



BOOK REVIEW:
Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy

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Bunting, Nancy, Seamus Hamill-Keays, and Toby Widdicombe. *Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. ISBN: 978-3-905703-52-8.

Despite its title, this volume largely ignores Tolkien's impact on literature, or on popular media more generally. Indeed, according to the series editors' preface most of the essays "investigate the possible effects of crucial events" in Tolkien's life, such as the untimely death of his mother, Mabel, in 1904 from diabetes at age 34, and "discuss some of his 'neglected' relatives" in an attempt to "provide inspiration for further research into the complex relationship between JRR Tolkien's life and work" (vii).

According to co-author Widdicombe's introduction, the collection recognizes the passing of the fiftieth anniversary of Tolkien's death in 1973 with seven biographical essays and two additional pieces that "consider where Tolkien studies may go in the next few decades and what issues it needs to address" (xiii). Here Widdicombe raises what seems to be a bit of a straw man, implying that Tolkien's legacy would be in danger of becoming "the preserve of professional linguists," against which this volume is aimed (xvi). However, given the number of peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journals dedicated to Tolkien studies (including *Tolkien Studies*, the Tolkien Society's *Mallorn*, and the *Journal of Tolkien Research*) as well as other journals specializing in the broader influence and study of Tolkien and the other Inklings (e.g., *Mythlore* and the *Journal of Inklings Studies*), Tolkien studies does not appear to be in any danger of being overrun by marauding bands of philologists. Instead, Widdicombe's claim illustrates what seems to be an unfortunately recurring problem in this volume, whereby opinion is presented as incontrovertible fact. For example, when Widdicombe claims that the Tolkien Estate is becoming "less interested in verity and ever more interested in preserving the

biographical legend and in profits,” his evidence consists of what he views as the increasing tendency to take “liberties with [...] source material” in the film and televisual adaptations of Tolkien’s work over the 21st century (xvii). His central piece of evidence, that Peter Jackson’s original film trilogy “was remarkably faithful” to the literary source material, has been debated by fans and scholars since the films’ initial release.

In her preface, Nancy Bunting explains the methodology of the first part of the book, “Past: Biographical Explorations,” which relies on biographical and contextual (historical/societal) information for its analysis. This approach mirrors that of Bunting’s and Hamill-Keays’s previous volume on the early life of Tolkien’s wife, *The Gallant Edith Bratt* (2022). As reviews of that work frequently pointed out the issues with Bunting and Hamill-Keays’s approach (see for example Gunner), Bunting’s preface here seems a deliberate response to this criticism, projected in a surprisingly defensive and even dismissive tone.

Although many of these works are “expanded and revised from *Beyond Bree*,” the monthly publication of the Tolkien Special Interest Group of Mensa, they seem to be used here without having gone through any outside peer review. Bunting’s opening essay, “Tea in Hay,” attempts to reconstruct an event mentioned in a note by Tolkien’s widowed mother, Mabel. This note apparently concerns one of her sons’ adventures with Father Francis Morgan who became the boys’ legal guardian after Mabel’s death. Bunting weaves together genealogical, geographical, geological, historical and philological tidbits to argue that the most likely location for their adventures was Kinver – before expanding to a claim that the Kinver Rock Houses (carved into the soft local sandstone) are a “possible model for hobbit holes” (7). The essay then takes a hard turn, claiming without solid evidence that Morgan and his charges “more than likely” stopped at a particular church in Kinver and “ponder[ed] its roots in early Catholic history,” particularly the “local tradition” that it was dedicated by Wulfere, King of Mercia” (9). Bunting connects this point, and the fact that “Kinver was part of this Hwicce kingdom,” to a line from Tolkien’s 1945 letter to his son Christopher where he wrote that “you are a Mercian or Hwiccan” (10). This example illustrates the general procedure of reasoning utilized throughout Bunting’s authored and co-authored essays.

The co-authored “The 1897 Diamond Jubilee and the Long Awaited Party” ponders Tolkien’s possible childhood experiences of the national Jubilee celebration, presenting it as a significant influence on rather generic aspects of Bilbo Baggins’ “long-expected” birthday party, such as the fireworks, food, and family interaction. Details include Victorian mourning fashions that the widowed Mabel would have been expected to follow and speculation on which members of their extended family the Tolkien boys might have engaged with.

While previous biographical investigations have focused on Tolkien’s younger maternal aunt, Jane, in “May Incledon, the Other Suffield Aunt” Bunting and Hamill-Keays present original biographical research on Mabel’s elder sister, May, her husband, Walter Incledon, and their potential financial, emotional, and religious influence on Tolkien’s family life. The authors do an admirable job in piecing together a great deal of circumstantial evidence, right down to details about the couple’s house. The childhood relationship between Tolkien, his younger brother, Hilary, and May’s daughters, is given emphasis, interspersed with general information on the circumscribed and largely colorless lives of middle-class Victorian girls. The first part of this essay builds

perhaps the most cohesive argument in the volume, drawing attention to the complex relationship with Catholicism that existed among members of Mabel's family, and suggesting the effects Catholicism had on her life after her and May's conversion in 1900. The information that Walter Incledon forbade his wife from openly practicing her new faith, and the apparent impact this had on his relationship with his daughter, Mary, when she later converted as well, is potentially interesting for those curious about Tolkien's extended family. This is followed by Bunting's speculative essay "J.R.R. Tolkien: Ambidexter" which is unfortunately slight in both page length and evidence, arguing that Tolkien was ambidextrous, and speculating how that might have been related to his creative abilities, especially in language creation.

Widdicombe's first contribution in this volume, "For Want of a Biography, the Story Was Lost," focuses on perceived problems with past biographical treatments of Tolkien, principally seen as rising from Tolkien's stated aversion to having his life chronicled by others and a desire by the Tolkien family – especially Christopher Tolkien, as his father's literary heir – to control the biographical narrative. While this essay largely has the tone of an opinion or editorial piece, it does include a noteworthy comparison of several biographical treatments (Carpenter's authorized biography and two unauthorized works) and invites the reader to consider how the family's tight rein on materials available for scholarly analysis impacts the field of Tolkien studies. Widdicombe ends with an impassioned plea for a modern, scholarly biography facilitated by digitizing all known Tolkien papers – which in his view should be funded by the Tolkien family as they have financially benefitted from the commercialization of Tolkien and his literary legacy.

Death takes center stage in the following essay, Bunting's "1904: Mabel Tolkien, Living and Dying," expanded and revised from her earlier essay in *Lembas*, the journal of the Dutch Tolkien Society Unquendor. Bunting's biographical and historical sleuthing concerning the events that led up to Mabel's death seeks to reconstruct the impact that her lingering and ultimately fatal diabetes had upon her young sons. This essay also makes heavy use of hypothesizing based on historical norms of the period. While the discussion is highly detailed (as seen in its descriptions of the symptoms of late-stage diabetes and the Tolkien boys' whooping cough) such details seem more melodramatic than illuminating. Bunting's argument that the episodes of Ring madness suffered by the ringbearers in *The Lord of the Rings* were motivated by hypothetical episodes of diabetic psychosis manifested by Mabel is highly speculative, at best.

This is followed by the only essay of Bunting's specifically written for this volume, "The Interlace of Autobiography and Faërian Imagery in *Smith of Wootton Major*." Here, Bunting spends 100 pages attempting to weave together claimed autobiographical aspects with Tolkien's self-described genre of "Faërian Drama" ("On Fairy-stories" 63) in his late and problematic 1967 work *Smith of Wootton Major*. This essay exemplifies another recurring problem with the volume, an insufficient (and largely dismissive) engagement with preexisting scholarship. While especially noticeable in Widdicombe's contributions, Bunting's essay only very briefly engages with the works of other scholars (for example, that of Verlyn Flieger, the editor of the extended edition of *Smith of Wootton Major*). Instead, Bunting recycles her own research on Tolkien's extended family, searching for what she feels are salient connections.

Her largely psychoanalytical focus ultimately comes back to Mabel Tolkien who Bunting presents not only as the major inspiration for the Faery Queen of the story, but as Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings* as well.

The remaining two essays, both written by Widdicombe, form the second part of the volume, “Future; New Directions in Tolkien Studies.” Regrettably, the discussion relies on sweeping generalizations, inaccuracies which amount to mischaracterization, and plain factual errors (similarly noted by reviewers of Widdicombe’s 2020 volume *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed* [Bratman 273]). For example, “Tolkien as Forgotten Utopian” begins with the now largely debunked claim that “the motivation for the legendarium was [Tolkien’s] desire to create a mythology for England” (251; see Shelton). Similarly to the other essays in this volume, this entry largely sidelines previous scholarship and surprisingly claims that before the essay’s completion “no book-length studies and fewer than half a dozen articles” had been written on the subject. However, this completely ignores, for example, Mark Doyle’s 2019 volume *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien’s Legendarium*.

The volume’s conclusion, “Christopher Tolkien as Editor: The Perils of Kinship,” claims that Tolkien scholars are largely ignorant of, or in denial over, the impact of Christopher’s editorial choices throughout his father’s posthumously published works. This sweeping generalization overlooks, for example, Douglas Charles Kane’s critically acclaimed *Arda Reconstructed*, which delves quite openly into the results of Christopher’s editorial choices in bringing *The Silmarillion* to publication. Widdicombe also forgoes any mention of Christopher’s own comments (especially visible in the later volumes of the encyclopedic *History of Middle-earth* series) where he regrets some of his prior editorial choices (a famous example being the paternity of the High King of the Elves, Gil-galad). Widdicombe’s tone is surprising for a scholarly essay, including general mean-spiritedness directed at both the Tolkien family and the Tolkien studies community. It is highly unfortunate that this tone detracts from Widdicombe’s sometimes-salient points, for example, concerning the control of the Tolkien Estate over what information is available to scholars.

While this volume presents many historical and biographical details, I am sorry to say that the overall effect of its arguments, like Bilbo, feel “thin, sort of *stretched* ... like butter that has been scraped over too much bread” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 41, emphasis original). As a result, I would encourage the reader to consider its arguments with a particular eye towards bias detection, especially given the frequent conflation of correlation and causation in this volume.

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