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Some Notes to The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien

Abstract
Some proposed additional notes to the first edition of The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien. One concerns American Indian archaeology and another, biblical references to centers of worship.

Additional Keywords
Tolkien, J.R.R. Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien; Patrick Wynne
It is a great joy to read the Letters of Professor Tolkien, not only because of the answers provided to many mysteries and long-standing questions about Middle-earth, but mostly because of the glimpses into his soul. One is deeply touched by his loving counsel to his children, cheered by his refusal to supply potential publishers in Germany with an affidavit of "Aryan" descent. One marvels at his patience in the face of afflictions and his willingness to answer innumerable impertinent questions from near and far. Before reading his correspondence, I thought Professor Tolkien to have been a great writer and a good man. Now, I suspect he was a great man as well.

The notes are excellent. One only wishes that there were more of them, for not all the allusions are perfectly clear. With the humble desire of helping others to better understand the words of Professor Tolkien, I present here some of the notes that could be added to the letters, with the hope that others will be stimulated to do the same.

Letter 131, page 151. Without consulting the text, can you pick out the words which have been inserted in the following excerpt? "There was nothing wrong essentially in their lingering against counsel, still sadly in love with the mortal lands of their old heroic deeds. The editorial note at this point comments: "...it appears that here the typist has omitted some words from Tolkien's MS." The reconstruction here offered is of course purely conjectural, but I think it makes good sense.

Letter 153, pages 187, 188, 192, 193. Elvish reincarnation is hinted at elsewhere (see Letter 131, page 147; "...never leaving it even when 'slain' but returning...") and clearly spelled out on pages 236 and 286 (though the Index omits these). The possibility is raised that Glorfindel, who helped Frodo, may be the same as the Glorfindel of The Silmarillion, reincarnated.

Letter 154, page 197. The Gondorians became "a withering people whose only 'hallow's were their tombs." There have been such people in history. At Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, from the 5th to the 3rd centuries B.C., the central sacred area consisted of large burial mounds in rows, instead of a temple. (See Pennsylvania State University Department of Anthropology, Occasional Papers in Anthropology No. 2, May 1969, page 165). According to Dr. Gary Wright, Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, SUNY the Hopewell culture, which existed from about 300 B.C. to ca. 400-500 A.D. in what today is the Midwest of the United States (Ohio and surrounding states) had huge and elaborate burial mounds. They had no temples or shrines. In fact, they lived in small clusters of houses. The evidence indicates they were hunters and gatherers. Yet their huge sepulchre-mounds are filled with hundreds of valuable goods brought from great distances. The practice ceased, apparently, when they learned agriculture and they no longer had time for such things.

Letter 156, page 204. The Numenoreans had "like the Jews (only more so)... only one physical center of 'worship': the summit of the mountain Meneltarma...". Here Professor Tolkien is obviously referring to the situation in the Kingdom of Judah during the righteous reigns of Kings Hezekian and Josiah, who centralized the worship of Yahweh and concentrated it at the temple in Jerusalem (see for example II Chronicles 31:1, 34:3). The Numenoreans were like the Jewish people, but "more so" because they did not have a Temple, a man-made building, but only the pristine sacred mountain. An even closer parallel is the case of the Children of Israel in the brief period from the arrival at Mount Sinai until the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 18:5 to 33:1-7)."

Letter 168, page 224. The Elvish word at the end of the letter is Namarye, "farewell" in Quenya.

Letter 171, note 1, page 446. It seems rather illogical to say that "thou wost" is the second person singular of the first person singular. It would be more accurate to say: "Second person singular of the verb 'to wit' (I wot, thou wost...)."

Letter 210, page 274. Appearance of orcs: the page is listed incorrectly as "174" in the Index.

Letter 241, page 320. Gadara View: an allusion Continued on page 46
Whatever he said at the meeting with a poem which might be what Lewis called hyper-critical, of which may be jealousy. In this outline of the event, Lewis presumably read some of his book at an Inklings' talk, Tolkien reacting, partly in terms of the case of Tolkien (as Roger Lancelyn Green reported Tolkien saying later in the year), which might be what Lewis called hyper-critical, and partly because Lewis was invading his area of the fairytale. At any rate, he followed up whatever he said at the meeting with a poem and a letter — perhaps a poem at the next meeting, at which time Lewis attacked it ("the verbal butchery"), and a follow-up letter. Presumably Lewis, when he realized how far they had gone, offered to stop reading his works at the Inklings; hence, Tolkien asks him to "bring out OHEL [English Literature was in the Oxford History of English Literature series], with no coyness" (p. 128). Either interpretation is conjecture, but the latter at least ties to a known difference between Tolkien and Lewis in 1948.

Two poems by Tolkien are quoted in this volume: the epigraph of The Lord of the Rings ("The Rings Under the Sky"), p. 153; and one of his clerihews on the Inklings — this one of Coghill ("Mr. Neville [sic] Judson Coghill"), p. 359. The latter is published for the first time.


Youngberg's annotated checklist of secondary materials on Sayers, arranged by year, is a good, professional job. Her annotated list of reviews shows amazing thoroughness, although she misses those of Nancy-Lou Patterson on Sayersana in Mythprint and Mythworld. E. R. Gregory's damning review of Robert B. Harmon and Margaret A. Burger's An Annotated Guide to the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers (1977) — in Analytic and Enumerative Bibliography, 3:2 (1979), 136-137, in which Gregory shows that their annotations of the content of some of the mystery novels are plagiarized. (He actually demonstrates it of only one, but it is also true of others.)

In Youngberg's "Introduction" she mentions the critics who complain of the influence of Lewis and Williams on Sayers' thinking about Dante (p. x1). Examples later in the volume are Charles S. Singleton (item 1950-5, p. 69), who regrets the influence of Williams only, so far as the annotation shows; Dudley Pitts (1955-10, p. 75), who says her views are too like Lewis; J. J. Semper (1955-18, p. 77), who complains of Williams' "erratic theories"; Thomas O. Bergin (1957-17, p. 82), who mentions the influence of Lewis and Williams, but does not seem to complain of it, from the annotation; Geoffrey L. Bickerstedt (1958-9, p. 86), who thinks the Italian Dantists know more than Williams.

There are also a large number of writers who happily associate her with Lewis and Williams—sometimes Tolkien— as Christian writers. These seem to start in 1947 with Edward Wagenen (1947-16, p. 63), comparing her to Lewis only. James O. Supple (1957-16, p. 91) also thinks H. R. Hambee (1969-6, p. 100) thinks of Lewis and Tolkien; W. W. Robson, in Modern English Literature (1970-7, p. 103), associates her with "Anglo-Oxford"; George L. Scherer (1973-17, p. 113) and Bastian Kruithof (1974-9, p. 116), with both Lewis and Williams; and an anonymous reviewer (1978-4, p. 139), with the Inklings. Most of the foregoing comparisons are in reviews, which because of their treatment of Sayers have escaped the bibliographers of Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams. Of course, there are more serious discussions of Sayers' relationships with one or more of these writers: Kathleen Nott's attack on Sayers and Lewis in Sayers in Tolkien, Williams; and Tolkien, in Tolkien and Williams, xi, 53, 63, 68, 73, 75, 82, 93, 96, 100, 113, 116, 129, 138, 140, 141, 146, W. H. Lewis, 94, Tolkien, 148; Wain, 93; Williams, xi, 10, 22, 50, 64, 69, 77, 80, 82, 86, 91, 96, 97, 113, 116, 119, 148; Inklings generally, 93, 96, 97, 103, 111, 125, 139, 152.

Word of Mouth

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