



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 12 | Number 3 | Issue 45, Spring

Article 3

---

4-15-1986

## Tales Newly Told

Alexei Kondratiev

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kondratiev, Alexei (1986) "Tales Newly Told," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 12 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol12/iss3/3>

This Column is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: <http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



## Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

### Tales Newly Told

**Additional Keywords**

Hugheart, Barry. Bridge of Birds; MacAvoy, R.A. The Book of Kells.; Christine Lowentrout

# Tales Newly Told

## A Column by Alexi Kondratiev

Mythlore is pleased to begin this new fiction review column by Alexi Kondratiev. There has been such plethora of fantasy and mythologically based fiction in recent years, that readers are deluged. The hope is that this column can provide some assistance in wading through the volumes that steadily appear, relating this new material to both the influence of the Inklings and the common background sources and influences. In light of the Society's annual Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, the column will attempt to cover likely nominees. Mr. Kondratiev is one of the best read members of the Society in this area and has served on the Fantasy Award Committee for several years.

G.G. Editor

From its subtitle -- "A Novel of an Ancient China That Never Was" -- one would naturally assume that Barry Hughart's Bridge of Birds (Del Rey, 1985) was meant to be in the tradition of the famous Kai Lung stories of Ernest Bramah: stories that use a perfectly imaginary "Chinese" setting as a prop for light satires on our own social mores, with convoluted, euphemistic language to point up the hypocrisy and superficiality of conventional "polite" interchange. At first glance, the comparison seems to hold true: the overall tone of Hughart's novel is humorous, to say the least, and there are stretches of superbly outrageous dialogue. There are also some gratuitous, anachronistic "Kai Lungisms" -- but not very many of those, and it is here that we begin to see Hughart's originality. Unlike Bramah (though it should be said in passing that Bramah did make many more references to genuine Chinese folklore than he is usually credited for), Hughart's main source of thematic inspiration is the literary tradition of China. The main plot, in which the genial peasant lad Number Ten Ox and the wizard Li Kao (who has "a slight flaw in his character") undertake a quest for the magical ginseng root that will cure the poisoned children of Ku-fu, recalls the framework of many classical Chinese stories. Since the root has been divided into several pieces, the finding of each piece constitutes -- again in true Oriental fashion -- a little separate episode, and gives rise to many subplots. The wonders the two heroes encounter -- ginseng fairies, ghostly lovers, invisible demons, guarding ruins, the Bridge of Birds itself -- will be familiar to aficionados of Chinese fairy tales. If this is a China that "never was" in strict historical terms (although there is no serious attempt at historical verisimilitude, the story is placed in the early Tang dynasty, and there is even a mention of the sixth-century Byzantine expedition to find the source of silk!), it has certainly existed in the Chinese imagination.

Hughart's style, however, is entirely his own, owing nothing to Chinese-in-translation, and not very much to Bramah. The farcical nature and frenetic pace of many of the adventures give the whole novel an air of bantering lightness (the heroes are constantly on the brink of death, but don't seem very put out); this is where the kinship with Bramah is most apparent. But Hughart can also adopt a very different tone of understated, elegiac poignancy (as, for instance, when Number Ten Ox meets the ghost of a dead sweetheart).

These two contrasting moods -- madcap farce and poignant realization of human frailty -- are imperfectly balanced in the writing, and the passage from one to the other can be quite jarring. Yet in one episode -- the scene in which Doctor Death, the mad Taoist alchemist, is trying to resurrect his dead wife -- the two moods are brilliantly integrated with each other. Since it is evident that there will be more adventures of Number Ten Ox and Li Kao, one hopes that Hughart will continue to work on this unique synthesis. Certainly the lyrical majesty of the finale -- a grand overview of the Chinese mythological landscape -- is a high-fantasy achievement Hughart can claim entirely for his own, and is light-years beyond any mock-Chinese convention. If he gives us more of this kind of writing, he may well turn out to be one of the outstanding fantasists of our time.

Turning from a China that never was to an Ireland that might have been, we have in R.A. MacAvoy's The Book of Kells (Bantam, 1985) a vision of tenth-century Celtic civilization that is in many ways a perfect answer to Morgan Llwyn's Lion of Ireland. Ailesh, a young girl attacked by Vikings a thousand years ago in our past, is catapulted into modern Dublin, and then returns to her own period in the company of a somewhat uncoordinated Canadian artist named John Thornburn and his aggressive girlfriend Derval, a teacher of the Irish language. The two modern characters are in for a series of culture shocks: the flamboyant, uninhibited world of the Celts is the exact reverse of the cramped, puritan, provincial society of present-day Ireland. It is also a very violent world, and they have to develop strong stomachs. Derval, strong-willed and self-possessed, suffers a blow to her pride when Mac Cullen, the high bard of Leinster, tells her that her Irish is terrible and that her harp-playing sounds like a cat scratching at the strings. Infuriated and fascinated by Mac Cullen, Derval eventually comes to recognize that his intellectual temperament is the perfect counterpart to her own. John, the instinctive, impulsive artist (he gets to handle the Book of Kells in its original splendour and even -- in a brief return to the twentieth century -- gets to compare it with its more weathered version in the Trinity College library), comes to appreciate Ailesh's sincerity and spontaneity. John is one of MacAvoy's most successful creations: he is the Fool, recalling both the Great Fool of Celtic tradition and Charles Williams' Tarot Fool -- an instrument of redemption, not through his conscious volition, but by his very nature.

Although I found the writing in the opening sections somewhat flatter and more conventional than one would expect from MacAvoy after reading, say, the Damiano Trilogy, as soon as the action has shifted to the tenth century one comes under the storyteller's spell. A second reading especially reveals how subtly and carefully she draws her characters. The novel's greatest asset, however, is its ring of historical authenticity, a quality rarely achieved by fiction dealing with this period (certainly not Lion of Ireland!). Not only has MacAvoy obviously done a lot of research, she has digested it thoroughly, and manages to convey the feel of the period without an

continued on page 23

Redeemed City," written by Williams in 1941, foreshadows All Hallows' Eve in some interesting ways. He uses the term the City, and opposes that to the Infamy. The former is free redemptive exchange, Christianity, and love, and is identified with England, while the latter is forced substitution, selfishness, and hatred, and is identified with the Nazis. "There is, in the end," writes Williams, "no compromise between the two; there is only choice." [12] This is the essential truth of All Hallows' Eve. The Infamy is truly parodic, and bears certain resemblances to the City, but this just makes it more dangerous -- and the City, more precious.

## NOTES

- [1] C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso (London, 1948), p. 123, cited George P. Winship, Jr. "The Novels of Charles Williams," in Shadows of Imagination ed. Mark R. Hillegas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 121.
- [2] Charles Williams, Descent into Hell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 98.
- [3] Charles Williams, "The Way of Exchange," in his The Image of the City (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 151-52.
- [4] Charles Williams, "The Cross," in his The Image of the City (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 131-39.
- [5] Lewis, cited in Winship, op. cit., p. 121.
- [6] Alice Mary Hadfield, An Introduction to Charles Williams (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1959), p. 190.
- [7] J'n'an Sellery, "Fiction Modes in Charles Williams' All Hallows' Eve, Genre, No. 1 (1968), p. 323.
- [8] Edmund Fuller, Charles Williams' All Hallows' Eve (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), p. 28.
- [9] Charles Williams, All Hallows' Eve (New York: Noonday Press, 1971), p. 146. Hereafter cited in text.
- [10] T.S. Eliot, "Introduction," Charles Williams' All Hallows' Eve (New York: Noonday Press, 1971), p. xvi.
- [11] Mary McDermott Shidler, The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 138.
- [12] Charles Williams, "The City Redeemed," in his The Image of the City (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 103.

continued from page 8

Smith, Patches of Godlight: The Pattern of Thought of C.S. Lewis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), Ch. 2 and 4.

[33] "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages," Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p.60.

[34] "Myth: A Flight to Reality," The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 203-4.

[35] The Achievement of C.S. Lewis (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980), p. 39

continued from page 9

ostentatious display of historical facts. Every word, every gesture of her tenth-century characters seems right. Details of behavior are used eloquently to express the contrast between the Celtic and Norse cultures. Most welcome is her vivid and sympathetic portrayal of Celtic Christianity (although it may be that she gives pre-Roman Church practices a greater prominence than they would have had at that late date). For this journey back to a pristine ancient Ireland is, in the end, a journey to spiritual sources, to an unveiling of inner truth, wonderfully articulated in the climatic duel of poetry between the Odinst berserker and the Celtic Christian bard. One closes the book with after-images of pure delight. It is hard to imagine a Celtophile who would not be charmed by this story, or indeed any sensitive fantasy reader who would remain cold to its simple, quiet evocation of joy.

continued from page 18

up in last word of Gilraen's lament to Aragorn; "anim" means "for myself" (III, p. 342). #37 is undoubtedly a concatenation of two or more morphemes, but other than "tin" as "spark;star" it is difficult to say.

There are, however, glossings for "nef", "nev", and "niv" meaning, respectively, "on this side of", "hither", and "west". Could it not be that western shore of Middle-earth is the "hither" shore "on this side of" the "sundering seas" between Beleriand and Valinor. Indeed, we are told that it is so (S, p. 343). It is the land and shore of the Sindarin, the Grey-elves, the "twilight Elves". They are not Calaquendi, "Elves of the light" who had lived in Aman; nor were they Avari, the Unwilling, the Darkest of the Moriquendi; they were those who came as far as they could out of the dark without being completely in the light (S, p.348). Thus, "tinuv-" may simply mean "twilight-spark", a poetic enough kenning for Nightingale (literally meaning "singer in the dark").

A loose, but semantically reflective translation could be:

"O thou rising Moon, Child of the One, magical jewel of the region of stars, thou who hast watched ever shining, I say to thee, Stay! Dwell where thou art! Now flower and tree, listen in silence here beneath. [To Gilthoniel] O Lord of the Sunset, of the Twilight, Star-Kindler, I must sing to thee; for I am, myself, Tinuviel, a spark of the Twilight, a Star ever in Twilight, the Nightingale."

A simple principle "language-legend and legend-language". I am glad Christopher reminded me of it.

