a foreign country: Tolkien did things differently there. An open mind, a keen eye for detail and a willingness to engage with, and to decode, Tolkien's real topographical, cultural and philological ciphers — to understand, and recreate his multidisciplinary working/walking methodology — is prerequisite to becoming fully conscious of the true immensity of Tolkien's Middle-earth sub-creation. Alas, there are no short cuts to Gondor: researchers accepting the challenge to locate Tolkien's 'bridge' are required to undertake close analyses of evidence and sources relating to specific English places, built structures, place-name translations and landscapes (archaeology, philology, cartography, geography); and geographically relevant, often obscure, elements of local English culture (history, theology, religious doctrine, mythology). Such detailed research provides the only reliable means of identifying and, more importantly, validating candidate real Middle-earth locations. Candidate locations may be confirmed or refuted by rigorous desktop investigation and field-testing against Tolkien's own research methodology; his cartography; and his visually descriptive texts. Thus, locations are identified by informed 'finds analysis' and 'field-walking', rather than by unsupported personal belief, popular opinion or suburban myth.

How does Tolkien transform physical, geographical source material into his storylines and plots? Orthodox Middle-earth geographical source investigations — usually focused upon red-brick, southern Birmingham and environs — tend to encompass a curious fusion of biographical details, personal belief, suburban myth, fantasy invention, and random locations that happen to remind the viewer of Middle-earth. The wider English West Midlands landscapes with which Tolkien was so familiar, and about which he wrote with such passion

How does Tolkien transform physical, geographical source material into his storylines and plots?



in the 1920s–1940s, were factual not fictional. They comprised both intact rural idylls and former country landscapes that had been despoiled and scarred by heavy industry. Many of these rural and post-industrial landscapes were changing yet again, becoming ‘tram-ridden’¹⁶, suburbanized rookeries. Within Tolkien’s sub-creation, real landscapes and structures currently lauded as important survivals of early industrial and social archaeological heritage positively invited robust transformation: they tended to re-emerge as the diabolical works of evil men, renegade wizards and dragons¹⁷.

The mouth of hell

Perhaps the most accessible case study with reference to a geographical landscape transformation concerns the development of Tolkien’s burning mountain, Orodruin. Field survey and desktop investigation indicates that the fantasy construct Orodruin comprises a fusion of a real geographical feature — a hill located in a smoke-polluted valley, an amended (Tolkienized) Early English place-name translation, a local historical legend concerning an ancient battle, and a specific form of symbolic medieval ecclesiastical and secular art. Inspired by its place-name, Tolkien’s Orodruin may be identified as a hell mouth.

An ancient visual image, the hell mouth was an awe inspiring, powerful component of medieval Christian wall art and secular theatrical stage sets. A hell mouth could be depicted as a gapping mouth into which damned souls were dragged by demons. An alternative form comprised a conical, crenelated tower with a door set in the side; through this door the damned were hauled to endure eternal torment. Tolkien’s Orodruin hell mouth took the form of a cone-shaped, volcanic mountain with a door cut into its flank. This door provided access to the fires of hell — the very fires in which the Ring of Power was forged by Sauron¹⁸. Medieval hell mouths had an alternative name: they were also referred to as dooms¹⁹. Thus, Orodruin is also known as Mount Doom.

Tolkien seems to have favoured the graphic medieval imagery of hell mouths or dooms, consequently others may be identified in the landscapes of Middle-earth. Tolkien’s hell mouths usually comprise mountains of ill repute, pierced with doors and/or tunnels, with something nasty lurking inside. Further potential Middle-earth hell mouths include: the West-door of Moria (beneath Caradhras the Cruel); Shelob’s Lair (beneath Ephel Duath, the Mountains of Shadow); the Door under Dwimorberg (the Haunted Mountain); and the enchanted door of Erebor (the Lonely Mountain, lair of the dragon Smaug).

An impressive medieval, Midlands-located hell mouth image may be observed upon the Hereford Cathedral *Mappa Mundi* (made in Lincoln or Hereford *circa* 1300)²⁰. A veritable compost-heap of potent medieval visual symbolism and fantastic imagery, the *Mappa* depicts its doom as a heavy, iron-strapped, open door in the side of a hill; a door leading to a subterranean chamber within which dwells a fearsome dragon²¹.

How does Tolkien transform standing archaeological source material into his storylines and plots? A test case

of one tower, two names might be considered. The tower in question is Minas Morgul/Ithil. Minas Morgul/Ithil was one of the Two Towers — the other being Minas Tirith/Anor. According to long-established, popular tradition, the towers of Minas Morgul/Ithil and Minas Tirith/Anor were inspired by Perrott’s Folly and the chimney of the Edgbaston Water Works — both of these structures are located in southern Birmingham. However, it should be noted that Tolkien chose not to endorse this belief²². It endures just the same.

Archaeological landscape investigation may provide an explanation for Tolkien’s apparent reluctance to confirm any creative interest in the two towers of Edgbaston. Field survey indicates that Tolkien’s two towers were inspired by two Anglican church towers located many miles from Birmingham. According to Humphrey Carpenter²³:

Tolkien had a deep resentment of the Church of England which he sometimes extended to its buildings, declaring that his appreciation of their beauty was marred by his sadness that they had been (he considered) perverted from their rightful Catholicism.

Tolkien’s bleak description of Minas Morgul/Ithil exudes a personal passion that seems to extend far beyond the requirements of pure fantasy; a passion that seems especially out of place when applied to a mid-eighteenth century folly and an industrial chimney. Thus:

A long-tilted valley, a deep gulf of shadow, ran back far into the mountains. Upon the further side, some way within the valley’s arms, high on a rocky seat upon the black knees of Ephel Duath, stood the walls and tower of Minas Morgul. All was dark about it, earth and sky, but it was lit with light. Not the imprisoned moonlight welling through the marble walls of Minas Ithil long ago, Tower of the Moon, fair and radiant in the hollow of the hills. Paler indeed than the moon ailing in some slow eclipse was the light of it now, wavering and blowing like a noisome exhalation of decay, a corpse-light, a light that illuminated nothing. (ref. 24)

It would seem that Minas Ithil represents this particular church building as a pre-Reformation, Roman Catholic place of worship; whereas Minas Morgul describes the same building in its post-Reformation guise as an Anglican parish church. Tolkien seems to be making a personal, doctrinal comment about the true light of Roman Catholicism being extinguished by Protestant Anglicanism. Alas, from an Anglican perspective, this name change is all the more disturbing since Minas Ithil became Minas Morgul after its capture by the Nazgul²⁵. Consequently, one might speculate that King Henry VIII, the instigator of Protestant Reformation and monastic dissolution in England, may be identified as Tolkien’s model for the Lord of the Nazgul — the Witchking of Angmar.

The Morgul fate of this village church may have been sealed decades before Tolkien took an interest in it: apparently, this building represents an especially notorious example of grievous Victorian ecclesiastical ‘restoration’.

I will bring this missive towards a conclusion by quoting Tolkien's signature tramping poem *The Road Goes Ever On*.

The Road goes ever on and on
Out from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
Let others follow it who can!
Let them a journey new begin,
But I at last with weary feet
Will turn towards the lighted inn,
My evening rest and sleep to meet.

(ref. 26)

Most readers interpret this poem as referring to journey's end, to death. I prefer a less gloomy understanding: 'The Road goes ever on' seems to incorporate both a challenge and an invitation from author to reader: 'Let others follow [me/Tolkien] who can!' and: 'Let them a journey new begin.'

Those who accept Tolkien's challenge, step on to the Road and go ranging the greenways that lie beyond the Edge of the Wild, will discover the fate of early-Seventh Age Middle-earth²⁷ — 54 years after the first publication of Frodo Baggins's account of the War of the Ring. In 2009, the fume-choked air of Mordor has cleared; the tunnel under 'the Hedge' remains passable but damp; picnics are enjoyed and ball games played upon the Pelennor Fields where Theoden fell; and the ruins of Cair Andros have become a popular tourist attraction. Alas, but the descendants of Saruman have also been busy²⁸: in defiance of Gimli's environmental concerns²⁹, industrial stone quarrying has damaged the Hornburg; a resurrected, resurgent Isengard has dominion over Fangorn Forest and Amon Hen; and a restored red eye stares once more across the wide realms of Rohan, Gondor and Ithilien.

The golden rule followed by those traversing unknown, or unfamiliar territory is: always trust your map and compass. Alas, for more than 50 years fantasy-led academic and private researchers seeking to understand and navigate the wide landscapes and complicated lore of Middle-earth seem inclined to mistrust Tolkien as a cartographer, and ignore him as a trail guide. The Questing for 'Tygers' project seeks to rectify this doleful situation by engaging academically and physically with the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. To interpret and follow — on foot — Tolkien's maps, and be guided by his texts and sources — trusting that Tolkien's own road to Middle-earth, so carefully mapped and described, will, eventually, lead open-minded, academic thinkers and thoughtful readers back to Mirkwood, the Lonely Mountain or "even further and to worse places?"³⁰. This paper, and those to follow, should, one might expect, focus fresh, critical attention upon J. R. R. Tolkien and his walking tales of Wilderland. At the very least, the historical archaeological landscape investigation methodology pioneered for this project, and the growing cache of findings and ideas said methodology has generated to date, should keep subject-specialist Tolkien scholars — and thinkers drawn from many other fields and disciplines — busy for decades. My conclusion? Middle-earth is full of

'tygers' — if you know where to look, how to look and what to look for.



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Acknowledgements I acknowledge, with sincere gratitude, all who have supported and encouraged this project: David Alton, Stratford Caldecott, Dimitra Fimi, John Hines, Lesley James, Jef Murray, Ronald A. Ross, Andrew Taylor, and Christopher and Christine Vigor.

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