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Ellen Rawson

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## Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

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### The Fisher King in *That Hideous Strength*

#### **Abstract**

Notes how Ransom's persona in *That Hideous Strength* as a modern Fisher King "contributes to Lewis's idea of Logres versus Britain." Notes parallels between the legend of the Fisher King and events of *That Hideous Strength*.

#### **Additional Keywords**

The Fisher King in *That Hideous Strength*; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom; Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*; Logres in *That Hideous Strength*

# The Fisher King in That Hideous Strength

Ellen Rawson

Logres, as both an idea and place, is brought to life in C. S. Lewis' That Hideous Strength. Within the novel is the conflict of Logres versus Britain. Derived from the Welsh word for England, "lloegr", Logres represents the England of King Arthur. It is a clean, unspoiled, spiritual England. It combines Christian and Celtic ideas. Celtic ideas and philosophies are "christianized" in this ideal England. Britain, on the other hand, represents evil. It is personified by all that tried to destroy Arthur, for example, Morgan Le Fay and Mordred. As time went on, it came to represent anything that opposed traditional England.

After every Arthur, a Mordred; behind every Milton, a Cromwell, a nation of poets, a nation of shopkeepers. (That Hideous Strength, p. 369)

The battle between Logres and Britain is heightened in the twentieth century, when the N.I.C.E., a conglomeration of all of Britain's evil, prepares to destroy Logres once and for all.

Logres in That Hideous Strength is a descendent of Arthur's Britain. Lewis has modernized old ideas and applied them to our own violent world by "christianizing" them. He takes away their wildness. An example is Jane's dream of the Titian painting come to life. In the dream, there was a wild woman who resembled Mother Dimble. Ransom explains her presence to Jane:

Mother Dimble is friends with all that world as Merlinus is friends with the woods and rivers. But he isn't a wood or river himself. She has not rejected it, but she has baptized it...You have put yourself where you must meet that Old Woman and you have rejected all that has happened to her since Maleldil came to Earth. So you get her raw--not stronger than Mother Dimble would find her, but untransformed, demoniac. (Ibid., p. 314)

Still, the natural essence of the old ways is maintained. The Logres people can relate directly to animals. An example is Ivy Maggs' attitude towards the bear, Mr. Bultitude. She treats him as she would another human being. They are all more at ease with the elements than are most modern people. As the Dennistons explain to Jane:

We both like weather. Not this or that kind of weather, but just weather. (Ibid., p. 113)

The night that Jane, Dimble, and Arthur Denniston search for Merlin is wild and windy. Camilla Denniston wishes that she was on a high hill. This is suggestive of Celtic celebrations like Beltaine, which normally occurred on hills, on nights that might seem wild with the celebration.

Lewis' use of Logres in That Hideous Strength lends to its mythic structure, and draws a comparison between King Arthur's and Ransom's England, Ransom being the director of the Logres group. Adding to both the mythic qualities of the work and the parallels between modern and Celtic England is the appearance of Ransom as Mr. Fisher-King. Ransom becomes a modern Fisher-King, the keeper of the grail, the keeper of a power which is old, spiritual, and true. He can also be seen as the mythic fisher-king brought to the twentieth century. All in all, Ransom as the Fisher-King contributes to Lewis' idea of Logres versus Britain, as well as finalizing the Fisher-King story.

Basically, the Fisher-King legend is as follows. The young knight Perceval meets a fisherman who invites him to rest at his castle. He accepts, and upon entering the castle, is greeted by his host, the fisherman. He is crippled, reclining on a couch in front of a fire. He presents Perceval with a sword. Perceval then sees a bleeding lance, but he does not ask about it. Later, a radiant golden grail is carried in. As each course of the dinner is served, the grail is passed before them. Perceval is curious, but does not ask about the grail. The next morning, Perceval is unable to find anyone in the castle. After he departs, he meets a hideous lady who tells him that he spent the night with the Fisher-King, a half human, half godlike figure who had been crippled by a wound through his thighs. She scolds Perceval for not having asked about the lance or grail. Because he did not, the Fisher-King will never have any peace. Total destruction and devastation will strike his lands. Perceval, however, does gain something from this tragic experience. He finally realizes that his name is Perceval, and that the Fisher-King is his uncle, or in some versions of the story, his grandfather. He had never known God prior to this. He now becomes a Christian.

Jane's first meeting with Ransom is similar to Perceval's meeting the Fisher-King in his castle. Both Ransom and the Fisher-King are crippled and are reclining on couches, in front of fires. Perceval sees the fisherman as a king, just as Jane

tasted the word King itself, with all linked associations of battle, marriage, priesthood, mercy, and power.

(Ibid., p. 143)

On his last journey, Ransom's heel was severely wounded. He cannot walk and is often in great pain. The Fisher-King is also fairly immobile, although his wound is in the thighs, rather than the heel. Bran, in the Welsh Mabinogion, is believed to have been the precursor to the Arthurian Fisher-King. In a battle against the King of Ireland, Bran is wounded in the heel. The direct consequence of the wound upon Britain is its devastation. The king's health is directly linked to the land's fertility. If he is not healed, the land will suffer. If Perceval was to have asked the right questions, he could have healed the land and the king. He would have been declared the rightful heir. The land would once again have a healthy heir. Both it and the Fisher-King would be healed.

Ransom's wounds can only be cured once his land, Logres, is safe. When he refuses Merlin's offer of a cure, he says:

We have drugs that could cheat the pain as well as your earth magic or better, if it were not my business to bear it to the end. (Ibid., p. 288)

Only after Logres is restored may Ransom return to the Third Heaven, Perelandra, to be healed. According to some of the grail stories, the Fisher-King is only healed after Perceval finds him again and asks him the questions.

Part of Perceval wants to ask about the grail, but there is yet another part telling him not to ask. Jane also finds an "inner commentator" (Ibid., p. 146) telling her not to say certain things to Ransom. Both "inner commentators" are telling Jane and Perceval not to speak honestly with their hosts. Rather than asking questions, Jane's purpose is merely to speak with Ransom. She must tell him about her dreams in order to help save Logres. Unlike Perceval, Jane overcomes her interfering inner commentator, and speaks openly with Ransom.

The Fisher-King's castle is not always visible. Even with explicit directions, Perceval has trouble finding it. The Manor at St. Anne's does not have the magic qualities of

appearance and disappearance that many Celtic dwellings have. It does, however, seem to hide from passersby.

There were no houses on her (Jane's) left ...She was on the highest ground in all that region. Presently, she came to a high wall on her right that seemed to run on for a great way: there was a door in it and beside the door an old iron bell-pull.

(Ibid., p. 51)

Jane exits by the main gate, which she had not seen when she approached the manor. The second time she comes to the manor, it almost seems to be rising out of the fog.

A few yards further and luminous blue was showing overhead, and trees cast shadows, and then all of a sudden the enormous spaces of the sky had become visible, and the pale golden sun.

(Ibid., p. 138)

It seems fitting that the dwelling place of Ransom, the modern Fisher-King, is situated above the fog.

Perceval is an outsider to Arthur's court, the place generally considered to be the center of Logres. He has only recently come to court. According to most stories, he is sent on the grail quest to prove that he is capable of being one of Arthur's knights. Unlike the other knights, Perceval is not a Christian, and does not become one until after he meets the Fisher-King. Similarly, Jane is a non-Christian, as well as an outsider to the Logres group and the very idea of Logres. She becomes a Christian only after she has met Ransom and learned more about Logres. Jane, like Perceval, is searching for a grail. For Jane personally, the grail represents a cure for her problems with Mark and her dreams. She can find the cure through Ransom, its guardian.

The heir to the Fisher-King would have been Perceval. According to Merlin, Jane would have borne (or may still, according to Ransom) Ransom's heir, the new Fisher-King and head of Logres.

It was the purpose of God that she and her lord should between them have begotten a child by whom the enemies should have been put out of Logres for a thousand years. (Ibid., p. 278)

The legend of the Fisher-King, as used by Lewis, adds to the fictionality of the work. It helps to create a desperate situation. This is Logres' last chance. If the Fisher-King's lands cannot be restored this time, then all of Logres will fall to the N.I.C.E. and be destroyed. This desperateness adds to Ransom's

need to find Merlin. According to some of the grail stories, it was Merlin who helped Perceval find and cure the Fisher-King the second time. Merlin must once more participate in the deliverance of the Fisher-King (Ransom), and Logres. Merlin's existence is more plausible because of the Fisher-King. If the Fisher-King, or one of his descendents is alive in twentieth century England, why couldn't Merlin be walking the Earth? The whole idea of the Fisher-King leads to Merlin's waking, which leads to the awakening of the spirits, such as St. Charity.

The Fisher-King is finally healed this time. In the grail stories, he sometimes is healed, but more often is not. Only now is he fully healed and the enchantments (in twentieth century England, the influence of the N.I.C.E.) are removed from England. Logres seems to be permanently restored. Jane, acting as Perceval in some instances, fulfills her part in the resurrection of Logres. The child she may later bear will eventually be the new Pendragon, the heir to Ransom, the Fisher-King. The Fisher-King legend has been completed.

Quenti Lambardillion, continued from page 19

rim S great number, host (coll.pl.); Allen, 88; U, 318; S, 363; PNH-65, 66

Allen, An Introduction to Elvish

S, The Silmarillion

U, Unfinished Tales

Road, The Road Goes Ever On

PHN, Computer derived glossary, Appendix A, Linguistic Techniques Used to Develop Character in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Purdue University (1982)

## *The Mythopoeic Fantasy Award*

Christine Lowentrou, the Steward in charge of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, would like to thank last year's selection committee, and to announce that members of the Society who wish to nominate a book (fantasy in category, published in 1982) for the 1982 Award, or who wish to serve on this year's selection committee, should write to her by March 1, 1983, at 115 5th St. #2, Seal Beach, CA 90740. Committee members must be willing to read all five of the final runners off. The nominations received by March 1 will be sent to the committee within ten days. Committee members will have until April 15 to select five books from the list and to mail their choices back to her.

We realize that this is the weak link in the system --expecting the committee to be familiar with a list of books before the final reading period, but most of the committee last year assured us (when we first tired this system) that they were indeed familiar with most of the new works in the genre, which was why they volunteered to serve on the committee in the first place!

Within ten days after April 15 the committee will receive a list of the five works with the most nominations. They will have until July 15 to read (or reread) the five works, and to return the list with the five listed in order of preference. The book with the most points will be announced at the August Conference.

## *The University of Otherwhere*

### Announcement of Course Offerings

#### DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

History 201. The Kingdom of Narnia, from Frank to Tirian. A survey course with special emphasis on the reign of Caspian the Seafarer. Dr. Cornelius.

History 141-2. Hobbits in the Third Age. Guided research in the Red Book of Westmarch and other documents. There in the fall semester, Back Again in the spring. Instructor, Mr. Bilbo Baggins.

#### DEPARTMENT OF MAGIC

Applied Wizardry 201-2. Simple spells, reading the runes, and fancy fireworks, taught by Gandalf the Grey. Note: Candidates for more advanced study will be subjected to piercing scrutiny.

Gramarye 1 and 2. Lore of Logres, taught by Master Merlinus Ambrosius. Field research in Broceliande, spring semester.

Gradalogy 606. De Retz and other reputations re-examined; medieval darkness probed. Professor Giles Tumulty. Laboratory experiments with selected volunteers.

#### COMBINED MAJOR IN WOMEN'S STUDIES:

Philosophy 3. The Platonic Ideas as they enter the world of reality. Dr. Damaris Tighe.

English 215. The Mystical Marriage: Donne's poetry re-examined in the light of practical experience. Mrs. Jane Tudor Studdock.

#### LINGUISTICS AND PHILOSOPHY

Introduction to Old Solar, I and II. Hressa-Hlab as spoken by the various rational beings within the Field of Arbol, with an excursus on the dating of Surnibur. Dr. Elwin Ransom.

Logic 123. The impossibility of a credible contemporary angelology is conclusively demonstrated. Mr. McPhee.

Philosophy 01. It's all in Plato; why look further? Professor Digory Kirke.

#### DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Water Sports 509. Messing about in boats, taught by two experts.

Self-Realization 1. Motor Mechanics, Martial Arts, and Singing. BY MR. TOAD.

Mary M Stolzenbach