

J.R.R. Tolkien: The Forest and the City, edited by Helen O'Briain and Gerard Hynes, Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd., 2013. 197 pp. £55 / €60 (hardcover) ISBN 978-1-84682-429-6.

This collection, arising from a conference at Trinity College Dublin in September 2012, comprises a judicious mixture of established authorities and more recent voices. Together, they bring a wealth of scholarship, seasoned reflection and new insights to the subject of nature and culture, in their many aspects, in Tolkien's work.

The editors frame the collection as building on my own *Defending Middle-Earth* (1997, 2004), Dickerson and Evans's *Ents, Elves and Eriador* (2006) and Liam Campbell's *Ecological Augury* (2011), but going further and deeper. I don't accept that the first addresses its subject in "narrow environmental terms" (p. 14), Dickerson and Evans probably see themselves as addressing more than simply Tolkien's ethic of Christian stewardship, and it seems unfair to describe Campbell's exploration of ecological themes as "unnecessarily limiting" (p. 14); after all, he doesn't try to ban other interpretations. It's also a strange feeling to find that something I wrote back in my 1997 book ("Middle-earth appears as a character in its own right", p. 61) has now become a "cliché" (p. 13) that needs no attribution. More importantly than all this, however, the work collected here amply fulfils the editors' promise.

The first paper, "Goths and Romans in Tolkien's Imagination" by Tom Shippey, is a tour-de-force. It doesn't cohere with the rest of the collection's focus on the natural world. Instead, he brings into sharp relief an historical dimension of Tolkien's fiction that many readers and even scholars will have only sensed. By the same token, he throws new light on the creative use Tolkien made of history, which often consisted of repairing, in his imaginative world, what went disastrously wrong in the world we agree to call real.

We are all aware of the Shire as a West Midland county that never suffered a Norman Conquest, and more vaguely of Middle-earth as a Europe that was never modernised or even Europeanised. Starting from examination questions set by Tolkien in the 1920s and 30s, however, Shippey unearths a major historically-informed aspect of the work midway between those two. We also now have an even earlier date than Tolkien's hated Norman Conquest for an historical Fall: the fifth to sixth centuries, when the Goths succumbed to the heresy of Arianism, which, according to Tolkien, forestalled an alliance with the Roman Catholic church that would have enriched both parties, and us.

Thus, the Goths became the Riders of Rohan, in alliance with a leader who succeeds in uniting the long-sundered Northern (Roman) and Southern (Byzantine) kingdoms. This is to put the matter crudely, of course, but Shippey supplies convincing detail, for example, on the linguistic and probable cultural affiliations between the Goths and Anglo-Saxons which facilitated their synthesis as the Rohirrim.

Like many others, I have long felt the presence of encoded history in Tolkien's work beyond what I could consciously grasp. I thought of this recently when reading Patrick Leigh Fermor's superb account of his walk across continental Europe in the 1930s. It is interwoven with historical accounts which – even beyond the obvious resonances of assailants from the East, led by the Huns; pitched battles between the paladins of Christendom and the paynim hosts of Islam; a carved ivory horn from "the oliphant of Lehel", and the thousand-year-old crown of St. Stephen – kept reminding me of *The Lord of the Rings*, very much including the Appendices. I now know why.

There are also wonderful vignettes, such Tolkien pretending suspicion (easily, one imagines) of the first tape-recorder he was subjected to, and reciting into it the Lord's Prayer in Gothic in order to exorcise any demons.

Verlyn Flieger's paper borrows two characters from an Alan Garner novel, Sal and Ian, in order to use their perspectives – mythopoetically animist and sceptically secular respectively

– to explore the challenging ground where Tolkien’s *Faërie* meets the natural world. This binocular vision is a promising strategy, but it also demands a balancing act between the two which is difficult to maintain. To my mind, Flieger’s determination to avoid idealising Tolkien’s work sometimes leads her into the opposite error.

For example, she takes Tolkien to task (and by implication, those who concur) for proclaiming that “In all my works I take the part of trees against all their enemies”. Her chief ground is that in fact, Tolkien doesn’t take the part of the Old Forest, including the malevolent Old Man Willow, against the hobbits, and that Treebeard’s condemnation of Saruman, the tree-killer, is “rhetoric, not enchantment” (p. 115). Maybe so, but Tolkien’s own position cannot be directly inferred from his fiction, nor points about it, even if true. So was his statement correct? A better test might be to ask, which do you think Tolkien would have preferred to see in the world, and even to flourish: forests or machines? And let’s make the choice fairer by posing it as between the nastiest possible trees – Huorns, say – and the cutest, cleverest, most progressive machine: an i-Pad, for choice. I don’t think the outcome is in much doubt. Bring on the Huorns (as he would never have said)!

Flieger also relies heavily on a radical distinction between scientifically real and poetically imaginary. Certainly the two are not identical, but the difference is not, and cannot be, foundational. The philosopher Galen Strawson succinctly states the reason: unavoidably, both are experiences, even if not of the same kind. As a result, when it comes to experience, there is no gap between “is” and “seems”.

Thus, to describe Primary Belief straightforwardly as the “acceptance as *real* of what is *imagined*”, or Tolkien’s imagination as giving him license to “*believe in* fairies and *ascribe* sentience to trees” (pp. 115, 122; my emphases), is to borrow the association of scientific materialism with truth, thereby lending weight to the view that what is imagined is therefore not real, that fairies do not in any sense exist, and that trees can in no wise be said to be sentient. In relation to Tolkien’s work, these would be particularly serious charges, and since the authority of that association is simply (albeit widely) assumed, I do not think we need to accept them.

To maintain that centaurs or dragons are no less real than motor-cars is obviously not to say they are all real in the same way. It is simply to deny the modernist assumption that there is only one kind of reality, and therefore only one way to be real. The contrary view, being more nuanced, requires a delicate balance, and Tolkien’s characters, at least, were adept at holding it. As Aragorn says, what Caradhras sends is both the wind *and* fell voices, and the green Earth one treads underfoot is *at the same time* a mighty matter of legend. But to put the matter the way Flieger sometimes does, relying on a simple dichotomy of reality and illusion, predisposes the outcome of the discussion to Ian’s disenchantment.

Where Flieger’s anti-romanticism comes into its own is with her bracing discussion of *Smith of Wootten Major*, and its bleak implications for both *Faërie* and Tolkien’s own relationship with it. The two are not identical, however, and the implications differ for each. For example, the story may well reflect Tolkien’s loss of contact, even felt ejection from it. But remember that in Lothlórien, Frodo felt he had “stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more.” In other words, *Faërie* is still happening when one is in that realm or state. And one can no more rule out finding oneself there again than one can get back there by an act of will. If there is a criticism to be made of Tolkien in this connection, then, it is perhaps that he neglected Gandalf’s advice: “despair is only for those who see the end beyond any doubt. We do not.” (It turns out Gandalf was quoting Mephistopheles, but that’s a wizard’s prerogative.)

Michael D.C. Drout contributes another sterling paper, this time on the past in Tolkien’s work and its chief images, towers and ruins. Their centrality underlines the fact that just as a ruin preserves a memory but also an equally enduring loss, so “the dominant emotion in all of

Tolkien's works" (p. 177) is sadness, a melancholy awareness of loss, as voiced in *The Lord of the Rings* by both Elrond (even if the One Ring is destroyed – the best possible outcome – “many fair things will fade and be forgotten”) and Théoden (“however the fortune of war shall go, may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass forever out of Middle-earth?”).

In order to make that case, Drout takes issue with the perception that eucatastrophe, “joy beyond the walls of the world,” is Tolkien's dominant motif. He does so convincingly, showing that the nostalgia undeniably present in his work is not wistful sentimentality but “a keen and subtle pain” (p. 178), and arguing that what Tolkien sought above all was “a sadness that was yet blessed and without bitterness” (from the final chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*). Arguably, Tolkien saw that as the best thing that could be saved from the existential wreck, the only triumph on offer.

Drout finds that the centrality of this emotion and aesthetic, and the accomplished way it is sustained, is rarely matched in twentieth-century literature. He rightly adduces James Joyce's short story “The Dead” (1914) as a rare example, but I can unreservedly recommend another: virtually any of Karen Blixen's poignant short stories. (She had read and admired Joyce's.)

Drout's insight, together with refinements I cannot cover here, is grounded in the realization that it doesn't require personal tragedy. “Simply being human incarnate in the irreversible stream of time is enough...” (p. 187) That may sound sententious, baldly quoted, but in the context of his essay as a whole it struck me rather as a reminder, along with the other two papers already discussed, that not all the methodology in the world – digital, cognitive, evolutionary, neurological and whatever may come after – can replace the kind of hard-won personal insight, informed but not dominated by scholarly knowledge, that is the humanities at its best.

Most of the other papers deal directly with issues of nature – usually as instanced by trees, woods and forests – and culture, both in the modern anthropological sense and as the older cognate of civilization. Rebecca Merkelbach usefully considers Tolkien's forests as liminal places of transformation, finding sources for this portrayal in folk- and fairy-tales but also showing how, typically, he made them over for his own creative purposes. Jennifer Harwood-Smith analyzes the changeability and corruptibility of Tolkien's cities – Minas Tirith and Minas Morgul respectively – and, by implication, human culture. She draws an interesting parallel with the city in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, among others. Meg Black makes a plausible case that the iconic oak of Guernica played a part in the creation of the Party Tree, which anchors the local and regional community in a similar way. Tolkien was, of course, well aware of the Spanish Civil War. And Karl Kinsella traces, in depth and detail, the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on Tolkien, and its presence in the architecture of Middle-earth. (I would have liked to have also heard more about the relationship between its broader values and his work.)

Dominika Nycz uncovers something important about Saruman and Radagast, both of whom arguably failed to fulfil their missions as wizards for related reasons: the former by identifying entirely with anthropocentric will and power as expressed, literally, in cities, and the latter by identifying entirely with wilderness. I'm not sure, though, whether Gandalf's success was a result of him maintaining what she calls an “essential otherness to Middle-earth” (p. 75) or a skilfully unresolved tension between Middle-earth, which he loved, and his Maian otherness.

Jane Suzanne Carroll's elegant contribution highlights the association in Tolkien's fiction, perhaps counter-intuitively, between civil pleasures and wild places. I would only add that her point that “Civility regulates and orders and controls” does not only apply to humans; all animals have codes of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and Carroll's notion of “wild courtesy” (pp. 35, 41) is already halfway there.

Dimitra Fimi delineates striking parallels, beyond the obvious ones, between Túrin and Oedipus, as well as adding considerably to our understanding of Tolkien's implicit critique of the tragic male hero. She also throws interesting new light on the evolution of the relationship between wildness and civilization between the First Age, when "Men", unlike Elves, were still deeply rustic, and the Third Age, when that situation was largely reversed. The notion of wilderness as "a product of civilization and a socially constructed idea" (p. 47) seems one-sided, however, as well as a bit tired. It leaves no room for the possibility of natural agency, and even Derrida acknowledged that everything "is political, but it is not only political".

Thomas Honegger borrows Lévi-Strauss's famous polarity of "raw" (natural) vs. "cooked" (cultural) to make sense of food, including cooking, in the narratives of Middle-earth. It works surprisingly well, not least in showing how important that subject is, and how it confounds any modernist division into spiritual vs. material. By the same token, Elvish food, such as *lembas*, being an instance of enchantment, overcomes the raw/cooked dichotomy itself.

Gerard Hynes's excellent paper reveals the powerful and (as we might say, if it hadn't been going on so long) prescient connection in Tolkien's work between imperialism and environmental destruction, particularly deforestation. Hynes's close analysis of Númenórean history, not only the conversion of Middle-earth's woods into fleets of ships but the gulf between Númenór's rulers and the Faithful who washed up on the shores of Middle-earth bearing a fruit of the tree Nimloth, makes this case undeniable. The former's hubris consist of interlocking strands – not only imperialism and environmental destructiveness but pride and moral decline and the fear of death – whose overlap would bear much more consideration. Personally, I would add androcentrism.

Erin Sebo departs from the general theme in considering Tolkien's abiding love, and use, of riddle, riddle-lore and riddle-wit (her term). Integral aspects of the last – reversals, inversions and deception by misdirection and omission – resonate strongly with an ancient and cross-cultural mode of thought, *mētis* in Greek, usually translated as 'cunning wisdom'. Further study in this area, whether by her or others, would do well to look at related work by Detienne and Vernant on this mode in classical Greece, and Lisa Raphals on the Chinese equivalent.

Ian Kinane turns the armoury of cultural materialism on *The Hobbit*, arguing that Bilbo's political development corresponds to his journey from the comforts of the Shire into the wild. He also enables us to discern interesting inflections of class in the various appropriations of the treasure, from Smaug's and the dwarves' to the hobbit's. It is gratifying to see Raymond Williams put to work on behalf of what Tolkien's work means, instead of crudely in order to dispose of it altogether. Still, it's asking a lot to accept without demur Bilbo as "a proto-cultural materialist" attempting "to challenge the dominant ideological narrative" in the course of becoming "a socially-aware politician" (pp. 153, 148, 153). The problem is, of course, that this view and its terms are so very far from what Bilbo, or Tolkien, almost certainly would have recognised and accepted as a description of what they were doing. I think that point should be admitted, even if its implication is disputed.

Alison Milbank offers a sensitive interpretation of Tolkien on Eden, quintessentially the Middle-earthly paradise of Lothlórien, by reading him alongside Dante. Among other things, she illuminates how Galadriel succeeds in overcoming the danger attending Elvishness of attempting to preserve enchantment against all change, thereby succumbing to a *fainéant* nostalgia. She closes with the valuable insight that Tolkien's own relational definition of *Faërie* as (to quote his essay on *Smith of Wooton Major*) "a love and respect for all things, 'animate' and 'inanimate', an unpossessive love of them as 'other'" opens out into the kind of ecological understanding I mentioned earlier in connection with Carroll, "in which," to quote

Milbank, “every part of his world from birds to animals and trees has a culture and ethnography” (p. 166).

In conclusion, this collection is a valuable addition to Tolkien scholarship. It is also nicely produced and presented. I only regret that a less expensive edition is not (yet?) available. The price will prove discouraging even for those with a salary, yet it could enrich the understanding of many beyond, as well as within, the academic demesne.

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