The Little Kingdom: Some Considerations and a Map

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Abstract
Features a map of the locations in Farmer Giles of Ham, and discusses correspondences with actual locations.

Additional Keywords
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Farmer Giles of Ham is ostensibly a fairy tale. Or, rather, it is ostensibly a tale for children; it is a fairy tale. In our more sophisticated age, adults can at last admit that they find literature of this type rewarding and satisfying.

There is something inexorably adult about Farmer Giles, despite the seeming aim at children. An air, of Tolkien's humanistic concern for ethics, breathes through this clever and effective morality tale. It is a story of badness ("evil" is too strong a term) which brings upon itself its own come-uppance. It is also a marvel of character development, in a brief space relating one man's discovery of his own strength of character. And of course it is full of cunning good humor.
Farmer Giles is set in England, in a time before the Saxon debacle, when various British kings were still playing at being Roman potentates...and of course when dragons, giants, and all that were in full cry. It is specifically set in a portion of the Thames valley east of Oxford. At the beginning this region is part of the “Middle Kingdom”; at the end it is an independent “Little Kingdom”.

A number of places, all of them real, are mentioned in Farmer Giles; and a cursory tour of the area shows a few more points of interest. The towns or parishes of Ham (now Oxford), Oakley, Woringhall, Farthingho(e), and Oxenford (now Oxford) are all mentioned, as well as the Otmoor, an area west of Oxford. It is interesting to note, since Giles was known as Lord of Tame, that a river and town of Thame lie not too far to the west, the Thame flowing into the Thames. In fact, in 1938 Tolkien made reference to “the Little Kingdom (with its capital at Thame)” (Letters, p. 39), which leads one to wonder. However, Farmer Giles itself refers to the Little Kingdom as being in “the valley of the Thames” (p. 66 of the combined edition with Smith of Wooton Major). A map of this region allows us to find other places with literary associations as well. Southeast of Ham is the town of Buckland...and it’s a good bet that a highly detailed map would reveal more names from the Shire in Oxenfordshire. To the south and west of Buckland is the Vale of the White Horse, recalling the emblem of Rohan.

In the same area lies Wantage, where Alfred the great was born. Its true immortality, however, lies in the classic limmerick:

There was a young lady of Wantage
Of whom the Town Clerk took advantage.
Said the County Surveyor,
"Of course you must pay her;
You've altered the line of her frontage."

Finally, between Ham and Oxford, lies the town of Wootton, presumably the site of Smith of Wooton Major. There is also, further west, a town of Wootton Under Edge...and of course Tolkien speaks of two Woottons.

Appended to this short article is a map, done in part from descriptions of where places are located, rather than seeing the actual dots on a printed page. In this regard, I am indebted to Ben Urrutia for first calling my attention to the fact that such a map was possible. In addition, also used were (1) Humphrey Carpenter’s Tolkien, (2) David Detmam’s “A Glossary to Farmer Giles of Ham” (in Minas Tirith Evening-Star, 9.9), (3) Encyclopedia Britannica, XI Ed. (1910), Vol. IX, Map of England and Wales (part III), (4) in Gershon Legman’s The Limerick (#987) or in William S. Baring-Gould’s The Lure of the Limerick (p. 228); an interesting variant can be found on p. 178 of Louis Untermeyer’s Lots of Limericks.

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10 Ibid., Canto XXXIV, 11. 50-52.


19 Matthew 12:43-45. The story is told in Luke in almost the same words.


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