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Tolkien's Calendar & Ithildin

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Abstract

Identifies the years Tolkien used as a basis for moon phases and other celestial events in *The Lord of the Rings* as 1944–1945.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Calendar systems

Tolkien's Calendar & Ithildin

Rhona Beare

On the program "Now Read On," BBC Radio 4, 16 December 1970, Tolkien said the moons and sunsets of The Lord of the Rings were taken from the calendar of a particular year. "The moons I think finally were the moons and sunsets worked out as they were in this part of the world in 1942." I have checked in back numbers of Whitaker's Almanac, and 1942 does not suit. I think Tolkien used 1944 for the year in which Frodo left the Shire, and 1945 (incidentally, the year of Hitler's suicide) for Sauron's fall. In 1944, when he first wrote of Frodo's journey through Ithilien, he was not using a calendar. He employed one a couple of years later when revising; this is what he means by "finally". By "this part of the world" he may have meant Oxford or London. It is not only the full moons and sunsets that come from the Almanac; Mars and Venus may come from it too, and it was in 1945 that Bilbo's birthday fell on a Thursday. (His birthday is on Halimath 22, but Halimath begins nearly ten days earlier than modern September; therefore Shire-September 22 = modern September 13.) In October and November of 1944 Mars was an evening star, close to the sun and low in the south. Whitaker says it was unsuitable for observation, which probably means that the sunset glow had not faded, so that Mars was too faint to be noticeable. Still, it was above the horizon, and in the south, so it may be what Tolkien refers to when he says that a fortnight after the Council of Elrond Frodo saw a red star: "Low in the South one star shone red. Every night, as the (Hunter's) Moon waned again, it shone brighter." Venus was an evening star in February and March 1945, the period in which Frodo saw Earendil one evening in Lorien, and Sam saw from the Morgai a star in the west after sunset, a star that gave him hope. (Earendil was called Gil-Estel, the star of hope.) Whitaker says that in February Venus was "superb"; it could be seen even by daylight for the whole of March, and reached its greatest brilliance on March 10. Venus would be bright enough to throw a shadow. On Shire-February 14 (modern February 4) the moon (which was waning) did not rise till about midnight, and its absence would make the Evening Star seem even brighter. In the garden of Galadriel "Earendil, the Evening Star, most beloved of the Elves, shone clear above. So bright was it that the figure of the Elvenlady cast a dim shadow on the ground. Its rays glanced upon a ring about her finger." On modern March 7 (Shire-March 15), three days before Venus reached its greatest brilliance, Sam apparently saw it from the Morgai. "Far above the Ephel Duath in the West the night-

sky was still dim and pale. There...Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart...and hope returned to him."

Barbara Strachey did not use these Calendars for Journeys of Frodo, but my findings and hers agree, with a margin of error of one day.

A New Moon is a thin crescent that sets less than an hour after sunset. The waxing moon always rises by day and sets before sunrise; the waning moon rises by night and sets after sunrise. When Frodo in the house of Tom Bombadil dreamt that by the light of a young moon he saw Gandalf escape from Orthanc, this was a fantastic dream-moon; it was waxing, and yet he saw it rise by night. The moon actually shining as he slept was either a New Moon or a brand new crescent; both these set less than an hour after sunset. Gandalf's escape took place, as he says at the Council of Elrond, on a "night of moon" i.e. a night with several hours of bright moonlight. Barbara Strachey calculates that it was half full and waning; this agrees with the 1944 Calendar. It was Shire-September 18, modern September 9; the moon rose about midnight, and was high in the sky when Gwaihir reached Orthanc, perhaps 3 a.m. I reckon that it would take Gwaihir only an hour or two to carry Gandalf to Edoras, if he flew as fast as a winged Nazgul.

The 1944 Calendar

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
full	2 0	2	-	-
last quarter	9 (9	7	7
new	17 ●	17	15	15
first quart.	25)	24	23	22
full	- 0	31	30	29

The Harvest Moon is the full moon closest to the Autumn Equinox. The following full moon is the Hunter's Moon, and fell on October 31 in 1944, which is Shire-November 10, a fortnight after the Council of Elrond: Autumn was waning fast...The Hunter's Moon waxed round in the night sky".

Our December 29 is in the Shire Calendar Afteryule 7, Shire-January 7. The Company reached Hollin the following day, and the moon was full. Sauron was overthrown on Shire-March 25, modern March 17.

The 1945 Calendar

	Jan	Feb	Mar
last quarter (6	5	7
new ●	14	12	14
first quarter)	20	19	20
full 0	28	27	28

Notice that the "dreadful nightfall" (Shire-March 22) was modern March 14, a New Moon; the thin crescent set just after the sun, so that it was a moonless night.

Once or twice Tolkien ignores the fact that the Shire month begins ten days earlier than ours; he says he chose December 25 for the setting out of the Company from Rivendell because December 25 is Christmas Day. Has anybody pointed out that the Quest is fulfilled on March 25, and in our modern Calendars March 25 is the Feast of the Annunciation?

ITHILDIN

In The Lord of the Rings, the chapter describing Frodo's arrival at the West Gates of Moria is entitled "A Journey in the Dark." The Nine Walkers reached the lake outside the gates when "cold stars were glinting in the sky high above the sunset," waded through a creek at its northern end as "the last gleams of the sunset were veiled in cloud" and walked a mile southwards to reach the two tall holly trees just outside the invisible doors. Gandalf passed his hands to and fro over the smooth face of the cliff, muttering a spell, and the west doors of Moria became visible.

The Moon now shone upon the grey face of the rock; but they could see nothing else for a while. Then slowly on the surface, where the wizard's hands had passed, faint lines appeared, like slender veins of silver running in the stone. At first they were no more than pale gossamer-threads, so fine that they only twinkled fitfully where the Moon caught them.

Gandalf explained that they were "wrought of ithildin that mirrors only starlight and moonlight". Since the cliff faces west, and the Moon is shining on it, the Moon must have passed the highest point of its journey and was beginning its descent to the west. Yet when the Company has journeyed for several hours through the Mines and Gandalf proposes a halt, he implies that the Moon has only just begun its descent. "We had better halt here for what is left of the night...The late Moon is riding westward and the middle-night has passed."

Barbara Strachey worked out the phases of the Moon for her Journeys of Frodo. Map 18 shows that the Moon was waning when the Com-

pany reached the west doors of Moria. It was January 13 by Shire Reckoning, i.e. Afteryule 13, which by the modern Calendar is January 4. A waning Moon rises after sunset and sets after sunrise; it could not possibly shine on the west doors of Moria an hour or two after sunset. Since the phases of the Moon for the year of Sauron's fall are (with a margin of error of one day) the same as those of 1945, the year of Hitler's fall, we can use Whitaker's Almanac for 1945 (though the latitude is wrong) to see when the Moon rose and set on January 4 (Afteryule 13). It rose 6½ hours after sunset, and set 3½ hours after sunrise.

Ithildin reflects starlight as well as moonlight; but the starlight would have to be unusually bright for Frodo to remember it as moonlight. From "The Mirror of Galadriel" we learn that Earendil the Evening Star was shining on Solmath 14, which by our Calendar is February 4. Whitaker tells us that Venus was an evening star in January as well as February of 1945.

Gandalf and Joseph Madlener continued from page 22

It now seems clear to me that Tolkien did not see the postcard on the wrapper of which he later wrote 'Origin of Gandalf' before the late twenties. Perhaps he got it--or the little folder Miss Madlener referred to--as a present from somebody who was touring the continent at that time. If that surmise is correct, the model for the outward appearance of the wizard came before the professor's eyes at about the time when he began to tell his children the stories that eventually became The Hobbit.

But are there any copies of the postcard left and, most important, where did the original painting get to? Unfortunately, I was not able to trace any more copies apart from the one among the Tolkien papers and one in the possession of the artist's daughter, with which she does not want to part, understandably enough. Where would you look for an obscure postcard reproduction made half a century ago? The publisher, Ackermann Verlag München, seems to be no longer in existence--it is not identical with today's F.A.Ackermanns Kunstverlag in Munich.

As for the original, nobody has the slightest idea as to its whereabouts. It might have perished somewhere in World War II, but on the other hand there is a chance that it might be--of all places--in America: At the time when he painted Der Berggeist Madlener sold a number of his works to the U.S., for quite substantial sums. Perhaps it is hanging on some American living-room wall or catching dust in someone's attic, unhonoured and unrecognized for what it is.

So keep your eyes open--you might recover a lost treasure. In order that you know what to look for I have provided a rough sketch. (The measurements of the original are 50 by 60 or 70 centimeters). For the limited success of the execution I crave the indulgence of the artists and illustrators among the readers of Mythlore.