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Memories of Clyde Kilby (Note)

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

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Memories of Clyde Kilby (Note)

Abstract

Foster recounts an early interview with Clyde Kilby, founder of the Wade Collection at Wheaton University and friend of several of the Inklings.

Additional Keywords

Inklings—History—1939-1945; Kilby, Clyde S.—Biography; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Textual history

MEMORIES OF CLYDE KILBY

MIKE FOSTER

I MADE MY FIRST PILGRIMAGE TO WHEATON and the Wade Collection to meet Clyde Kilby in 1978, a year after I'd begun my study of the Tolkien trove at Marquette University, my '68 BA and '71 MA alma mater. I had already published a newspaper article on the manuscripts and wanted to meet the man who'd known Tolkien.

In 1992 at the Tolkien Centenary Conference in Keble College, Oxford, I met publisher Rayner Unwin and author George Sayer, whose 1952 recordings of Tolkien reading the riddle scene from *The Hobbit* and assorted poetry and "The Ride of the Rohirrim" from the then-unpublished *The Lord of the Rings*, proved to be precious resources in the Tolkien classes at Illinois Central College and Bradley university that I taught from 1978 to 2008, and visited Sayer in Malvern twice thereafter. In 2002 at a Tolkien conference in Toronto, Dr. Havard's son, Colin, who has since done four "An Inklings Son Remembers" presentations with me, befriended me.

Nevertheless, Kilby was the first. Generous with his memories, he consented to an interview on the record that was published in the *Peoria Journal Star* on Dec. 16, 1978 under the headline "Wheaton Prof Midwest Link To Middle Earth."

KILBY AND TOLKIEN

"He was a genius suffering through his inspiration," Kilby said of Tolkien. He characterized Tolkien as a friendly, talkative host who dwelt in the complex world of his myth-making. "He had this world, you see," Kilby recalled, "and he had ten percent of the world actually written and the other ninety percent was still unwritten, and he kept thinking about that world, whereas everyone else could only think of what they had actually seen, the ten percent he actually wrote."

Of his 1966 "editorial and critical assistance" (Tolkien's job description) on the unpublished typescript of *The Silmarillion*, Kilby said, "I soon found out he didn't need literary criticism in the ordinary sense. What he needed was encouragement. He could get down in the dumps. I saw him two or three times very, very down. I thought I could go in there and talk with him," he said with a gentle smile. "The second or third time, I found that you couldn't even begin to talk with him. He'd gone in three seconds to worlds far away from what you asked him. You didn't dare carry a tape recorder in there. I longed for one with all my heart. In two hours, he'd say fifty things you'd want to remember."

He noted that the typescript passages he reviewed then were substantially the same as the published version. I asked Kilby why Tolkien

hadn't published that then. "Because once it was published, it was over," he replied. "He was aware of its faults. He was most displeased with his own work. Think of Niggle. He was lazy. If C.S. Lewis hadn't taken the *Ring* from him, he wouldn't have finished that. I'd find him working crossword puzzles. If you pressed him, he'd say 'I still have to discover my world, and this is a little relaxation.'"

Once Kilby dared to criticize Tolkien, pointing out that *The Silmarillion's* text did not explain Tom Bombadil or the Ents. "I don't think he paid the least bit of attention to me." Kilby recalled wryly. "He just looked at me just as though he were looking out into space. 'It's in the high style,' he said. 'It's essentially another type of thing.'"

Tolkien told Kilby that *The Silmarillion* would be at least as long as *The Lord of the Rings*. However, the version published by Christopher Tolkien in 1977 is barely a third of that length. Kilby said that in what he read in 1966, everything except the chapter "Of Maeglin" was present. "He wrote five volumes. He would have written fifty volumes." Kilby's slim (89 pages) but fascinating 1976 book *Tolkien & The Silmarillion* was the first work to hint at what readers could expect, a precious portrait of the artist as an old man.

Kilby was surprised that Tolkien disliked the character that some readers think is *The Lord of the Rings'* hero: Sam Gamgee. "He didn't like him at all. He had no antipathy toward any other character. He especially mentioned that episode when Gollum came down the cliff. He said, 'If Sam had kept quiet, Gollum would have been saved or converted.' But then, perhaps, writers know their characters are alive when they are beginning to fight them."

Tolkien likewise had a deep enmity against George MacDonald, allegorized in *Smith of Wootton Major*, and "in some sense, he disliked C.S. Lewis. They were close friends but Tolkien was hard to please in the best sense of that statement. Lewis turned out seven Narnia books in nine years while he was struggling with one. He did more or less jump on Lewis. 'He used things of mine [Numenor / Númenor] that he never did acknowledge.'"

"It seems pretty clear that England is The Shire," Kilby stated.

I once asked Kilby what Tolkien thought of The Beatles, who in 1966 were at the peak of their powers and popularity. Kilby sniffed. He replied: "He didn't think anything about The Beatles."

KILBY AND OTHER INKLINGS

Of Tolkien's son and literary executor Christopher, Kilby said "Christopher is a nice chap. He's far less explosive, more businesslike. The Tolkien family is hard to describe. After he told me about all the manuscripts that he had found, much to his surprise, I said, 'It looks like you'll be editing your father's manuscripts all your life.' He said 'Yes!' at once." He added, "I had

quite thoroughly convinced myself that Galadriel was an image of the Virgin Mary and that *lembas* was a symbol. Christopher, as I recall, denied this quite categorically.”

“The Lewis brothers would let you talk,” he told me in 1980. “All three men liked a joke.”

KILBY THE MAN

In my notes at the time of our first meeting, I wrote: “Kilby has the full-fleshed face of a man well-aged, Bilbo Baggins. As cordial as Tolkien, his thought leaps from abstract expressionist art to Platonism in answer to a direct question, such as why couldn’t Tolkien get down to it. He speaks of his Wade administrative duties but goes to Texas in winter to write.” I added: “A man cannot set his own deadlines lest he set them past his own deadline.”

I was there when George Sayer gave the annual Wade lecture that he titled “Surprised by Joy—A Reappraisal” on Sept. 28, 1979. At one point, Sayer (author of arguably the best Lewis biography, *Jack*) said, “All of his life, Lewis was troubled with guilt about masturbation.” Although he never stopped smiling, at that moment Kilby looked like he wished that he could have donned the Ring of invisibility.

I interviewed him several more times and in 1980, I proposed writing a long profile of him for *Mythlore*. He replied, saying that his wife Martha suggested he demur and write his own autobiography. In the event, he did not. The last time I saw Clyde Kilby was when he presented the paper on Tolkien titled “Woodland Prisoner” at “The Road Goes Ever On” conference held at Marquette University, on Sept. 16, 1983. It was, of course, splendid.

Afterwards we chatted and I said, “You know, if one could have a favorite Inkling, mine would be Warnie.” He beamed. “I’m so glad to hear you say that,” he said, smiling. “He was such a wonderful man.” “I gave [Tolkien] a copy of my book *The Christian World of C.S. Lewis* with a slight bit of hesitation. Not long after, he turned a little bit cold to me. I brought this up to Major Lewis and he said to me, ‘Well, if he liked your book, it would be the first one he liked’.”

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MIKE FOSTER was a member of the English faculty at Illinois Central College in East Peoria from 1971 until his retirement in 2005. His specialty is English fantasy literature, especially J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and J.M. Barrie, and he has published widely in this area. He taught courses in both fantasy literature (1974-2005) and in Special Studies, J.R.R. Tolkien (1978-2005 and continued at Bradley University in Peoria in 2006 and 2008). He is a founding member of the Far Westfarthing smial.

APPENDIX: ARTICLES BY CLYDE S. KILBY IN MYTHLORE

"The Other Dimensions of Myth." *Mythlore* 10.4 (#38) (1984): 28–30.

"Tolkien and Coleridge." *Tolkien Journal* 4.1 (#11) (1970): 16–19.

"Tolkien as Scholar and Artist." *Tolkien Journal* 3.1 (#7) (1967): 9–11.

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A NOTE ON A NAME

VERLYN FLIEGER

WHEN I FIRST READ IN HUCOPHRY CARPENTER'S *Tolkien: A Biography* that all through the first complete version of *The Lord of the Rings* Strider was "a queer-looking brown-faced hobbit" named Trotter (188) my initial reaction was not just surprise but disappointment, even bewilderment. As they do for any lover of Tolkien's work, the names of his characters comprised a large part of the enchantment of my first-reading experience. Not just the lyrical, polysyllabic elven names on which he spent so much linguistic time and effort — *Nimrodel*, *Legolas*, *Galadriel* — but *Frodo*, *Wormtongue*, *Gaffer*, even the hyphenated *Sackville-Baggins*, with its nod to Bloombury aesthetes. *Frodo*, in particular, carried all kinds of mythic resonances from the Eddas of Norse mythology. There was King Froði, under whose reign a gold ring could lie on the ground and nobody would take it. There was the epithet *fróðr* ("wise"), for the fertility god Freyr. It is beyond doubt that Tolkien was fully conscious of the weight of these references when he changed his hero's name from Bingo to Frodo. Granted the references were pretty esoteric, and their impact required some knowledge of Old Icelandic literature. Still, they were there and they were obviously intentional on Tolkien's part. Tolkien, I felt, had a gift for naming.

I particularly liked the name *Strider*. It was more accessible than *Frodo*, not dependent on mythological associations, besides being a perfect type-name for the mysterious hooded man I glimpsed in the common room at Bree. And like *Gaffer* and *Wormtongue*, *Strider* wasn't a proper name, but an epithet, like Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, or *The Lone Ranger* of my childhood cowboy fantasies. "What his right name is I've never heard," Butterbur says to Frodo, "but he's known round here as Strider. Goes about at a great pace on his long