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Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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George Sayer

Abstract: Reminiscences of walking with Tolkien around Malvern and of visits to his house in Sandfield Road. What he said and what our mutual friend, C.S. Lewis, said about him.

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On earth Ronald Tolkien loved parties, so I think he'll be there among the immortals enjoying this imaginative and beautifully organized centenary party. One or two items on the menu may surprise him – for instance why should mushrooms or morels, homely English things, be translated into French, not at all his favourite language? But that's a detail. I hope nothing I say will offend him if he bothers to listen, that all I say about him will be worthy of the great courtesy and kindness he always showed me.

I got to know him through C.S. Lewis, who was my tutor when I read English at Magdalen. Lewis took a low view of the standard of lecturing in Oxford – a view that was I think, correct. He advised me to go only to two-and-a-half series of lectures in first year. The two were his own lectures and those of Nevill Coghill. The half was Tolkien's. "I don't know what to say about Tolkien," was how he put it.

He is scholarly, and he can be brilliant though perhaps rather recondite for most undergraduates. But unfortunately you may not be able to hear what he says. He is a bad lecturer. All the same I advise you to go. If you do, arrive early, sit near the front and pay particular attention to the extempore remarks and comments he often makes. These are usually the best things in the lecture. In fact one could call him an inspired speaker of footnotes.

"An inspired speaker of footnotes." INSPIRED. The word stuck in my mind, but it was not until many years later that I realised that Lewis was saying something profoundly true about Tolkien's writing as well as his lecturing. He really is an inspired writer. The general level of his work is high and every now and then one comes across passages and whole incidents of real inspiration. The Ents are an example. They are a wonderful invention that owes, as far as I know, nothing to previous writing. They are like nothing else that has ever been. They are charming and loveable with, also, the sadness characteristic of the author, a sadness that underlies much of his humour. Another example is the ride to Gondor where the prose narrative rises to the truly heroic, the rarest thing in modern literature and perhaps the literary quality that its author admired most. What one could call very good footnotes sometimes occurred in his private conversation. If he was with several other people and not

very interested in what they were talking about, he might mutter to whoever sat nearest him a comment that was, as far as one could hear it, of real interest.

But in spite of the footnotes, I was disappointed in Tolkien's lectures. Unlike Lewis, who had a fine resonant voice, he had a poor voice and made things worse by mumbling. I did try arriving early and sitting in the front. I then found myself sitting in the midst of a small group of young women who knew each other rather well. At least some of them must have gone to him for tutorials. I think that in the early days the women's colleges sent him pupils because he was a married man. If he had not been, a woman undergraduate would not have been allowed to go to a tutorial with him alone. She would have had to be chaperoned by another woman. I think he retained this connection with women's colleges after the demise or neglect of the chaperoning rule.

I noticed that some of them spoke of him with affection, as "rather sweet". The more homely enjoyed going to his North Oxford house and meeting the little Tolkiens, as I heard them called, presumably Christopher and Priscilla. I followed the good example of those around me and tried to take notes. This wasn't easy for he went quite fast. The footnotes were for me certainly the best part but there were not enough of them and I enjoyed them for wrong or quite unintellectual reasons, because in them Tolkien showed a rather pleasant sense of humour. But in spite of these I foolishly soon gave up going. Since this may shock those of you who do not know Oxford and Cambridge, I had better explain that going to lectures was entirely voluntary at these ancient universities. It still is, and is unnecessary too for success in Schools. My step-daughter, Sheena, who was recently up at St. John's, never went to a single lecture all the time she was up. Yet she got a first.

My real relationship with Tolkien did not begin until about thirteen years later. It was during the school holidays at Malvern where I was teaching. Quite near the college I came across C.S. Lewis and his brother Warren apparently setting out for a hike. They were wearing open-neck shirts, very old clothes, had stout walking sticks, and one of them was carrying a very ancient looking rucksack. It was the fact that they were doing it in Malvern that surprised me because I

know that C.S. Lewis was certainly not the old-boy type, even though his brother was. They explained that they had swapped houses with Maureen, Mrs. Moore's daughter, who had married Leonard Blake, the Director of Music at Malvern College. She had gone to Lewis's house, The Kilns, to be with her mother, who was ill. With them was Tolkien and a man whom they introduced to me as Humphrey Havard, "our friend and doctor". Lewis invited me to have some beer with them at the pub called The Unicorn. There he asked me which were the best walks in the area, and then if I could join them for the next few days, acting as their guide. Lewis then drew me on one side and said that they would be extremely grateful if I would be willing to walk much of the time with Tolkien, while they went on ahead.

He's a great man, but not our sort of walker. He doesn't seem able to talk and walk at the same time. He dawdles and then stops completely when he has something interesting to say. Warnie finds this particularly irritating.

I soon found that the brothers liked to walk hard and fast for half an hour, a period which Warnie would time, for Jack never wore or, as far as I know, owned a watch. Then they would have what they called a "soak". This meant sitting or lying down for the time it took to have a cigarette. Then the other man would shoulder the pack, which was their name for the rucksack, and they would go on walking hard for another half-hour. Humphrey Havard had been most kind in walking some of the time with Tolkien but he had to go back to Oxford the following day.

It worked really well. Tolkien seemed glad to be left behind by the Lewis brothers, whom he described to me as "ruthless walkers, very ruthless indeed". Certainly he was not used to their sort of walking, and got quickly out of breath when we walked uphill. Just as C.S. Lewis said, he tended to stop walking, certainly walking fast, whenever he had something interesting to say. He also liked to stop to look at the trees, flowers, birds and insects that we passed. He would not have suited anyone who, like the Lewis brothers, walked partly for health, in order to get vigorous exercise. But it delighted me. He talked so well that I was happy to do nothing but listen, though even if one was by his side, it was not always easy to hear all that he said. He talked faster than anyone of his age that I have known, and in a curious fluttering way. Then he would often spring from one topic to another, or interpolate remarks that didn't seem to have much connection with what we were talking about. He knew more natural history than I did, certainly far more than the Lewises, and kept coming out with pieces of curious information about the plants that we came across. I can remember one or two examples. Thus on the common wood avens:

This is Herb Bennet, in Latin *Herba Benedicta*.
What do you think that means?

The Blessed Plant.

Yes, though the English form wants it to be *St. Benedict's Herb*. It is blessed because it is a protection from the devil. If it is put into a house "the devil can do nothing, and if a man carries it about with him no

venomous beast will come within scent of it."

And upon the celandine:

Did you know that when picking celandine various combinations of *Aves* and *Paternosters* have to be said? This was one of the many cases of Christian prayers supplanting pagan ones, for in ancient times there were runes to be spoken before it was picked.

Though he was generally interested in birds and insects, his greatest love seemed to be for trees. He had loved trees ever since childhood. He would often place his hand on the trunks of ones that we passed. He felt their wanton or unnecessary felling almost as murder. The first time I heard him say "ORCS" was when we heard not far off the savage sound of a petrol-driven chain saw. "That machine," he said, "is one of the greatest horrors of our age." He said that he had sometimes imagined an uprising of the trees against their human tormentors. "Think of the power of a forest on the march. Of what it would be like if Birnam Wood really came to Dunsinane."

I had the impression that he had never walked the hills before though he had often admired the distant view of them from the Avon valley near Evesham. Some of the names of the places we saw from the hills produced philological or etymological footnotes. *Malvern* was a corruption of two Welsh words, "moel" meaning *bear*, and "vern" derived from *bryn* or *fryn* meaning *hill*. This of course told us that the area was in early times heavily wooded, though the ten-mile ridge of the hills was not. The main pass over the hills is called the Wyche. This gave him an opportunity of talking about the various meanings of the word "Wyc".

It was the custom of the Lewis brothers to eat the bread and cheese they brought with them in a pub and to drink with it a couple of pints of beer, always bitter. They liked the beer to be drawn from the wood and the pub to be simple, primitive and above all without a radio. Tolkien agreed strongly with this taste. I can think of a pub he wouldn't enter because there was a radio on. But he was happy drinking beer, or smoking his pipe in a pub among friends.

Usually he was genial and relaxed, as if liberated from the worries of ordinary life. As I sat with him and the Lewis brothers in the pub, I remember being fascinated by the expressions on his face, the way they changed to suit what he was saying. Often he was smiling, genial, or wore a pixy look. A few seconds later he might burst into savage scathing criticism, looking fierce and menacing. Then he might soon become genial again. There was an element of acting about this gesturing, but much that he said was extremely serious.

Except at Inklings meetings I saw nothing of Tolkien for perhaps two years after this. Lewis gave me bulletins about him, and talked quite a lot about *The Lord of the Rings*, its greatness and the difficulty of getting it published. He thought this was largely Tolkien's fault because he insisted that it should be published with a lengthy appendix of largely philological interest. In negotiation with Collins he had even gone so far as to insist that it should be published with the earlier work, *The Silmarillion*, a book that Lewis had tried to read in typescript, but found very heavy going. The two together would make a volume of over a million words. Even

alone *The Lord of the Rings* would, Lewis thought, be the better for pruning. There was a large section that in his opinion weakened the book.

Of course Lewis's enthusiasm made my wife and me most eager to read the book. Lewis said that he would try and get a copy for us, but he did not see how. Then on one of my visits to Magdalen he told me that Tolkien had given up hope of ever having it published. This was a real calamity, but it brought great good to me. "Look," he said, "at what I have here for you!" There on his table was the typescript of *The Lord of the Rings*. Of course I must take the greatest care of it, read it in a month or less, and return it personally to the author, 'phoning him first to make sure that he would be there to receive it. It was far too precious to be entrusted even to the more reliable post of forty years ago.

Of course my wife and I had the thrilling experience that all of you remember vividly. Well before the month was up, I turned up with it at Tolkien's house, then in Holywell. I found him obviously unhappy and dishevelled. He explained that his wife had gone to Bournemouth and that all his friends were out of Oxford. He eagerly accepted my invitation to come to Malvern for a few days. "But what shall I do with the other book? I can't leave it here." So I drove Tolkien to Malvern with the typescripts of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* on the back seat. What a precious cargo!

His talk now was mainly of his books. He had worked for fourteen years on *The Lord of the Rings* and before that for many years on *The Silmarillion*. They really were his life work. He had in a sense planned them before he went to school, and actually written one or two of the poems while he was still at school, I think the Tom Bombadil poems. He had now nothing to look forward to except a life of broken health, making do on an inadequate pension. He was so miserable and so little interested in anything except his own troubles that we were seriously worried. What could we do to alleviate his depression? I could walk with him and drive him around during the day, but how were we to get through the evenings? Then I had an idea. I would take the risk of introducing him to a new machine that I had in the house and was trying out because it seemed that it should have some valuable educational applications. It was a large black box, a Ferrograph, an early-model tape recorder. To confront him with it was a risk because he had made it clear that he disliked all machinery. He might curse it and curse me with it, but there was a chance that he would be interested in recording on it, in hearing his own voice.

He was certainly interested. First he recorded the Lord's Prayer in Gothic to cast out the devil that was sure to be in it since it was a machine. This was not just whimsey. All of life for him was part of a cosmic conflict between the forces of good and evil, God and the devil. I played it back to him. He was surprised and very pleased. He sounded much better than he had expected. He went on to record some of the poems in *The Lord of the Rings*. Some he sang to the tunes that were in his head when writing them. He was delighted with the result. It was striking how much better his voice sounded recorded and amplified. The more he recorded, and

the more often he played back the recordings, the more his confidence grew. He asked to record the great riddle scene from *The Hobbit*. He read it magnificently and was especially pleased with his impersonation of Gollum. Then I suggested he should read one or two of the best prose passages from *The Lord of the Rings*, say, the "Ride of the Rohirrim", and part of the account of the events on Mount Doom. He listened carefully and, I thought, nervously, to the play-back. "You know," he said, "they are all wrong. The publishers are wrong, and I am wrong to have lost my faith in my own work. I am sure this is good, really good. But how am I to get it published?"

Of course I had no idea. But I had to say something, so I said, "Haven't you an old pupil in the publishing business?" After a pause he said: "There's only Rayner." "Then send it to him and ask for his help."

I won't tell you what happened after that because you will have heard it from Rayner Unwin himself.

He went on recording until I ran out of tape.

Of course compared with this nothing in my relationship with Tolkien is of much importance, but I will tell you a few other things. I don't think he much liked the food he had while staying with us, because my wife was then working through a French cookery book, and he seemed to detest everything French – I don't know why. We thought he had a bad appetite. Nevertheless he thanked her with a charming bread-and-butter letter written in Elvish and complete with English translation.

While with us he asked if he could do something to help in the house or garden. He was quite domesticated, not at all an impractical academic. We thought, in the garden, for our garden has never been a tidy or weed-free one. He chose an area of about two square yards, part flower border and part lawn and cultivated it perfectly: the border meticulously weeded and the soil made level and exceedingly fine; the grass cut with scissors closely and evenly. It took him quite a long time to do the job, but it was beautifully done. He was in all things a perfectionist. I think his training in domesticity, in housework, gardening, and looking after chickens and other creatures gave to his writing a homely and earthy quality. On Sunday we took him to Mass at the Church to which we always go ourselves. Before we left the house he asked if confessions were heard before Mass. I told him they were. He said he always liked to go to confession before receiving communion. I do not think that this was because he had on his conscience any sin that most people would regard as serious. True, he was what spiritual directors call "scrupulous", that is, inclined to exaggerate the evil of the undisciplined and erring thoughts that plague most of us. But he was above all a devout and strict old-fashioned Catholic, who had been brought up to think that if possible one should go to confession first. This was the usual nineteenth-century attitude. It lingered in backward parts. Thus my wife tells me that in her village in County Kerry in the nineteen-thirties, no one would have thought of going to communion without going to confession first. In the pew in front of us there were two or three children who were trying to follow the service in a simple picture book missal. He

seemed to be more interested in them than in events at the altar. He lent over and helped them. When we came out of the church we found that he was not with us. I went back and found him kneeling in front of the Lady Altar with the young children and their mother, talking happily and I think telling stories about Our Lady. I knew the mother and found out later that they were enthralled. This again was typical; he loved children and had the gift of getting on well with them. "Mummy, can we always go to church with that nice man?" The story also illustrates one of the most important things about him, his great devotion to Our Lady. He wrote to me years later a letter in which he stated that he attributed anything that was good or beautiful in his writing to the influence of Our Lady, "the greatest influence in my life." He meant it. An obvious example is the character of Galadriel.

The few days he spent in Malvern with that early model Ferrograph tape recorder at a time when he was "in the doldrums" as he put it in a letter, made me one of his friends. He invited me to call on him whenever I was in Oxford and with remarkable frankness talked to me not merely about *The Lord of the Rings* and his other writings but about his private worries about things such as money, religion and family.

In the spring of 1953 he moved to Sandfield Road, a turning on Headington Hill off the London Road. I think that when I called, it was always Mrs. Tolkien who answered the door. One of her jobs was to protect her husband from people who would interfere with his work. She would then go upstairs to tell him that I, an admissible visitor, was there. I always found him seated at a large desk or table with many papers in front of him in a room full of books and piles of papers. I was told that there was also a bookstore and a sort of office in what would have been the garage if he had had a car. Until *The Lord of the Rings* was a success he talked a good deal about his misfortunes. He had much to complain about. The expenses of the move had made him rather short of money, and yet he would have to contribute more than he could afford towards publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps the best way of conveying his state of mind will be to read a few sentences about his anxieties from a letter he wrote to me at the end of August, 1953. It also shows that he had taken with enthusiasm to the use of a tape recorder:

When I got your letter I was altogether played out. Not that I have been able to relax, beyond one morning's long sleep.

Life has been most complicated and laborious with domestic comings and goings and difficulties arranging for Father John and anxieties about my daughter lost in France. Amidst all this I have had to work day and (especially) night at the seemingly endless galleys of the Great Work that had piled up during Vivas, at drawings and runes and maps; and now at the copy of Vol. II. Also at Sir Gawain.

Immediately after Vivas Newby of the Talks Department descended on me. The upshot is that my translation is being taken in toto, uncut, as the basis of six broadcasts at Christmas. But they do not take

equally kindly to me as the actual performer. However I go to London tomorrow for an audition. This is where a tape-recorder would have been so helpful. I had to hire a horrid old sound Mirror, the best I could get locally, but it was very helpful in matters of timing and speed. With the help of Christopher and Faith, I made some three voice experiments and recordings of the temptation scenes. An enormous improvement – and assistance to the listener. Chris was making an extremely good (if slightly Oxonian) Gawain, before we had to break off.

I got as near to Malvern as Evesham on August 23rd. The wedding of my nephew Gabriel Tolkien, at which John officiated. I thought not without longing of the Dark Hills in the distance, but I had to rush straight back.

He doubted if many people would buy the book at the high price of 25 shillings a volume. He feared too that the few people who read it would treat it as an allegory or morality about the nuclear bomb or the horrors of the machine age. He insisted over and over again that his book was essentially a story, without any further meaning. "Tales of Faerie," he said, "should be told only for their own sake."

One of the advantages of the house in Sandfield Road was that Tolkien's doctor, Humphrey Havard, lived in the same street, only a few doors away. He sometimes took him to church. I once asked him how he was and had the answer:

All right now, but I've been in a very bad state.

Humphrey came here and told me that I must go to confession and that he would come early on Sunday morning to take me to confession and communion. That's the sort of doctor to have.

This story shows his humility. He had a very low opinion of his own merits, and fairly easily got into a depressed state when thinking of his faults and deficiencies. Life was a war between good and evil. He thought the sacraments freed one from enthrallment to Sauron. Once he spoke to me of Ireland after he had spent part of a summer vacation working there as an examiner: "It is as if the earth there is cursed. It exudes an evil that is held in check only by Christian practice and the power of prayer." Even the soil, the earth, played a part in the cosmic struggle between forces of good and evil.

He thought hatred of Catholics was common in Britain. His mother, to whom he was most deeply devoted, was a martyr because of her loyalty to the Catholic Faith, and his wife, Edith, was turned out of her guardian's house when she was received into the Church. In 1963 he wrote in a letter:

And it still goes on. I have a friend who walked in procession in the Eucharistic Congress held in Edinburgh, and who reached the end with a face drenched with the spittle of the populace which lined the road and were only restrained by mounted police from tearing the garments and faces of the Catholics.

He found little or nothing wrong with the pre-Vatican II Church, and therefore thought the reforms of the 1960s misguided and unnecessary. He frequently complained about the new English translations of the Latin texts used in Catholic services, because they were inaccurate or in bad or

clumsy English.

Lewis told Tolkien that of all his friends he was "the only one impervious to influence". This was largely true. It was no defect. Combined with his belief in all the traditional virtues such as courage, loyalty, chastity, integrity and kindness, it gave to him as a man and to *The Lord of the Rings* tremendous moral strength. He was unwaveringly loyal to the Christian Faith as taught him by his guardian and benefactor, Father Francis Morgan.

Our mutual friend, C.S. Lewis, was a frequent topic of conversation. Their relationship before the war had been very close, so close that Edith Tolkien had resented the time that her husband spent with him. Lewis who was aware of this for his part found it impossible to see as much as he would have liked of Tolkien, whom he described as "the most married man he knew". But apart from the fact that one of them was married, the two had different concepts of friendship. Tolkien wanted to be first among Lewis's friends. Lewis may have loved Tolkien as much but he wanted him to be one among several friends. Tolkien was jealous of the position that Charles Williams, of whom he did not entirely approve, occupied in Lewis's affections. They were separated also by the success of the Narnia stories, the first of which appeared when he was struggling to get *The Lord of the Rings* through the press. He described it to be "about as bad as can be". It was written superficially and far too quickly (I think that perhaps he envied Lewis his fluency), had an obvious message, but above all was a mix-up of characters from dissimilar and incompatible imaginative worlds. Dr. Cornelius, Father Time, The White Witch, Father Christmas and Dryads should not be included in the same story. I never saw the force of this criticism.

At long last, after the three volumes were successfully launched, he became what Lewis called "cock-a-hoop" and talked with great enthusiasm of the fate of the pirated paperback version and the astonishing growth of the Tolkien cult. He enjoyed receiving letters in Elvish from boys at Winchester and from knowing that they were using it as a secret language. He was overwhelmed by his fan mail and would-be visitors. It was wonderful to have at long last plenty of money, more than he knew what to do with. He once began a meeting with me by saying: "I've been a poor man all my life, but now for the first time I've a lot of money. Would you like some?"

In my later visits he was nominally hard at work getting *The Silmarillion* into a form suitable for publication. But after a time I began to wonder how much he really did. I can think of two visits at an interval of a month. On the second I am almost sure that he had the same page open as on the first. I have been told that he spent much of his time reading detective stores. I don't blame him. His life work was

complete.

I once asked him about the origin of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It seemed to be more than anything else philological. Then just as I was leaving to go on a walk with C.S. Lewis he handed me a pile of papers. "If you're interested, have a look at these."

Lewis and I took them to a pub and looked at them over bread and cheese. "Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, "he seems to have invented not one but three languages complete with their dialects. He must be the cleverest man in Oxford. But we can't keep them. Take them straight back to him while I have another pint."

If I was there at the right time in the afternoon he would take me to have tea in the drawing room on the floor below, Edith Tolkien's room. The atmosphere was quite different, with hardly any papers and few books. She did most of the talking and it was not at all literary. Frequent subjects were the doings of the children, especially Christopher, the grandchildren, the garden in which I think Ronald enjoyed working, the iniquities of the Labour Party, the rising price of food, the changes for the worse in the Oxford shops and the difficulty of buying certain groceries. The road had deteriorated since they had moved there. It used to be a quiet cul-de-sac. Now the lower end had been opened up and lorries and cars rushed through on their way to a building site or to Oxford United's football ground. There were also some very noisy people in the road. They even had as near neighbours an aspiring pop group.

Ronald (I call him Ronald in talking to you, but I always addressed him by his Inklings nickname, "Tollers") told me that when she was younger Edith had been a fine pianist. Some of the conversation was about music. On one occasion she played to us on a very simple old-fashioned gramophone a record that she had just bought. Her husband was relaxed and happy with this domesticity. Anyway, it was an important part of his life. Without a liking for the homely and domestic, he could not have written *The Hobbit*, or invented Frodo and Sam Gamgee, characters that sustain quite convincingly the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, and link the high romance to the everyday and the ordinary.

He told me that he was moving to Bournemouth because the house was too big and too much work for Edith, and in order to escape the fan mail and the fans. I did not go there. The last time I met him was after his return to Oxford. He was with children (perhaps great-grandchildren), playing trains: "I'm Thomas the Tank Engine. Puff. Puff. Puff." That sort of thing. I was conscripted as a signal. This love for children and delight in childlike play and simple pleasures was yet another thing that contributed to his wholeness as a man and the success of his books.