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Publishing Tolkien

Abstract

During the last thirty years of the Professor's life, but especially towards the end, Rayner Unwin met, talked with, and worked for, J.R.R. Tolkien. It was a business relationship between author and publisher, but increasingly it became a trusting friendship as well. In an ideal world authors and publishers should always act in partnership. This certainly happened between Professor Tolkien and George Allen & Unwin, but in some respects, the speaker explains, the collaboration had very unusual features.

Additional Keywords

Beowulf; Farmer Giles of Ham; The Father Christmas Letters; The Hobbit; illness; illustrations; letters; The Lost Road; maps; Mr. Bliss; The Silmarillion; typesetting

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Rayner Unwin

Abstract: During the last thirty years of the Professor's life, but especially towards the end, Rayner Unwin met, talked with, and worked for, J.R.R. Tolkien. It was a business relationship between author and publisher, but increasingly it became a trusting friendship as well. In an ideal world authors and publishers should always act in partnership. This certainly happened between Professor Tolkien and George Allen & Unwin, but in some respects, the speaker explains, the collaboration had very unusual features.

Keywords: *Beowulf*, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *The Father Christmas Letters*, *The Hobbit*, illness, illustrations, letters, *The Lost Road*, maps, *Mr. Bliss*, *The Silmarillion*, typesetting

I have thought for a long time about what I could say this morning that might be either original or interesting. Alas, I have used up most of the personal anecdotes that I could remember after twenty or thirty years in various recent articles and talks. And I am acutely aware that all of you, who have come so far to this conference, are much better informed about Tolkienian matters than I shall ever be.

Publishing Tolkien is the title of my talk, and it covers the only subject that gives me any justification for being here. But what, I have to ask myself, was so different (apart from the actual contents of the books) about publishing Tolkien and publishing anybody else?

I thought it might be easier if I concentrated on a period when I was myself only indirectly involved, and by carefully examining the correspondence of a single year try to isolate those peculiarities that made the relationship between Tolkien and his publisher special. I have chosen 1937 – the year during which *The Hobbit* was actually published. By the beginning of this year the single-spaced typescript had already been read by a precocious ten-year-old, a contract had been signed, and copy had gone to the printer for setting.

Most of you will have read the highlights of the 1937 correspondence in the book of *Letters*. Indeed, if you're like me, it is more and more to that book that I turn in order to recapture the true flavour of the man. Eleven letters to his publishers are reproduced in whole or in part in *Letters*. But this is only the tip of the iceberg.

In the publishing file for 1937 there are 26 letters from Tolkien to Allen and Unwin, and 31 letters from Allen and Unwin to Tolkien. In addition there is evidence that other notes were exchanged when routine packets were posted between the author and the Production Dept. There is no evidence that either side telephoned each other during the year. Telephones were regarded as an intrusion, and anyway, at a distance of 60 miles, wildly extravagant. On one or two occasions a cable was sent across the Atlantic, and when, in December, a reprint of *The Hobbit* was called for, Tolkien was told: "the last minute crisis was so acute that we fetched

part of the reprint from our printers at Woking in a private car in order to avoid delay." On one occasion Charles Furth called on Tolkien in Oxford, and twice in the autumn Tolkien came to London by train where he met my father for the first time and was "overwhelmed" by his kindness.

But the vast majority of all communication was by letter. On Tolkien's part these were all in handwriting, often up to five pages long, detailed, fluent, often pungent, but infinitely polite and exasperatingly precise.

The first point that struck me as I read through the file was the sheer quantity of patience and time that was spent on preparing a children's book by an unknown author for press in exactly the way the author wanted. I doubt very much if any author today would get or exchange such leisurely courtesies as passed between Tolkien and his principal correspondents at Allen and Unwin. They were Charles Furth, the senior editor, and Susan Dagnall, the editorial Jill-of-all-trades who had "found" *The Hobbit* for the publisher she had recently come to work for. Towards the end of the year my father also entered into the correspondence.

The text should have been a straightforward typesetting job. When the first batch of proofs came through in February Tolkien found "some minor discrepancies that come out in print and make it desirable to have the whole story together before passing for press." But after the proofs had all arrived he wrote, "the type-setting throughout was guilty of very few divergences from copy and in general proof-corrections are light. But I ought to have given the MS. a revision." Later on it became apparent that it was not just the odd letter or word that needed correction: blocks of text needed to be replaced, but "I have calculated the space line by line as carefully as possible."

With admirable calm Charles Furth replied at the end of March: "it is not improbable that the printers will prefer to send revises of the whole book, because your author's corrections are pretty heavy." Revised proofs were produced and quickly dealt with. But Tolkien wrote a fortnight later, "I have (I fear) again altered 8 words to rectify narrative errors

that escaped my previous care; and I have also corrected necessarily about 7 errors that descended from copy and also escaped. I have marked in red a few new errors, and one or two others that were overlooked.”

No-one had lost their cool – indeed Susan Dagnall at one point went out of her way to report that “our Production Dept has not felt that you have at any time been in the least troublesome.”

But it was apparent that the “free” allowance for author’s corrections provided under the contract (10% of the actual cost of typesetting) was going to be exceeded. Charles Furth hinted at this, and Tolkien acknowledged the hint. “I must pay what is just, if required, though I shall naturally be grateful for clemency.”

As we know, even corrected revised proofs were not enough to make perfect copy. In October Tolkien was acknowledging “a piece of private bad grammar, rather shocking in a philologist”, when he used the incorrect plural of “dwarf” and wished he had substituted the archaic word “dwarrow”. And early next year Christopher, ill in bed, was earning tuppence a time for spotting mistakes in the printed text.

Probably the greatest part of the voluminous correspondence concerned maps, illustrations and embellishments. Tolkien was always apologetic about his skills as a draughtsman or as an artist. “I discovered (as I anticipated) that it was rather beyond my craft and experience” he said when he sent his first draft of *The Hobbit* jacket. Charles Furth was quick to reassure him: “the only feature about which we were not entirely happy in the cover is the flush on the central mountain, which makes it look to our eyes just a trifle like a cake.”

The maps were equally worrying. “I have small skill, and no experience of preparing such things for reproduction,” he protested. But the pictures were worst of all. When Houghton Mifflin asked to see some of his colour pictures he felt “even greater hesitation in posing further as an illustrator, or as one to be preferred to good American artists”. As to *Mr. Bliss*, “the pictures seem to me mostly only to prove that the author cannot draw.”

Now we would all of us agree that he protested too much, and his publishers certainly were very happy to encourage him to do all the embellishments himself. It was cheaper, too, not to have to employ a cartographer, designer or jacket artist. Indeed Tolkien realised this and managed to extract \$100 from Houghton Mifflin for the use of the four colour pictures that they chose. And just before publication my father produced an ex-gratia advance of £25 in appreciation of all Tolkien had done to make *The Hobbit* look an attractive book.

But once the publisher decided to use his work he became a total perfectionist. In January he examined his art-work proofs microscopically. “In Mirkwood . . . a spot of grease, which I removed with the finger, has been reproduced as a black dot . . . In the Wilderland map the t in Hobbiton has a defect not in copy”. In February “the thin white outline of one of the background trees is slightly broken: some of the tiny dots outlining a flame have failed to come out . . . In

the ‘Hall at Bag-End’ I misguidedly put in a wash shadow reaching right up to the side beam. This has of course come out black . . .”

In April, “I am sorry it proved impossible to substitute the better drawn runes in the space on the map. Those now shown are ill-done (and not quite upright!)”

As late as July (21 September was the actual publication date) Tolkien, who had taken a hand in the blocking on the binding-case, was writing “I still hanker after a dragon, or at least some sort of rune-formula.” Charles Furth, having conceded central, upright lettering rather than italic tried to dig his heels in about the lines at top and bottom, “because without them we feel the binding will be bare, and that if they are made straight lines it will look too much like a Macmillan textbook.”

I marvel (but am not entirely surprised) that Allen and Unwin really thought they were economising by using the author as an amateur designer-cum-illustrator. But in those happy days cost-benefit analysis had scarcely been invented. I know that Charles Furth was probably responsible for seeing 50 or 60 other books through the press that year, on a wide spectrum of subjects, not all as complicated as this children’s book.

I believe that the overall standards of editing and production were probably higher then than now; and I know that no senior editor in any publishing company today would dream of indulging an author to the extent that the author of *The Hobbit* was indulged. I say this with gratitude because it laid the foundation for a relationship of trust that I inherited. And although at times it nearly drove one mad, it meant that the life-long partnership that existed between Tolkien and his publisher, rare even in its time, would be a total anachronism today.

Another major difference between pre-war and post-war life concerns health. Authors and publishers alike were constantly falling ill, and not just for a day or two. Nothing emphasises more vividly the pre-antibiotic world than the correspondence of 1937.

On 4 January Tolkien was “faced by a family laid low one by one by influenza, brought back from school for the entire ruin of Christmas. I succumbed myself on New Year’s Eve.” Four days later we learn that Miss Dagnall had been laid low by the prevailing ‘flu.

In February an ingenious method of printing the moon-runes on Thrór’s map so that they would seem to be “both there and not there” went wrong. First “the magic was left out through a misunderstanding” and fresh blocks were promised. Then (I quote Charles Furth), “unfortunately both the responsible member of the Production Dpt. and the blockmaker’s representative who had worked out the scheme went down with, ‘flu simultaneously.”

In March Charles Furth reported that “we have again been afflicted by illness here and are therefore short-handed.” All went well until July when Tolkien wrote, “I attempted something about the cover but could not bring it off – mainly owing to my ill-health and to the serious illness of one of my children.”

In the autumn it was my father’s turn to collapse. Tolkien

wrote, "it was very good of you to answer me from your bed. I hope your cold is now better, though mine always cling." A little later the reason why Arthur Ransome, who thought *The Hobbit* was "great fun", had not responded earlier was because he was "temporarily laid up in a nursing home in Norwich." At the end of the year the wheel comes full circle and we learn that Tolkien had been "working under difficulties of all kinds, including ill-health, since the beginning of December." It is, I think you will agree, a miracle that anything ever got accomplished against such a blizzard of infection.

Another of the peculiarities of the year when *The Hobbit* was published was the surge of other projects that Tolkien produced, which largely confused his publisher and led to nothing for at least twelve years.

Mr. Bliss had been submitted at much the same time as *The Hobbit* (though I have no recollection of earning my shilling from it). Charles Furth wrote very positively in January saying: "it should be hardly necessary to state that we should very much indeed like to publish this little book which is in a class which it shares with *Alice in Wonderland* and the extremely few comparable books. The difficulty is solely a technical one, but it seems at the moment serious." It remained a serious technical problem for the next 40 years or so; but it should not be forgotten that colour photolithography was in its infancy before the last world war, and no other technique could have dealt with the book in its unique original form. Throughout the year Tolkien half-heartedly offered to re-design it in such a way that it could be produced, but Allen and Unwin, after their initial enthusiasm – and with increasing first-hand experience of trying to satisfy Tolkien's high standards for reproducing illustrations – began to put it on the back burner.

Farmer Giles of Ham (which I did earn a shilling by reporting on) was then much shorter than the version that was eventually published in 1949, but in the end my father sent it back, saying that if there was enough material of a like character to put with it it would make an excellent book. There were, as we know, no other tales of the Little Kingdom available, and for lack of them *Farmer Giles* too went onto the back burner.

Then, after *The Hobbit* had been published, and the reviews and sales had turned out to be everything that could be desired, my father wrote to warn Tolkien that "a large public" would be "clamouring next year to hear more from you about Hobbits,"

Soon afterwards Tolkien came to London, met my father, and over lunch totally confused him with a mass of projects, mostly half-completed, seldom suitable for children, and often deriving from the unexplained matter of Middle-earth. All of which were offered for publication. My father's typed note of this bombardment is worth quoting in its entirety.

1. He has a volume of fairy stories in various styles practically ready for publication. [Then a pencil note: "only 3 or 4 ready. Sil Marillion"]
2. He has a typescript of a History of the Gnomes, and stories arising from it.
3. Mr. Bliss.

4. The Lost Road, a partly written novel of which we could see the opening chapters.
5. A great deal of verse of one kind and another which would probably be worth looking at.
6. Beowulf upon which he has done as yet very little.
7. He spoke enthusiastically of a children's book called *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, illustrated by George Morrow and published by Benns some years ago. He mentioned that *The Hobbit* took him 2 or 3 years to write because he works very slowly.

Lastly in pencil, he added "The Father Christmas Letters".

My father was obviously completely at a loss. What he really wanted was another book about Hobbits. What Tolkien was offering was everything but. The material was farmed out to various readers. Susan Dagnall was given *The Lost Road* and confessed it to be "a hopeless proposition." I seem to have been given a bit of the "great deal of verse" in the form of Tom Bombadil, which I thought was "quite a good story", but suggested that he should write something quite different.

The worst gaffe of all was to send Edward Crankshaw, one of the firm's outside readers, *The Geste of Beren and Lúthien* in both prose and verse versions, without mentioning its provenance or the name of the author. Crankshaw said: "I don't know whether this is a famous geste or not, or, for that matter, whether it is authentic. I presume it is, as the unspecified versifier has included some pages of a prose version (which is far superior)." Crankshaw went on to complain of "eye-splitting Celtic names" and "something of the mad, bright-eyed beauty that perplexes all Anglo-Saxons in the face of Celtic Art." But his conclusion was damning. "The tinkling verses go on – and on, conveying almost nothing. On that count alone I am afraid this is not worth considering."

Charles Furth pencilled "what do we do?" on the report, and passed it to my father who spent much of the latter part of the year returning Tolkien's rejected offerings one by one, with conciliatory letters – usually asking for more about Hobbits to publish next year. Despite my father's unfortunate habit of quoting parts of reader's reports back to Tolkien (he did it with Crankshaw, and much later did it with me) Tolkien was remarkably resilient at the bad news. "I did not think any of the stuff I dropped on you filled the bill", and although he doubted if he had anything more to say about Hobbits he resolved to try.

But, as he remarked a little later, "my mind on the story side is really preoccupied with the 'pure' fairy stories or mythologies of the Silmarillion, into which even Mr. Baggins got dragged against my original will, and I do not think I shall be able to move much outside it – unless it's finished (and perhaps published) – which has a releasing effect." All the same, on 19 December Tolkien told Charles Furth, "I have written the first chapter of a new story about Hobbits – 'A long-expected party'."

It is interesting to see how almost all the elements of Tolkien's posthumous publications surfaced in 1937, and subsequently became submerged to await the "releasing effect" of the publication of *The Silmarillion*. Only the much-

urged sequel to *The Hobbit*, which was absorbed by, but ultimately not subdued by, the unfinished *Silmarillion*, escaped into print in his lifetime, together with the enlarged History of the Little Kingdom, which had always staunchly resisted the drag to integrate it with Middle-earth.

The year 1937 covered the whole publication of *The Hobbit*, and you have heard some of the minutely detailed problems that afflicted the production and design of the book. It is surprising, therefore, to see how trustingly Tolkien allowed his publisher to promote and market the finished product. He became involved with the American edition only because of their desire for pictures. But he neither criticised nor interfered with sales, though he was appreciative of good news when it reached him.

When Miss Dagnall proposed a series of small advertisements saying "What is a Hobbit?" he replied "my youngest boy hopes Miss Dagnall's 'teasers' will appear on lines of sandwichmen, ending up with gaudy pictorial explanation." I wonder if Christopher would still feel that way today?

When asked for useful contacts or reviewers he was unusually vague. "*The Catholic Herald* takes a mild interest in me, and would certainly review any work of mine, though I cannot guarantee the tone: it is apt to be rather highbrow in spots." C.S. Lewis – who Tolkien thought had been disgruntled when June publication proved impossible – produced splendid (anonymous) reviews in both *The Times* and the *TLS*, on the strength of which my father persuaded Bumpus, the prestigious Oxford Street bookshop, to order 50

copies. Richard Hughes, whom he had never met, wrote appreciatively. All these happenings interested Tolkien, but once the book had been made to his satisfaction he was happy to let his publishers get on with it. He noted that Parkers was the only bookshop in Oxford that displayed it; he reckoned his own college was good for half-a-dozen copies "in order to find material for teasing me"; but he never initiated enquiries about sales outside Oxford, or likely earnings, though he had every reason to wish to know.

He was also unnaturally resigned when the reprint that was rushed through before Christmas allowed no time for corrections. It was, perhaps, another example of the act of publication having a releasing effect.

Many of the characteristics that I have tried to identify from the details of a single year may also be discovered in the correspondence and recollections of subsequent decades. I believe that Tolkien changed very little. Circumstances and people changed around him, but he had pondered so long and so hard on what he wished to achieve; he was so humble yet so certain of his goals; so instinctively courteous and so unpretentious in his manner; so prone to the distractions of ill-health and domestic misfortune, yet so remorseful at his failure to overcome them; that those who worked with him – people like his publishers – were not irritated by the trail of disasters and confusions that seemed to accumulate around his, and their, well-intentioned actions; but rather were spurred to achieve that impossible perfection that Tolkien always strove towards himself, and by example made his exasperated publishers wish to achieve it too.