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Beyond the Fields We Know

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Abstract
Discussion of the career and writings of Lord Dunsany, precursor of Tolkien and a great influence on H.P. Lovecraft in particular. Emphasizes Dunsany's unique literary style, inventive and opulent, and focuses primarily on *Tales of Three Hemispheres* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter*.

Keywords
Dunsany, Lord

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There is in the United States today a revival of interest in fantasy literature. When the Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien was "discovered" in 1965 this was the spark for a strong resurgence of popularity for heroic fantasy. However Professor Tolkien is only the latest in a long line of fantasy writers. The first of the modern writers of heroic fantasy was William Morris who wrote his fantasy novels in the 1890's. The second of the modern writers was Lord Dunsany, who though recognized by writers of fantasy to be perhaps the greatest of all fantasy writers, is unknown to a large percentage of readers today.

The writer was Lord Dunsany, formally known as Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron Dunsany. The facts of his life are simple. He was born in County Meath, Ireland on July 24, 1878. He was heir to the oldest Barony title in the British Isles which dated from the 13th century. He lived in a castle built in the 12th century by his ancestors who came to Ireland with William the Conqueror. He was educated at Eton and Sandhurst. He bore War with the Coldstream Guards and in World War I was a Captain in the Inniskilling Fusiliers. Besides being an author he was a well-known traveler and sportsman. At one time he was chess champion of all Ireland. He died October 23, 1957.

His principal medium in which he grew up and lived had a large influence on his writing. Perhaps just being an Irishman was a major influence. He was a good storyteller and as most of his works were fantasy the Irish love of the supernatural and myth must have given him this taste for the genre in which he chose to write. As a wealthy peer he had the freedom to travel and pursue his favorite pastime, hunting. Much of his writing shows the influence of his travels to Africa and the Orient. In fact he once estimated he spent ninety-seven percent of his time traveling and hunting, the rest in writing and hunting.

With the publication of The Gods of Pegana in 1905 Dunsany began his career as a writer of short-stories, novels, verse, plays and autobiographical works. He wrote more than sixty volumes altogether. He wrote with a quill pen and was inspired by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1911, but he did not get along well with Yeats and Lady Gregory and very soon after 1911 got out of the Abbey Theatre. Later his plays were very successfully produced in England and the United States.

Dunsany was well-known during his lifetime, but mainly as a dramatist and essayist. A careful searching of both English and American guides to periodical literature find him largely ignored during his lifetime and since. This seems strange since practitioners of fantasy have continued and continued to praise him and readers who are introduced to his writing by his works become enthusiastic and want to continue to read his works. This paper is concerned only with his short-stories and novels of a fantastic nature and will not discuss his plays or books of verse.

The Gods of Pegana, his first book, introduces us to the completely new pantheon of gods describing the divinities of the "Third Hemisphere". They dwell upon Pegana and were made by the mighty Dreamer of All Things, Mana-Yood-Sushai. It is significant his first book "...began like an ancient literature in myth and legend." He was influenced by the gods of the lands where his priests and kings and shepherds were to abide..." He created a separate world of his own; but very originally, he created a set of gods, myths and legends the people of his created world might know and speak. There was a mythology of his own. It was truly stated "He has the mind of a myth-maker." In addition to Mana-Yood-Sushai, the Dreamer of All Things, there is Skaarl the Drummer, who drums while Mana-Yood-Sushai rests from his residing and hunting. When Skaar! stops drumming Mana-Yood-Sushai awakes and the gods will cease to exist. Among other gods residing in Pegana are Keb, the Giver of Life; Shd, Whose Soul is by the Sea; Roon, the god of Going; Kiloolooogung, the Lord of Silence, whose woodland whisper is the voice of the forest, the Lord of Silence, whose woodland whispers is the voice of the forest, the Lord of Silence, whose woodland whisper may be heard no more, but becometh part of the silence.

Besides being a work of wonderful imagination, The Gods of Pegana is an excellent example of one of the characteristics of Dunsany's writing—his use of exotic and romantically evocative names. Not only gods in his books have wonderful names, but places as well. For examples there is Sardathrion, the ancient city of the gods; Babbulkund, that was called by the people the "City of Marvels," and the lands whose sentences upon their borders do not behold the sea.

As to the origins of the names Dunsany used, in speaking of Greek and Latin classes during his schooldays at Cheam, he tells us:

"I had begun to fill with the sounds of Greek and Latin words, and continued to do so afterwards at Eton, until my memory held the echoes of more stately syllables than I knew the meanings of; and, when geography was bumbled on top of this, my mind was very full of the material needed for the names of strange rivers and mountains. And when I came to write, my mind put together for itself; and, on the rare occasions when it has failed to do so and I have used conscious effort instead, the name has almost always been interesting, unconnected and suggestive."

Certainly the names in Dunsany's stories are evidence of his great imaginative powers and his rather unique approach to the writing of fantasy. "To many readers the names in themselves seem magically evocative." The names transport the reader from the present to the world created by Dunsany almost immediately and the opening of his works invariably begin by using one or more extraordinary names which catch the attention of the reader. The opening of "Polarinnes, Beholder of Oceans" for example, begins, "Toldes, Mondath, Arizim, these are the lands where the lands whose sentences upon their borders do not behold the sea."

As to his stature amongst modern fantasy writers, Lord Dunsany is unknown to a large percentage of readers today. His head began to fill with the sounds of Greek and Latin words, and continued to do so afterwards at Eton, until my memory held the echoes of more stately syllables than I knew the meanings of; and, when geography was bumbled on top of this, my mind was very full of the material needed for the names of strange rivers and mountains. And when I came to write, my mind put together for itself; and, on the rare occasions when it has failed to do so and I have used conscious effort instead, the name has almost always been interesting, unconnected and suggestive."

As to his stature amongst modern fantasy writers, Lord Dunsany is unknown to a large percentage of readers today. In addition to certain names a few examples of "idealonomatopoeia: his Hish, for example, seems precisely right as a name for the Lord of Silence; his Slith as a name for a thief; and Sliph for the hurried rush of time."

The Sword of Welleran and Other Stories, published in 1906, contains some stories of myth, but begins to move into tales of heroic fantasy. His stories begin to show touches of oriental opulence and his great delight in color. He used to speak of "Those Eastern lands of the fancy, in which my imagination was always happiest." Of all writers of modern fantasy he is the only one who evidences a strong affinity for Oriental culture and is the only writer who shows the influence of Oriental mythology to any extent upon his writings. In his autobiographical Patches of Sunlight (1936) Dunsany says the stories in Time and the Gods were dictated to his wife because her pen moved faster than his quill did. He also states, "I did not feel in the least as though I were inventing, but rather as though I wrote the history of lands that I had known in forgotten wanderings."

The Sword of Welleran and Other Stories, published in 1906, contains some of Dunsany's best heroic fantasy stories. Beside the title story there is "The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth" in which the hero Leothric slays the dragon Gaznak and removes from its body the sword of Welleran, with which the famed citadel of the emperor may be overthrown and taken. "Carcasome" tells of the bold, conquering young king, Camorack of Am, who burns a minstrel's song of a gorgeous city far away, rises up in the night with all his host and marches out to find and possess it. The title story tells how the long dead heroes of Merimanas defend their glorious and beloved city against savage tribesmen from beyond the Cyorean mountains. Certainly these are heroic tales which excite the reader's mind. The heroes are all larger than life and battle or quest for good against overwhelming odds and great evil. A "champion's Tales, 1919; The Book of Wonder, 1912; Fifty-One Tales, 1915; The Last Book of Wonder, 1916 and Tales of Three Hemispheres, 1919, all contain more fantasy short-stories. Fifty-One Tales is interesting because it contains fifty-one tales of very short length. They vary in size from less than a page to just five pages. Stylistically they demonstrate the art of the best.

Dunsany's last book of fantasy short-stories, Tales of Three Hemispheres, ends with three stories which have a connecting story line. The overall title Dunsany gave them was "Beyond the Fields We Know." The first story, "Idle Days on the Yunn," was reprinted from A Dreamer's Tales but the other two, "A Shop in Go-By Street" and "The Avenger of Perdocardis," were written for Tales of Three Hemispheres. To my mind these are almost the best short stories Dunsany wrote and also some of the most significant because the elements of fantasy and reality which Dunsany mixed in these stories illustrate perfectly the craft of fantasy writing. The short introduction Dunsany wrote for the stories reads in part:"
Beyond the Fields We Know, in the Land of Dreams, lies the valley of the Yann where the mighty river of that name, rising in the Hills of Hap, idles its way by massive dream evoking anemeth cliffs, orchid laden forests and ancient mysterious cities, comes to the Gates of Yann and passes to the sea... and one day out of the blue, it comes to me that the land leads up from the embankment toward the Strand and which you and I always do go by and perhaps never see in passing. he poet found the door which one enters on the way to the Land of Dreams. Tolkien, in his famous essay in fairy stories, has written the true fairy story or fantasy is about the adventures of men in the realms beyond the world. So are the three stories Dunsany wrote concerning the Yann. In "Idle Days on the Yann," Dunsany has his poet explain to the Captain of a ship, the king of the island, and the owner of the ship. He enters the Land of Dreams and his fancy would take him to see the marvels he has imagined. The Captain sails down the Yann and the poet see the places of his fancy. But the reader knows they are the places of the poet's imagination only and the dream is inspired to dream his own dreams, in which all things are possible. He ends the story saying:

And the time was come when the captain and I must part, he to go back again to his fair Belzooind in sight of the distant peaks of the Him Man, and I to find my way by strange means back to those happy fields that all poets know, wherein stand small mysterious cottages through whose windows, looking westwards, you may see the fields of men, and looking eastwards see glittering elfin mountains, tipped with snow, going range on range into the region of Myth, and beneath the heavens of Fantasy, which pertain to the Lands of Dream. Long we regarded one another, knowing that we should meet no more, for my fancy is weakening as the years slip by, and I go ever more seldom into the Land of Dreams...

In the second story of the series, "A Shop in Go-By Street," the poet wants to return to the Yann, but has forgotten the way. He makes inquiries and finds a shop in Go-By Street that runs out of the Strand. The proprietor of the shop, after being asked to supply something he cannot, suggests the poet back down the street, and enter there a shop window. There he meets a witch who is putting the poet's head to bed so they may dream as they wish. He goes to the Yann to wait for the Bird or the River but finds its old bulk in the mud-ages have passed. The plot of Elfland is a simple, Alveric, Prince of Erl, is sent by his father to enter the twilight meadows of Faerie, "beyond the fields we know," to bring back as his bride Lirazel the Elf-Princess. Alveric is asked to do this because the rulers of Erl decided they wanted to benefit from the special magic of the Elflands. Alveric does his best, but discovers that neither thing nor person is real, they are the only wealth by which Earth can increase its store. Of the little fantasy Dunsany wrote after 1919 only one work is really important, a full length heroic fantasy novel written in 1924, "The King of Elfland's Daughter." This novel stands today as a major fantasy, a book admired by all serious readers. The plot line is simple, Alveric, Prince of Erl, is sent by his father to enter the world of Elfland and become a hunter. But, Orion, being half elf, begins to yearn for Elfland and his mother and is pulled closer and closer to the borders between Elfland and Earth. Many events conspire against Alveric, but finally Alveric, Lirazel and Orion are united again.

And we can only bring to it fancies; and whether they are expressed or not expressed, this is the telling of the story. To my mind, in this particular work Lord Dunsany has written a novel that could be a model for all other fantasy novels to come. The King of Elfland's Daughter is about the world of Elfland and the idea that perhaps such a borderline does not exist, except in men's minds. In the preface to the novel we wrote, "...for, though some chapters do indeed tell of Elfland, in the greater part of them there is to be shown that the face of the fields we know, and ordinary English woods and a common village and valley, a good twenty or twenty-five miles from the border of Elfland. There are people in the novel who purposely turn their backs on Elfland and all that could mean for them. Not because they do not care about Elfland, but because they feel that they must accomplish in this world and duties to perform that are necessary to living. They believe that the magnificence and magic of Elfland will overwhelm them so that they will not be able to complete their work. If this were true, the world would be a much poorer place and quite dull. Beside the aforementioned works, Dunsany wrote a series of books concerning the revels and experiences of one, Mr. Joseph Jorkens. These are tales combining experiences of weird and supernatural occurrences which Jorkens either has had about or undergone himself. Jorkens is a member of a Club and is persuaded to tell the tales to his listeners because they buy him one or more whiskey and sodas. The Jorkens tales are different from Dunsany's other fantasies.
They are much more down to earth and quite humorous. They also have excellent beginnings and unexpected endings which take the reader by surprise. Their style and manner of telling make them models for the types of stories a writer has characterized as "fantastic barroom reminiscences." Actually, for weird and supernatural tales they are in a sense too well written. They do not contain enough of the feeling of horror or grimmness that should be a part of this type of story. But for models on how to use the English language effectively and clearly they stand out as superb archetypes. They are also very good stories with excellent plots and hold the reader's attention if for nothing else than to know the end of the story.

Without a doubt, Dunsany is the best writer and craftsman of all fantasy stories, "perhaps superior to H.P. Lovecraft at least to those two great stylists in all fantasy, James Branch Cabell and E.R. Eddison." H.P. Lovecraft said of Dunsany: "Dunsany loves the vivid of jade and of copper domes, and the delicate flush of sunset on the ivory minarets of Impossible Dream cities. To the truly imaginative he is a talisman and a key unlocking rich storerooms of dream... Unexcelled in the secrecy of crystalline singing prose, and supreme in the creation of a gorgeous and languorous world of incandescent exotic visions...." To my mind, no writer has or perhaps ever will capture the form, Teutonic somberness, and Celtic wishfulness are so superbly blended, each sustains and supplements the rest without sacrifice of perfect congruity and homogeneity.

Lord Dunsany has one great weakness which he outgrew as a writer. His stories, the early ones in particular, have better beginnings than endings. He begins a story and after describing a setting or event in lovely prose ends the story without telling anything. There is no action or conclusion and the reader is left very unsatisfied; there is no substance to the story. By the time he wrote the Jorkens stories he has largely overcome this fault and the endings of these stories are excellent.

Dunsany's influence on the fantasy writers of the first half of this century was very great. H.P. Lovecraft acknowledged Dunsany's influence on his work. His The Dream Quest of the Unknown Kadath was written in the Dunsanian style as were many of his early short stories. Lovecraft knew of Dunsany's influence on his work. In his introduction to the novel The Well of the Unicorn by Fletcher Pratt, Clark Ashton Smith has read Dunsany and many of his Zoetic stories show evidences of Dunsany's influence. The Jorkens stories started a cycle of barroom fantasy tales, including Arthur C. Clarke's White Hart stories. Pratt and De Camp's Gavagan's Bar tales.

Dunsany's influence can be seen in the work of Modern Librarian, John W. Luce, John W. Luce, John W. Luce, and others. Dunsany's influence will continue to be felt in some degree as long as love for fantasy is written as L. Sprague De Camp has written:

"...I take farewell of my readers. But I may we shall even meet again; for it is still told how the Gnomes robed the fairies, and of the tragedy that the fairies took, and how even the gods themselves were troubled thereby in their sleep; and how the King of Ool insulted the troubadours, thinking himself safe among his scores of archers and hundreds of horsemen, and how the troubadours stole to his towers by night, and under his battlements by the light of the moon made that king ridiculous for ever on song. But for this I

Footnotes:


2. Ibid., p. xiv.


5. Ibid., loc. cit., p. 125.


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-. The Sword of Wellernan and Other Stories. London, George Allen and Sons, 1919.

-. Tales of Three Hemispheres. Boston, John W. Luce, 1919.
