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Letters

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Letters

Abstract

A Footnote to *Tales Before Narnia* by Douglas A. Anderson: Suggests an addition to the list of recommended reading in the author's *Tales Before Narnia*: M.P. Shiel. C.S. Lewis was known to have owned several books by this author.

The Origins of Dwarves by Pierre H. Berube: Following on Helios de Rosario Martinez's article in *Mythlore* 109/110, suggests several avenues of exploration for the popular folkloric concept of dwarves as miners.



ETTERS

A FOOTNOTE TO *TALES BEFORE NARNIA*

DOUGLAS A. ANDERSON

I recently learned of an uncollected C.S. Lewis letter. Had I known of it when I was compiling my anthology *Tales Before Narnia* (2008, reviewed in *Mythlore* #107/108, Fall/Winter 2009), I would have included an additional author in my list of recommended reading at the rear of the book. While the content of the Lewis letter is of minor significance, it is worth some attention.

The letter appears in *Ferguson on Shiel*, an unpaginated micro-published documentary volume edited and produced in 1998 by John D. Squires from his Vainglory Press in Kettering, Ohio. *Ferguson on Shiel* collects various documents—articles and correspondence—that pertain to the writer M.P. Shiel (1865-1947) as written by (or to) the American bookseller and librarian, Malcolm M. Ferguson (b. 1919), who met the elderly Shiel in 1944 when stationed in England as an American serviceman. Ferguson, who later published a handful of short stories in *Weird Tales* in the late 1940s, wrote to Lewis on 2 February 1953 (the ellipses are in the original):

I would like to have read a book which your late friend Mr. Charles Williams did not write, nor did my late, elderly friend M.P. Shiel . . .

I would like, then, to read a book which I would like you to write. (Like Andrew Lang, I've been thinking up books which ought to be) . . .

The book which I fancy would concern itself with the discovery of THE BOOK OF JUDAS. Men of good will would welcome the revelation of such a book's contents, after confirming its authenticity. Many Churchmen and the Communists would see in such a discovery an opportunity for furthering their own doctrines by seizing this volume and seeing to it that it was distorted according to their ideas.

Ferguson concluded, "Now I've given you my idea, and you are welcome to it. It doesn't fit in with my other literary luggage."

Lewis's brief response is dated 20th February 1953, and reads in full: "What a good idea! It would have suited Shiel (whose books I like) better than me. Like you, I want someone else to write it, you see. But very many thanks."

The only significant content of Lewis's letter is the parenthetical mention of his liking Shiel's books, a fact which I believe is recorded nowhere else. Shiel was a prolific writer of novels and stories, so from this general statement it would be pure speculation to suggest any particular works by Shiel that Lewis might have read. However, after Lewis's death in 1963, the Wroxton College Library in Oxfordshire acquired a significant portion of his personal library (the majority of these books are now held in the Wade Center at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois), and from the listing "C.S. Lewis: A Living Library" made by Margaret Anne Rogers in 1969, we know that Lewis owned at the time of his death two editions of Shiel's most famous novel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), one dated 1946, the other 1963. The edition from 1946 is likely an American one, published by The World Publishing Company of Cleveland; it may possibly have originally been owned by Joy Davidman, the American woman whom he married in 1956 and who predeceased him in 1960, for some of the books found in his library after his death are known to have been hers. The 1963 edition was apparently that from the nine volume series of "Rare Works of Imaginative Fiction" published by Victor Gollancz in 1963-64. *The Purple Cloud* was the first in the series, which also reprinted two other Shiel titles, no. 6 *The Lord of the Sea* (originally published in 1901) and no. 8 *The Isle of Lies* (originally 1909). Still, unless the 1946 edition of *The Purple Cloud* was Lewis's, we cannot single out which Shiel books Lewis might have read before writing his letter to Malcolm M. Ferguson in 1953.

The entry I would add to the recommended reading at the rear of *Tales Before Narnia* follows:

Shiel, M[atthew]. P[hipps]. (1865-1947)

British writer, born in the West Indies. In a single letter, Lewis mentioned that he liked Shiel's books, but gave no specific titles. From a listing of books from his library made after his death, we know Lewis owned two editions (1946 and 1963) of *The Purple Cloud* (1901), a scientific romance of a post-apocalyptic world. It is probably Shiel's most lasting work. His other writings include a collection of lyrical and luxurious short stories *Shapes in the Fire* (1896), and the stories of the decadent armchair detective, *Prince Zaleski* (1895).



THE ORIGINS OF DWARVES

PIERRE H. BERUBE

In *Mythlore* #109/110, Helios de Rosario Martínez writes: "it is probable that the particular idea of smallness as a feature of fairies was connected to the conflation of elves and dwarfs."

It may well be true that elves/fairies acquired their small size by being associated with dwarfs, but that merely pushes the question back one stage. Where did dwarfs get their diminutive size?

It's no good saying that occasional dwarfs occur in all human populations (one for every fifty thousand or so). The fact that real dwarfs exist, or even that they are perceived as uncanny, does not make them the prototypes for a mythological race. Real dwarfs occur rarely and at random, and they do not form communities. Besides, dwarfism is only one of the many disfigurements that flesh is heir to. Where are the mythological races of albinos, or stutterers, or twins, or left-handed people, or idiot savants?

The best answer to the question, "Why were the miners and metallurgists of mythology envisioned by the ancients as dwarfish in size?" is, I suspect, "Because the real miners of prehistory were stunted." Colonies of miners have existed throughout European prehistory. Mining, even prehistoric mining, is a specialized and capital-intensive craft. Miners quickly develop their own law and their own technical jargon, unintelligible to outsiders. They jealously guard their trade secrets. They hand down their art to their children but do not teach it to strangers. They stick together and evolve their own customs and superstitions.

In mining as in chimney-sweeping, littleness is an advantage. Before explosives, the cost of a tunnel was roughly proportionate to its cross-sectional area. That means the square of the user's height. A tunnel to accommodate a six-footer is more than twice as expensive as one to serve a four-footer.

A colony of miners, once formed, will perpetuate itself every generation until the ore runs out. Tall children will be encouraged to migrate elsewhere to find work suitable for them. Short children will go to work in the mine and perpetuate their kind. In a few generations the miners will be markedly shorter than the surrounding agriculturalists.

We Americans have added several inches to our height in only a couple of centuries. The same forces working in reverse would produce the opposite effect on the miners.

Imagine a prehistoric farmer or herdsman who gets to hear about a colony of miners living not in his district but in the next district over. They speak a barely intelligible language, they are secretive and clannish, they have their own customs very different from yours. They spend most of their time *inside* mountains. They have the art of making beautiful and useful and expensive

things by mysterious and probably magical methods. Oh, and they are noticeably shorter than you are.

Wouldn't these people be prime candidates for mythologization? They would already be half mythologized by the time you got to hear about them!

I wish some competent scholar would pursue this idea further. I see four possible lines of investigation.

1. Historical. Did any Greek or Roman give us a description of ancient miners? Pliny or Herodotus, say? Did they happen to mention that the miners were unusually short?
2. Philological. Does the proto-Indo-European word **dvaugr* really mean *dwarf* or could it originally have meant *miner*? Are there any words relating to mining cognate to **dvaugr*, or do any descendent words retain a mining association? Are there any languages with the proverbial expression *short as a miner* just as we say *hungry as a hunter* or *mad as a hatter*?
3. Genetic. Examine the rural populations still living in the immediate vicinity of prehistoric mine workings. Are they the same size as their neighbors, or shorter?
4. Archaeological. There must be some ancient mine works surviving. What are the dimensions? A drift too small to accommodate a normal sized man would be decisive proof, as would the skeleton of a dwarf found inside an ancient cave-in. What about tools, clothing, footgear, found *in situ*? Are they normal size or dwarf size? Handprints or footprints? What about the cemeteries adjoining the ancient mines; how tall are the occupants?

