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Moot Point ~Letter Column~

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Moot Point ~Letter Column~

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Edward Felipe
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March 5, 1971

Dear Mr. West,

I don't know whether it's news to serious Tolkien fans or not, but I recently spoke with Mrs. Ian Ballantine (a charming lady, even if she did reject my manuscript), and she said that there were plans to film The Lord of the Rings in northern Ireland in live-action. How this could be done without cutting out half of the sub-plots is beyond me. Perhaps, like War and Peace, it could be released in two parts. Casting could also be a problem, particularly finding actors to play three-foot Hobbits. [No film based on a long narrative can use more than a fraction of the original material. If the film of LOTR is ever completed, it will be a new work of art in a new medium, and will have to be judged on what it succeeds in doing, not on what it omits. The film has been a matter of controversy among Tolkien fans since it was announced that United Artists had the rights: some people would prefer animation of one sort or another to live-action (some like the Disney approach, others the style of Yellow Submarine, others computer animation); some would rather use human actors, but worry about casting (Darby O'Gill and the Little People proved that humans can plausibly represent beings such as leprechauns or hobbits, provided unfamiliar actors are used); others oppose any sort of dramatic representation. Nan Meškys is conducting a poll of opinions on the matter. The director is John Boorman. His first film was Having a Wild Weekend, with the Dave Clark Five; his most recent film, Leo the Last, won a prize at Cannes. The only film by him that I have seen is Point Blank, which impressed me very favorably: it is a Lee Marvin "thriller", exciting both emotionally and intellectually (its complicated plot probes the dark evil underneath society's bright, civilized veneer); its visual effects may seem superficially "arty", but they are suited to what is being expressed. I have heard very little news of how the film of LOTR is progressing, but it doesn't seem to be doing too well: the part of Frodo has not even been cast yet, I understand. It is current speculation that the people at United Artists are not doing very much to further the project, but have announced it mainly to judge public reaction.--RCW]

She also said that the Professor writes his manuscripts in longhand, usually as poetry which he later converts to a prose form. This partly explains the flow of his sentences, and their imagery. [There is no evidence for this in the manuscripts at Marquette University--though none of these represent the earliest stages of Tolkien's writing. However, Tolkien has made plenty of revisions in these papers, and all of them are in prose. The approach to writing prose that you report would be very unusual, if it is true.--RCW] The Silmarillion does exist in more or less final form, although Tolkien is making corrections and revisions to polish it and make it agree in details with the already-published work.

Has anyone made a glossary of characters and names of Tolkien's sub-world? It seems a natural enough project, and such a dictionary would save a good deal of

memory-racking, as well as being invaluable to the new reader. [Al Halevy began such a project some years ago, but soon softly and silently vanished away, and, so far as I know, has never been heard from again. Bob Foster had begun a glossary also, and at first intended to complement Halevy's work, but then proceeded alone. He has published several sections of this in Niekas, and Mirage Press has just brought out his Guide to Middle Earth at \$3.95 in paperback.--RCW] Also, in That Hideous Strength, C. S. Lewis refers to "Numinor" as the "true West". How closely is Lewis' literary world related to Tolkien's? [Well, some people feel that they are virtually interchangeable, but that seems to me to reflect little credit on either writer. The close friendship between the two indicates that their minds was compatible in many ways (as in their both finding inspiration in medieval literature and in Christian, Celtic, and Nordic mythology), but their unique personalities are reflected in their molding rather different fictive worlds giving rather different literary experiences. I think their secondary worlds are sometimes closely related but with fine shades of difference (compare the Narnian dwarfs with those we meet in Middle-earth), sometimes quite different (neither Merlin nor the eldila remind me much of Gandalf). The comparative method of criticism--bringing works together so that they may shed light on one another--is shallow if it stops at saying that two authors have a good deal in common, and does not use their similarities, differences, and the subtle differences within their similarities, to help us appreciate their individual artistic accomplishments. Also, while Lewis borrowed (and adapted) a few things from Tolkien, I do not believe it has been shown that Tolkien took anything from Lewis except encouragement.--RCW] Finally, Marvel Comics is doing an admirable job of adapting Robert E. Howard's Conan and King Kull stories to the illustrated format. What are the chances of a similar venture with a serialized Lord of the Rings? Marvel writer Roy Thomas is an avowed Tolkien fan, and Marvel has the premier talents of artist Neal Adams. [I have seen one story called "In the Shadow of...Sauron", drawn by Neal Adams and written by Roy Thomas for X-Men No. 60 (September, 1969). The villain of this story chooses for himself "The name of Tolkien's ultimate villain...that dark lord who personified evil...who was truly evil incarnate" (p. 17) because no other name is suited for someone as evil as he is determined to be. He apparently did not read closely enough to discover that Sauron was but a servant of Morgoth. The story has no resemblance to Tolkien's world that I can see, but it does indicate an interest on the part of Marvel. You would have to ask them if they had any plans for the venture you suggest; and they would have to secure permission from Tolkien and his agents. I did not care much for the Khazad-dûm sequence published in comics format in I Palantir No. 4 (1966), and I wonder if the variousness of Middle-earth could be well represented in this medium.--RCW]

