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## A Note on a Name (Note)

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Discusses a possible source for the name *Trotter* in early drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*.

### Additional Keywords

Scotland—History; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Trotter; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Scottish history; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Textual history

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#### 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.

"Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams." *Mythcon I, Harvey Mudd College, Claremont, CA, 1970*. Ed. Glen GoodKnight. Los Angeles: Mythopoeic Society, 1970. 3–4.



#### 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

shanks" (*Lord of the Rings* I.9.156). "Known" as Strider. This guy had a reputation and a name to go with it. He didn't walk, he strode, he made great strides, he took things in his stride. All the idioms supported him as somebody who got around, who got things done, a mover and doer.

But what kind of hero "trots"? The image simply did not fit the powerful, mysterious figure I glimpsed in the shadows at The Prancing Pony. Worse than just a poor fit, the name *Trotter* seemed jarringly inappropriate, and dangerously close to cute. Like *Bingo*, it evoked games, or puppies, or pigs, if, like Leopold Bloom, you're into culinary treats. *Trotter* seemed an unsettling diminishment of a powerful character, hardly appropriate for the tall, sardonic authority figure who knows all about Frodo and his errand, is tight with Gandalf and crossways with Bill Ferny, who takes over the narrative with the wave of a finger and steers the quest to Rivendell. Of course, to my great, albeit retroactive relief, Tolkien did finally wise up—as he did with the change from Bingo to Frodo—and switch to the infinitely more evocative, powerful, name by which we all know Strider today. But how, I wondered, could JRRT have made such a misstep in the first place? And stuck with it right to the end?

I learned the answer some years ago in a second-hand bookstore, where I picked up George MacDonald Fraser's *The Steel Bonnets*, a riveting account of the Scottish-English Border wars in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The book's endpapers were a map of the Scottish-English Border territory in the period, locating in their home territories the Riding Surnames—the perpetually feuding, raiding, cattle-rustling, barn-burning clans on both sides of the Border. And there—just north of the Tweed and inland from the English stronghold of Berwick, comfortably at home among the Dixons and Nixons, the Armstrongs, Grahams, Johnstones, Maxwells, and Elliots—were the Trotters, a Northern English and Scottish Border surname whose French origin, *Trotier*, means *messenger*.

This pushed my thinking in a new direction, and opened up hitherto unimagined resonances for the name. It not impossible possible that *Trotter* was a wholly Tolkien-invented hobbit name, and that it was intended to evoke and mimic the wooden shoes that, as Butterbur points out clattered when he walked: "You can hear him coming along the road in those shoes: clitter-clap—when he walks on a path, which isn't often" (*Return of the Shadow* 138). It would also suit the presumed gait of someone with relatively short legs (unlike the final and much more appropriate 'long shanks'). But given the pre-existence of the name, the choice seems more likely to have been the other way round, that the wooden shoes were meant to go with the name, in which case, it is also reasonable to suppose that, as turned out to be the case, my original reading of the name was wrong on all counts.

*Trotter* wasn't cute. It had nothing to do with games or puppies or pigs. It was a *proper* proper name. And it carried historical baggage that fit with the character. I am not suggesting that Tolkien was influenced by *The Steel Bonnets*, which was first published in 1971, many years after the 1954-55 publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and a scant two years before he died. But I do suggest that

he, like any educated Englishman, had some knowledge of Border history, a history, moreover, that had a close resemblance to the immediate back-story of *The Lord of the Rings*, the unending guerilla action that we are told Strider/Aragorn has been fighting for many years, riding under many different names with the Rohirrim and the Dúnedain in their struggle against Mordor.

Now *Trotter* is British surname that, while not as common as Cooper or Thatcher or Webster or Wright, is nonetheless current in England and Scotland. It could have appealed to Tolkien for its sound alone. But I put it to you that no one as name-conscious as J.R.R. Tolkien, who once declared that “a name comes first and the story follows” (*Letters* 219), could have failed to be aware of the almost incantatory power of the surnames on the Scottish-English Border in the sixteenth century. I suggest that when he picked the name *Trotter* for his character Tolkien was making a deliberate choice; that he knew what he was doing; that it was a conscious, albeit oblique, reference intended to evoke the toughness, endurance, tenacity and dangerous history of the Border surnames, and to honor his character’s role as someone on the edge of a society at war, by choice an outsider and by destiny a messenger.

I would further suggest that Tolkien did not pick any of the better-known Border names for exactly the reason that they were better-known, and would have given the game away by making a too-explicit reference to real-world history, which, like real-world mythology, Tolkien felt had no place in an invented world. *Trotter* was sufficiently obscure (even in the end-paper map it is printed in small caps, unlike the large caps of the – quite literally – big names that surround it) and sufficiently close to a real verb to be acceptable as a type-name for Tolkien’s “queer-looking, brown-faced hobbit” (*RS* 137) who wears wooden shoes, walks a lot, and is also a Ranger.

It is not my purpose here to go into the chequered and diffuse history of Trotter/Strider/Aragorn as a character. Christopher Tolkien has explored this thoroughly, and his extended discussion in *The Return of the Shadow* is well worth reading as a road-map of Tolkien’s creative process at work in all its sprawling and overlapping glory. As part of that creative process the character of Trotter went through many transformations and identities, at one point becoming Peregrin Boffin, a cousin of Frodo’s whose name sounds too much like *muffin*, finally ending up not as a hobbit but as a man, though still called Trotter. I have no doubt (nor, I suspect, do most readers) that the last-minute change from *Trotter* to *Strider* was a wise decision on Tolkien’s part. But his original choice of *Trotter* told us, as Tolkien meant it to, more than most readers (at least in America) were aware of at the time.

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

J. ALEKSANDR WOOTTON

**I**N *MYTHLORE* 35.2, ANDREW LAZO BEGAN HIS PAPER with excerpts from Eliot's *Love Song* and Lewis's *Confession*: an engaging entrance to an insightful offering.

Fuller treatment of the two poems' dialogue would not have served Andrew's thesis, which needed them only for a springboard. But I should like to observe, in Eliot's defense, that in *Prufrock* it is of course only a bit of grammatical misdirection which implies that "evening" is "like a patient etherized upon a table," a misdirection which cunningly reflects a reversal of cosmic perception in the modern era. Evening is "spread out against the sky," there to be studied and dissected; man as detached observer. Whereas according to the medieval model, well-known to Lewis, it is "we" who are the patient, under the influence of *aether* (that which gods breathe, through which the affecting planets move, and from which the medical anesthetic got its name); we who are being operated on by heavenly powers.

I would add as well, in Lewis's defense, that this subtle acknowledgment of the overturned cosmos is unlikely to have escaped his attention; therefore, that the "coarseness" of which he complains in *Confession* is a mere conceit. Poets such as these do not converse superficially.

Sincerely,  
Jack

**J. ALEKSANDR WOOTTON** IS the author of *FAYBORN*: contemporary fairytale-fantasy that invites our old friends from *Marchen* and classic literature along for new adventures in the present era. In spare time, Wootton chairs the Folklore Department at Lightfoot College. More at [www.jackwootton.com](http://www.jackwootton.com).