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Services in Oxford and Los Angeles

Gracia Fay Ellwood

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Gracia Fay Ellwood, a member of the Mythopoeic Society's Board of Advisors and former member of its Board of Directors, was in England with her husband Robert when J. R. R. Tolkien died. She wrote in a letter these comments:

We attended JRRT’s funeral this afternoon. It surprised me in some ways....

I had ordered a wreath in green and gold and blue and silver. I was a little disappointed with its stiffness and heaviness — the wreath covered with white carnations, a heavy spray of yellow gladiolas across it, a bow in blue and silver. We brought it to the church a little before noon, shortly before the doors were locked. I had wanted to quote the passage about the far green country and the swift sunrise on the accompanying note but did not have a copy of LotR with me. So I wrote "From the Mythopoeic Society, in Hope — Elen sila lumenn omentielvo." This I know does not represent the convictions of all members of the Society, but I hope those others will not object greatly. Robert took several photos of the wreath as I held it against the (surprisingly small) coffin. Then we put it in the foyer with most of the other flowers.

Expecting the church would be crowded we arrived forty-five minutes early, but to my surprise it did not fill up. Among the congregation were fifteen or twenty dons in their black gowns, two Dominican friars, and a few nuns.

The service was a very simple requiem mass, without music, homily or eulogy of any sort — almost anonymous save for an occasional reference to "our brother Ronald" or "the souls of Ronald and Edith Tolkien." I had for so long thought of Tolkien as a very big person, and so deeply medieval, that it was hard to believe that the small coffin in the stark modern church three-quarters full of people could have anything to do with him. I felt someone should read the Song of the Eagle or a farewell song such as those for Boromir or Gandalf.

We did not go to the burial service, having been told it would be private. We do hope to get to the cemetery in a day or two and photograph the place.

All these details are so insignificant, seem so unreal. If we could perceive the reality of Tolkien talking over old times with Jack Lewis and Charles Williams, perhaps coming upon his own Niggle's Parish! or at least taking up new dimensions of sub-creation....

(The Funeral Service was held at St. Anthony’s Church in Headington, Oxford, on September 6, 1973.)

A special memorial service was held on September 23, 1973 at the Church of Our Saviour, which is near the University of Southern California. Out of respectful recognition that Professor Tolkien was a faithful member of the Roman Catholic faith, it was decided it was appropriate that the memorial service be held in a church of his faith.

The service was extremely simple, without music. The same scripture texts used in the funeral service in Oxford were used. The first reading was from the book of Wisdom 3:1-9; the second reading was Romans 14:8-9; and the Gospel was Saint John 14:1-3. The Homily was the reading by Glen GoodKnight of the full text of "Leaf by Niggle" without further comment. The service ended by the reading of a special prayer composed by Glen GoodKnight and the singing of the "Chorea Magna."

Prayer

Almighty God, with whom the souls of those departed in the Lord do live in joy and felicity, we give you heart felt thanks for the examples of all your servants and saints which rest from their labours, especially our brother John Ronald. May he be led into the country of paradise, the land of light and joy, where you, O Primary Creator, may permit him to see his sub-creation with the greater insight of his new reality, having entered the gates of larger life.

May perpetual peace and light shine upon him, May he increase in knowledge and love, in your joyful service forever.

Give us, O Maker, the strong grace and gladness of heart to keep afresh the memory of the poignant glimpses of Joy sent us as refracted beams of your spiritual light through John Ronald and your other servants. May the eucatastrophes of secondary creations lead us to share in the supreme eucatastrophe of this, your Primary world. By good example, may our creative acts strive to enrich the purpose of your creation. Amen.

Chorea Magna

The Dance is the singing of the stars at their birth,
The Dance is a tree with its roots in utmost earth,
The Dance is the gamboling of balls in a game
With their source a hand, and their end the same.

(Refrain)

The Dance knows the crippling that the earth cannot heal,
The Dance knows the weight and the flaming of the wheel,
The Dance knows the binding to the stake lit at dawn,
But the dancers, stilled, still go dancing on.

(Refrain)

The Dance is a lion and child locked in play,
The Dance is a feast on a royal wedding day,
The Dance is a City where the time-scattered meet,
And the Glory blazes in each complete.

(Refrain)

(Refrain)

Dare, then, the measure of the Dance
Follow the Fool in his reckless fall
In his madness-joy, his destiny-in-chance
For all luck is good, and the Naught is All!

You may have a copy of the Special Memorial Bulletin the Society sent out in September, 1973, which contains a memoir by C.S. Kilby, and a copy of the printed service held in Los Angeles, by sending a self-addressed envelope to the Whittier Box.