

# The desire of a tale-teller

MAGGIE BURNS

**S**couting for Buller by Herbert Hayens (1904)<sup>1</sup> and *The Lost Explorers* by Alexander Macdonald (1906)<sup>2</sup> are adventure stories for boys. The two books are of interest to *Mallorn* readers because they were selected by J. R. R. Tolkien as his donations to King Edward's School Library in 1911 (ref. 3). They may also shed light on issues raised by two articles in *Mallorn* 47 that have, in turn, inspired this article. The first piece is Dale Nelson's article on H. Rider Haggard<sup>4</sup> in response to Tom Shippey's Editorial in *Mallorn* 45 noting that there has been little consideration of the influence on Tolkien of nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors<sup>5</sup>. What did Tolkien enjoy reading as a boy? The stories by Hayens and Macdonald may give some clues. And these stories in their different ways lead to the second inspiration for this article: Franco Manni's discussion of history in Tolkien's stories<sup>6</sup>. In the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>7</sup> when Tolkien wrote that he disliked allegory he continued: "I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers." 'Feigned' history is a concept that needs clarification. Generally history is a record of events that actually took place, story describes an imaginary sequence of events. To feign usually means to pretend, history therefore should not be feigned.

## 'True' history

Today, history requires accuracy and is unsympathetic to 'feigned' additions. As the writing of 'true' history itself changes and develops, it is worth considering what 'true' history may have been for Tolkien and his friends at the start of the twentieth century. Arthur Conan Doyle's books were very popular at King Edward's School. Tolkien had certainly read Conan Doyle's *The White Company*, as it was on his list of books suitable for two Mexican boys for whom he was responsible in the summer of 1913 (ref. 8). However, I will not discuss Conan Doyle's fiction here, but a contemporary work of history by him: *The Great Boer War*<sup>9</sup>. One of Tolkien's donations, *Scouting for Buller*, was set in the Boer War.

When the Boer War broke out, Conan Doyle volunteered and served as a doctor with British troops in South Africa. As the troops reached Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State in March 1900, there was a major outbreak of typhoid (enteric) fever. This was a subject of personal interest to Tolkien as his own father had died there of typhoid fever in February 1896. As Conan Doyle commented: "Enteric fever is always endemic in the country, and especially at Bloemfontein." Many British soldiers died; Conan Doyle was working in the field hospital to try to save them. *The Great Boer War*, which



The library at King Edward's School, 1933.

he wrote on his return home, was acclaimed in reviews as a standard history of the war. It seems to have been popular as there were many reprints. As there was a copy in the school library, it is very likely that Tolkien read it. Conan Doyle's history is well-written, with telling phrases — for example, in the first chapter, when he explains the background to the conflict, he writes: "The Government had the historical faults and the historical virtues of British rule. It was mild, clean, honest, tactless and inconsistent."

Conan Doyle's writing offers an example of the character of 'true' history for readers at the time the book was published. Some scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* reflect elements of Conan Doyle's account of the Boer War. Individual warriors are praised, and leaders are important: "Small, brown, and wrinkled, with puckered eyes and alert manner, Lord Roberts in spite of his sixty-seven years preserves the figure and energy of youth." Conan Doyle describes battles and forced marches for the soldiers, with little or no food and water. Such events are illustrated with anecdotes that vividly convey the experience of the protagonists. Baden-Powell had held the besieged town of Mafeking for months; when the Boer commander Eloff surrendered just before Mafeking was finally relieved. "Good evening, Commandant," said Powell to Eloff; "won't you come in and have some dinner?" The prisoners — burghers, Hollanders, Germans and Frenchmen — were treated to as good a supper as the destitute larders of the town could furnish."

Conan Doyle's history is full of tales of heroic exploits by soldiers, and, perhaps more importantly for Tolkien and his friends, of officers. Often these were tales of self-sacrifice.

Lord Roberts's only son was an aide-de-camp in the war. At the Battle of Colenso in 1899, he and a couple of other officers responded to a desperate appeal for volunteers to rescue the British guns that were about to be captured by the Boers. He died, and was awarded the Victoria Cross. Immediately before this, four gunners had perished trying to save their gun; this is the final part of Conan Doyle's description: "The third threw up his hands and pitched forward upon his face; while the survivor, a grim powder-stained figure, stood at attention looking death in the eyes until he too was struck down. A useless sacrifice, you may say; but while the men who saw them die can tell such a story round the camp fire the example of such deaths as these does more than clang of bugle or roll of drum to stir the warrior spirit of our race." This was the subject of one of the only two illustrations, in colour, in *Scouting for Buller*. Both words and picture carried a powerful message to the youth of Britain.

Conan Doyle's moving history helps to explain what would follow at the start of the 1914–18 war. Much has been written about Tolkien's experience of war; John Garth has told in detail what happened to Tolkien and his friends<sup>10</sup>. Their records, including the history of the school's Cadet Corps and the Officers' Training Corps, are available in the *King Edward's School Service Records*<sup>11</sup>, the *King Edward's School Chronicle*<sup>12</sup> and the *Old Edwardians Gazette*<sup>13</sup>. But it is still difficult to wholly understand the motivation of huge numbers of young men in Birmingham, a middle-class, working-class mostly nonconformist city, in August 1914. They flocked to enlist for fear that the war might end before they could take part. There had been an appeal to their imagination in the war stories they read. But added to this, in Conan Doyle's and other histories was the information about a real war in their own lifetime, a war in which young officers were heroes. This stirred 'the warrior spirit of our race.'

When looking at 'true' history there are difficult-to-define boundaries between history and legend in ancient stories. There are examples in the Greek and Latin texts that Tolkien studied at school; Livy for instance gives an account of the recent history of Rome, but also tells the story of the suckling of Romulus and Remus by a she-wolf. Tolkien discussed this process briefly in *On Fairy-stories*<sup>14</sup>, taking a story about the mother of Charlemagne as an example. Here he makes a comment that is of general use when discussing 'feigned' history: "The opinion that the story is not true . . . must be founded on something else: on features in the story which the critic's philosophy does not allow to be possible in real life." This article does not assess ancient or medieval stories for the nature of history, however the concept of what is 'possible in real life' gives a useful criterion for judging semi-historical tales of Tolkien's time.

## 'Feigned' history

One type of 'feigned' history was common during Tolkien's youth. A number of the books for boys written before the First World War combine history and story; being about

events and battles that have happened, but with fictional characters playing a significant role. Tolkien was a sub-librarian in his last year at school and, in the final term, librarian<sup>12</sup>. He would have had to issue some titles repeatedly. Librarians' reports suggest that the librarians felt that the works of Walter Scott and Charles Dickens were ideal reading matter. Which authors were the boys actually reading?

The following librarians' laments come from the *King Edward's School Chronicle*.

December 1904: "Although not wishing to depreciate the good work of Mr. Henty, he thinks that for members of the Modern 5th to take out the works of no other author, shews distinctly childish taste."

December 1905: "All the 80 books classed as 'Doyle', 'Haggard', 'Fenn' and 'School Stories' were frequently in actual circulation simultaneously."

October 1911: "The sub-librarians demand that no more Henty, Haggard, School Tales, etc., be kept in the Library than can be read out in one breath."

March 1914: "School stories, Henty, Conan Doyle and the usual favourites have lost none . . . of their popularity with the School at large."

February 1915: "Doyle and Wells are still the favourites, though Haggard, Henty, and School-tale writers are read extensively."

And from December 1915, in a satirical piece by Thomas Ewart Mitton, a younger cousin of Tolkien's, when the German Army has invaded and has reached King Edward's in Birmingham: "Sub-librarians were running to and fro from the great Library. Each was carrying some precious M. S. S. to a place of safety. I observed that the works of Doyle, Haggard, Henty and Ballantyne were given primary consideration." (The German invaders were repulsed by the 'deadly asphyxiating stinks' coming from the school Science Building, so the invasion failed<sup>15</sup>.)

We know that Tolkien enjoyed Rider Haggard, and Nelson has shown many links between Tolkien's work and that of Rider Haggard. *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling was another book Tolkien felt suitable for his Mexican charges in 1913. A 1923

King Edward's School library catalogue<sup>16</sup> lists in the fiction section 21 books by Rider Haggard, 37 books by George Alfred Henty, 19 books by Conan Doyle and 15 titles by R. M. Ballantyne, and many other fiction authors. But, as Shippey points out<sup>5</sup>, there was a vast range of boys' reading material and boys' adventure stories that Tolkien could have read.

Some donations to the library appear in the King Edward's School Lists<sup>3</sup>. Most were from adults, a few from pupils, some from men who had just left the school. In 1908–09 Tolkien donated two books by G. K. Chesterton: *Orthodoxy* (1908) and *Heretics* (1905). These are books of essays in flamboyant Chestertonian style. Chesterton's writing entertains, but it is also both educational and spiritual. Other pupils donated works of fiction; in the same year R. Q. Gilson gave *The House Prefect* by Desmond Coke, and H. S. Astbury gave *With Kitch-*

## Army 'biscuit' might be the forerunner of 'dwarf-bread' in *The Lord of the Rings*.

*ener in Soudan* by G. A. Henty. The majority, possibly all, of the other books donated by adults were non-fiction. Again in 1909–10, R. Q. Gilson and E. R. Bloomfield each donated a fiction title; and in 1910–11 R. Q. Gilson and F. Scopes, fellow sub-librarians, donated several fiction titles. One gift from F. Scopes was *With Buller in Natal* by G. A. Henty<sup>17,18</sup>.

George Alfred Henty's books are interesting because they represent a range of popular adventure stories for boys. It is highly probable that Tolkien had read some Henty. Henty was a prolific writer of the late Victorian period; a popular writer in the *Boy's Own Paper*, as well as writing many novels for boys. His stories follow a pattern. They are set at a time of war from some point in the world's history; a fictional teenage boy or boys becomes involved with those fighting, and plays a heroic role; the teenage boys, although active participants in war, always seem to survive. Before the First World War, Henty's books were popular with boys, and adults certainly approved of them. Many of the Henty titles in the collection in Birmingham Central Library have bookplates inside showing that they had been given as school or as Sunday School prizes.

The following year Tolkien gave a second boys' story about the Boer war, *Scouting for Buller*<sup>1</sup>. Tolkien as librarian would know that Henty's book was in the library. It may be useful to ask why he donated a boys' adventure story on exactly the same topic as one in the library. *Scouting for Buller* describes the same battles, and also has a boy hero. A comparison of the two stories may give an indication of the type of 'feigned' history that Tolkien preferred as a youth.

## War stories

Tolkien, born in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, probably took a particular interest in the Boer War. He was only three when he left but had some memories. His father stayed behind because of business and political problems; had he travelled with his family to England in 1895 he might not have died when he did. Tolkien remembered hearing his mother talk about South Africa with relatives when he was a child. Her meagre income came from the shares in South Africa that her husband had purchased before he died. He wrote to Christopher Wiseman in November 1914, "I no longer defend the Boer War!"<sup>28</sup>, which suggests earlier interest and partisanship.

Although Tolkien would have greater reason for knowing about South Africa than did his friends, most of them would have known something about the Boer War. Both of the titles discussed here are aimed at boy readers. Hayens as the narrator addresses "my boy readers". Henty does so more indirectly; when the bank manager says to Chris: "You are all men", Chris replies: "We are all boys". Other writers popular with boys had taken part in the Boer War; Conan Doyle is mentioned above; Rudyard Kipling had worked on an army newspaper. Boys would have known the name of Baden-Powell including his resistance in Mafeking. He had contributed articles to the

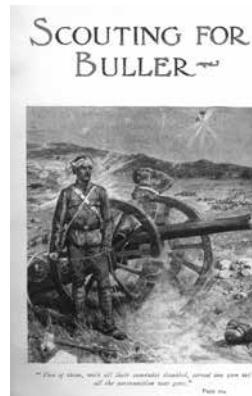
*Boy's Own Paper* when serving in India. In the 1890s he had written a handbook on 'Army Scouting for Cavalry' and this was accepted for publication in 1899. 'Scouting' was seen as a skill essential to the army rather than a leisure activity for boys. *Scouting for Boys* was published in 1908; the Tolkien brothers must have read it as it was reported in the *Oratory Parish Magazine* in 1909 that three patrols of scouts, under the brothers Tolkien, had "marched in the wake of the Boys' Brigade on Easter Monday".

*With Buller in Natal* was published in 1901 before the Boer War had ended. The story ends just after the relief of Ladysmith. The sequel, *With Roberts to Pretoria*, was published not long before Henty died<sup>19</sup>. This was not in the King Edward's library, so I will focus on *With Buller in Natal*. In the short preface, Henty states that he has tried to "reconcile the various narratives of the fighting in Natal". He adds: "Fortunately this is not a history, but a story, to which the war forms the background." The story is about Chris and his friends, teenage sons of rich local engineers and landowners of

English stock. They offer to scout for General Buller. They do this in semi-independent fashion, and seem to be free to carry out the tasks that appeal to them. The group of boys themselves elect Chris to be captain of their troop; not normally a way of becoming a captain in the British Army. They are successful in every task, and eventually leave the army to rejoin their parents, before the war has ended.

Henty's narrative technique was uneven. It was his practice to use a variety of resources when writing his stories. This could mean opposing points of view that were not always reconciled: for example, in *With Buller in Natal*, the Boers are all villains at the start then later after a battle "kindly Boers" give water to wounded British soldiers. There is an omniscient narrator; the language of much of the book reads like a newspaper report of that time. Even when Chris as the leader of a group is speaking to his friends there are many long sentences with an assortment of subordinate clauses. Henty gives detailed descriptions of the battles from the standpoint of an observer rather than a participant. Two of the boys are wounded, but not seriously. The battle hospital sounds luxurious. It is mentioned that soldiers have died, but none of them are close to the teenage heroes, and therefore not to the reader. The portrayal of the Boers is unconvincing; as mentioned above, they are described as villains for the most part.

By contrast, *Scouting for Buller* is written in the first person. Much of the book is dialogue and the language is simple, the phrases short. The hero is Frank West, a young man of English descent living on a farm in Transvaal with an Irish friend, Terence. Both of his parents are dead. His father's death is a mystery that involves a neighbouring Boer family. Frank is close friends with the son and daughter of that family, and their story and the resolution of the mystery are interwoven with the story of the war. Frank becomes a scout like Chris and his friends, but it is clear that he is 'under orders', as are the other soldiers.





## Resurrection

Jef Murray

A comparison of the two books shows that although both deal with the same historical events, there are significant differences between the probability of events described. In Henty's story, the landscape is described in sufficient detail to know how a battle took place, but there is no sense of the difference that a hill, a river or a sudden change in the weather might make to a man fighting. In Hayens' story the weather and landscape play a role; a horse may nearly fall over a precipice or fog may save the day for soldiers under attack. Food is always of interest to fighting men. Henty states that soldiers have biscuit to eat, and that is that. Hayens describes how the soldiers react — with good-humoured dismay — on such occasions. Army 'biscuit' might be the forerunner of 'dwarf-bread' in *The Lord of the Rings*.

There is emotion and humour in Hayens' book, which is lacking in Henty's account. The men who are killed are close to Frank, and he suffers. When Frank joins the troop of Barker's Scouts, a soldier he had just got to know, Old Mac, is shot and he mourns his death. A companion throughout the story is his magnificent horse, Bay Ronald; he dies near the end. Frank grieves for his comrades, yet he also grieves when he sees Boers being shelled: "My heart sickened." But there is humour as well. The soldiers often swap jokes and make fun of each other. Frank manages to capture a small group of Boers on his own by pretending he is with other soldiers, by dint of shouting orders to them and replying to the orders in a different voice.

There are small circumstantial details in Hayens' story

that enhance the impression that the author is giving the reader a picture of the war as it happened. Frank, when close to Ladysmith, meets a young man who turns out to be a war correspondent. No name is given, but it is tempting to see this as a portrayal of the young Winston Churchill, as he was present at the relief of Ladysmith. There were admittedly many war correspondents; in the preface to his history Conan Doyle acknowledged that he had used their writings in addition to his own experiences and names 14 of them, Churchill being one. Hayens would have heard of Churchill's adventures; when back in England, Churchill toured the country giving talks about his experiences. He gave a talk at Birmingham Town Hall in November 1900 (ref. 20). However, Hayens is describing Frank's experience, and Frank does not know the name of the man he met by chance.

The second book donated by Tolkien, *The Lost Explorers* by Alexander Macdonald, was another boys' adventure story, first published in 1906. The author was born in Scotland in 1878, and travelled in Australia when young. His story may be considered history, not as a well-known historical event, but because it is based on personal experiences. In the preface he writes: "I have given a tale of gold-digging and of exploration — a tale, for the most part, of events that have actually happened. My characters are all drawn — however crudely — from life; my descriptions are those of one who has seen and felt in a similar environment. My boys in the story were real boys." As Tolkien wrote<sup>21</sup> in 1956, Letter 181: "I take my models like anyone else — from such 'life' as I know."

Macdonald also wrote travel books, which contain many of the events told in *The Lost Explorers*. One of these, *In Search of El Dorado*, was published in 1905, dedicated “To my mother”. The preface, written at Elcho Park, Perth, states: “I desire to assure all readers of this book that the scenes here depicted and the events described may be taken as faithful representations from life. I would also add that the geographical descriptions throughout are accurate in detail.” *In the Land of Pearl and Gold* was published in 1907. In this preface Macdonald assures the reader: “a book of travel should be accurate”. However the preface concludes with a sentence that suggests imagination has played a role<sup>22</sup>: “One or two of the adventures ... have not yet reached the conclusions which perhaps the last lines suggest. But hope ever leads.”

The boys in *The Lost Explorers* are in their late teens and are called Robert ‘Bob’ Wentworth and Jack Armstrong. They work for an engineering firm in Glasgow. Reading about the Scottish Australian explorer James Mackay visiting Glasgow they decide to travel to Australia. When booking their tickets they meet Mackay and he takes them under his wing. The first part of the story describes their hunt for gold, in which they are successful. Some of their experiences are reflected in the history of Kalgoorlie and its development as a gold-town. Macdonald himself had visited Kalgoorlie and written about it. There is a gold rush and an exciting contest

with the evil-natured prospector Macguire, including a race through the desert to register a claim. Some of the achievements accredited to Bob were true of the 1890s gold-miner Paddy Hannan, who had a town named after him temporarily; and the Canadian miner Larry Cammilleri who discovered that the quartz did not carry the gold, but the lode matter composed of ironstone. Thereafter the first battery was established, and the miners and diggers prospered.

The second part is foretold in the preface: “The last few chapters in the book are based on an explorer’s natural deductions. We all, who have forced a painful path over Central Australia’s arid sands, hope — ay, believe — in the existence of a wonderful region in the vague mists of the Never Never Land.” Mackay’s small group struggles across the Australian desert coping with thirst and hunger, and with battles with the natives. They find the mountain, hidden by sulphurous fumes, and inhabited by unusually intelligent and aggressive natives. There they also find the ‘lost explorers’, given up for dead by Mackay.

This last part of the story has the air of fantasy suggested by the name: Never-Never. Some scenes recall parts of *The Hobbit*<sup>23</sup>. The chart to find the mountain is as vital to their search as is Thorin’s chart. Although the mountain in the Australian desert does not hold a dragon lying on a hoard of treasure, it is itself formed of rock from which treasure can be won, precious stones and a gold-bearing lode so rich that plates and everyday equipment are made of gold. The natives who attack appear from a tunnel through the mountain, coming out of a cleft, as do the goblins in the

Misty Mountains. At first the explorers cannot understand where they appeared from, but then they find the door, like the door into the tunnel to Smaug’s lair. And the explorers’ experience groping through the tunnel in the dark is similar to Bilbo’s experience when alone in the tunnels under the Misty Mountains. Tolkien takes some of his plot materials Rider Haggard, he may also have taken some from Macdonald.

The description of the landscape and of the gold-diggers’ life is vivid, as Macdonald draws on his own experience — he was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. Bob navigates precisely across the desert with a sextant according to the chart they had been given. He can make accurate calculations, and compensate for problems with the chart. His knowledge and experience from the engineering works helps him develop the vital process to extract gold from the clay in which it is found.

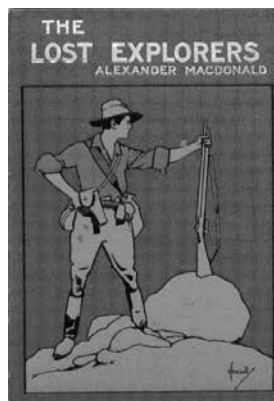
The treatment of the ‘natives’ by all the writers, Macdonald, Hayens and Henty, is interesting — and politically incorrect, in modern terms. The English in South Africa claimed that their regime was better for the Zulus and other native tribes than was that of the Boers. Henty’s language seems more correct by our standards, the servants are described as natives or blacks. But in Henty’s book there is no sense that the natives have, or might have, a life of their own. They are purely servants to carry

out Chris’s orders. At one point he tells them they may go and watch the battle if they wish.

By contrast the ‘natives’ who feature in the books donated by Tolkien are enemies who should be respected. Hayens calls them natives or ‘niggers’. Nigger is not necessarily a pejorative term; during a battle a young doctor is praised for saving lives with the words: “He’s a nigger to work!” The ‘niggers’ in Hayens book have a life of their own. Terence points out<sup>24</sup>: “We’ve both walloped the niggers and stolen their land.” Frank comments: “What a splendid chance for the natives to rise!” The natives are skilled guides, but able to disappear in an instant when they wish. In Macdonald’s story the natives or ‘niggers’ are fierce opponents, to be feared if not respected. Those living in the mountain are said to be descendants of a superior tribe.

### History — true or feigned

In terms of history, both of the books donated by Tolkien, and also Henty’s novel, are based on historical events. *Scouting for Buller* and *With Buller in Natal* both tell part of the story of the Boer War. Macdonald states that most of *The Lost Explorers* is based on historical episodes. Historical events are telescoped into a shorter space of time, so that they can all play a part in one story. The Boer War novels are ‘feigned’ in that imaginary characters are added to the history of real battles. In both Macdonald’s and Hayens’ stories some imaginary characters are not simply added, but take over the roles played by historical characters. The gold-diggers are mentioned above, for example. In the Boer War



there was a Captain de Montmorency who formed a group of scouts that grew in size and reputation. He died near the end of the war, and is probably the model for Captain Barker whom Frank follows, and tries desperately to rescue near the end of *Scouting for Buller*.

The boundaries between story and history start to blur. Conan Doyle's history records heroic sacrifices. Hayens describes how Frank nearly dies trying to save Captain Barker. In the First World War a friend of Tolkien's from the school debating society, W. H. Ehrhardt, went to rescue another Old Edwardian, Sanders, who had been shot by a sniper. He was shot himself in the same way; a third Old Edwardian, Emile Jacot, then managed to get them both back behind the lines at the risk of his own life<sup>25</sup>. It may be wondered how far nature was imitating art, and how far story and history affected the beliefs and subsequent behaviour of men at war.

When history is 'feigned', then the scenery and events may be expected, as Tolkien wrote, to be possible in 'real life' and to follow the everyday laws of nature. Thus when Tolkien spent time on the revision of *The Lord of the Rings*, he took care to ensure that in all the geographical areas covered by the story, the moon was waxing and waning in accordance with the date. The concept of 'real life' can be applied to Hayens' story about the Boer War. He makes the suffering of war vivid, of the soldiers killed, of the families they leave behind, and also the soldiers who have to live the rest of their lives with injuries from which they never recover. Moreover he shows how men at war may fall victim not to the enemy's guns, but to disease — Terence fights bravely, but then succumbs to and nearly dies of typhoid fever. The first part of Macdonald's story follows the rules of nature, for example the kind of geological formations that may contain gold, the way in which to navigate across a desert, and the type of vegetation that contains water. The miners' dialogue flows naturally, and their way of life, clothing, food and so on, seem to be portrayed realistically.

### Thought and experience of readers

Tolkien was choosing books to be read by boys still at King Edward's, younger than himself, so would consider the value of the overall message as well as the quality of the story itself.

One such message was patriotism. The works of both Henty and Hayens suggest that it is a noble thing to fight, as did Conan Doyle in his history. Shippey has referred to the 'Henty ethos'. It is harder now for us to understand Hayens' repeated praise of the British Army, always brave and gallant; and of the greatness of the Empire, but he is showing boys the ideals for which they might fight when older, and at that time probably most accepted this. Tolkien wrote to his friend Christopher Wiseman that he was a patriot<sup>8</sup>. Through his life, as he experienced war, this feeling would develop. It did not mean unquestioning belief in and support for one's

fatherland or motherland. It could mean making sacrifices for and showing loyalty to the people of one's homeland, as Frodo does for the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings*. And at the end this could be love for another homeland, one that 'lies beyond the circles of the world'.

Another value expressed by the books was the love of our fellow-men. *The Lost Explorers* ends with the successful adventurers saying: "greater by far than gold or gems is the love of our fellow-men". This theme is important to Tolkien's writings, man should not lust after gold and treasure. It is the message of the poem *The Hoard*<sup>26</sup>, and of *The Hob-*

*bit*, when the dwarves are about to fight their future allies because of their desire for the treasure that Smaug had taken from them. Greed for gold corrupts. In *Scouting for Buller* and *The Lost Explorers*, treasure is important insofar as it can help other human beings. Frank helps Boers in need as well as British; at the end both he and his Boer friend Barend

declare that they will spend their money to help widows and orphans. In *The Lord of the Rings*, when Sam returns he shares his gift from Galadriel with everyone in the community by distributing it carefully across the Shire so that every plant grows more strongly and beautifully.

If you can get hold of them, the books discussed here are enjoyable to read, Conan Doyle's history as well as the stories. They are satisfyingly long: *Scouting for Buller* has 400 pages, *The Lost Explorers* 380. In the foreword mentioned above<sup>7</sup> Tolkien said that his prime motive when writing *The Lord of the Rings* was "the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them". The titles discussed here would easily fulfil most of these criteria, so do read them if you come across them.



**Maggie Burns** is at Birmingham Central Library.

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  14. Tolkien, J. R. R. *On Fairy-stories (Tree and Leaf)* (1964).
  15. Murray Smith suggests that this may well reflect the sack of Louvain in Belgium by the Germans in August 1914; when the city's library of ancient manuscripts was destroyed. Pupils at King Edward's School would have known about events in Belgium as many refugees came to Birmingham. At least one such refugee, Bertels, attended King Edward's as he is listed in the King Edward's School Service Record (see ref. 11). There is an annotated version of this in the Archives and Heritage section of Birmingham Central Library, given by Charles Heath.
  16. King Edward's School Library Catalogue 1923
  17. Henty, G. A. *With Buller in Natal* (1901).
  18. General Sir Redvers Buller was in charge of British troops in Natal during the first part of the Boer War.
  19. This has been digitised: <http://www.archive.org/details/withrobertstopr00hentoog> (thanks to Murray Smith for sending this link). He also mentioned Tolkien's rejection of the 'With-the-flag-to-Pretoria spirit' in Letter 183 — see Note 21 — which suggests that Tolkien had noticed the influence of Henty-style books on boys, but did not himself accept it.
  20. *Town Crier* 10 November 1900 (weekly Birmingham journal)
  21. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (eds Carpenter, H. & Tolkien, C.) (George Allen & Unwin, 1981).
  22. Both of these titles have been digitised by University of California Libraries and can be read online at <http://www.archive.org/stream/insearchofeldora00macd#page/n9/mode/2up> and <http://www.archive.org/stream/inlandofpearlgo00macdiala#page/6/mode/2up>
  23. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit* (1937).
  24. 'Both' here means the Boers and the British.
  25. Carter, T. *Birmingham Pals* (1997).
  26. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962).

# Frodo as the scapegoat child of Middle-earth

LYNN WHITAKER

On recently rereading the Ursula Le Guin short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, I was struck by the possibility of using Le Guin's theme of the child scapegoat as a lens through which to examine the character of Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. While stopping short of terming this a 'queer reading' strategy (as I lack the counter-culture objective normally allied to such practice), I should stress that the reading offered here is, deliberately, at least partially oppositional or 'against the grain' of an ordinary construction of the text. I do not, therefore, suggest that this analysis in any way divines Tolkien's 'true' or unconscious meaning; instead, I hope that, by adopting an alternative reading strategy, additional insight may be gained into the power of the Frodo character.

First published in 1973 in the original fiction anthology journal *New Dimensions* and reprinted in 1976 in Le Guin's own collection of science-fiction stories, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*<sup>1</sup>, Le Guin's tale (or 'psychomyth' as she terms it) makes for very uncomfortable reading. It tells of the utopian city of Omelas and of its intelligent, joyous people. That the people are not, "simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians", is central to the moral and narrative impact of the condition of their ideal existence: the happiness of Omelas is dependent on the misery and suffering of one child kept imprisoned in a basement.

The description of the child is affective, gross in its abject nature and gross in its nearness to the mark of actual child poverty and abuse:

Perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition and neglect. ... The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes,

except that sometimes ... one of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. ... "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining ... and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin ... its belly protrudes ... It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually. (ref. 1, p. 281)

Most gross of all, perhaps, is the implication of the reader's complicity in this suffering, reinforced by Le Guin's use of direct address to the reader throughout:

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing. (ref. 1, p. 280)

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible. (ref. 1, p. 283)

Like the citizens of Omelas (who each know of the child's existence), the reader also accepts — the story cannot be unread — the existence of the child and of its constituent role in the happiness of the state and its individuals:

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, ... even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery. (ref. 1, p. 282)