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J.R.R. Tolkien and Old English Studies: An Appreciation

Abstract

Some scholars argue that Tolkien did not fulfil some of his responsibilities during his thirty- four years as an Oxford Professor, in that he spent the bulk of his research time on his imaginative writings, thereby depriving scholarship of valuable works he - or other holders of his Chairs — might have produced. This paper leaves posterity to judge this issue, but in assessing Tolkien's contribution to Old English studies, it will argue that one of them - his 1936 British Academy lecture, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" - has had more influence than most of the products of his critics, and that many Old English scholars owe much to his inspiration.

Additional Keywords

Anglo-Saxon; Beowulf; Simone d'Ardenne; Middle English; Old English; Oxford; scholarship

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Keywords: Anglo-Saxon, *Beowulf*, Simone d’Ardenne, Middle English, Old English, Oxford, scholarship

“He smoked at me.” This, Ladies and Gentlemen, was the reply of an Oxford graduate to a questioner who asked him how his tutor had taught him. “He smoked at me.” J.R.R. Tolkien – Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University 1925-45, Merton Professor of English Language and Literature 1945-59, lover of pipe-weed – did indeed smoke at his pupils. But he did more than that. He helped us to resolve our difficulties. He stimulated us generously with his knowledge and his ideas. He inspired us with a love of our subject. He brought to his teaching the “humanity . . . revealed in so many aspects of him”. (The words are those of Simone d’Ardenne of Liège, one of his best-known pupils, in Salu and Farrell, 1979, p. 33.) How fortunate we were to be in the genial presence of that formidable yet humane intellect.

Professor d’Ardenne rightly spoke of his “extraordinary knowledge of languages”, noting that he “belonged to that very rare class of linguists, now becoming extinct, who like the Grimm brothers could understand and recapture the glamour of ‘the word’” (d’Ardenne, 1979, pp. 36 and 35). The writer of *The Times* obituary (3rd September 1973) related that “Tolkien used to describe himself as ‘one of the idlest boys Gilson (the Headmaster [of King Edward’s School, Birmingham]) ever had.’” “But”, he went on, “‘idleness’ in his case meant private and unaided studies in Gothic, Anglo-Saxon and Welsh, and the first attempt at inventing a language . . .” Typical examples of his power as a philologist are his papers “Chaucer as a Philologist: The Reeve’s Tale” (Tolkien, 1934a), in which he demonstrated how accurately Chaucer represented the language of the two Cambridge undergraduates John and Alleyn, who hailed from “Strother, fer in the north”, and “Sigelwara Land” (Tolkien, 1932 & 1934b), which is an exhaustive investigation of the difficult word *Sigelhearwan*

“Ethiopians”, which appears in various forms in Old English. Both his humanity and his philological power are manifest in *The Lord of the Rings*. But these are topics I leave to other speakers at this Conference.

J.R.R. Tolkien had strong views about the place of Old English in English syllabuses:

So-called Anglo-Saxon cannot be regarded merely as a root, it is already in flower. But it is a root, for it exhibits qualities and characteristics that have remained ever since a steadfast ingredient in English; and it demands therefore at least some first-hand acquaintance from every serious student of English speech and English letters. This demand the Oxford School has up to now always recognized, and has tried to meet.

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 22)

I am in complete agreement with this and with the following observation about philology:

Philology was part of my job, and I enjoyed it. I have always found it amusing. But I have never had strong views about it. I do not think it necessary to salvation. I do not think it should be thrust down the throats of the young, as a pill, the more efficacious the nastier it tastes.

(Tolkien, 1979, pp. 17)

But I am puzzled by what followed:

I do not think that it should be thrust down throats as a pill, because I think that if such a process seems needed, the sufferers should not be here, at least not studying or teaching English letters. Philology is the foundation of humane letters; “misology” is a disqualifying defect or disease.

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 17)

My puzzlement arises from the fact that the English

syllabuses in operation in Oxford in the 1950s and 1960s, in whose creation J.R.R. Tolkien played a leading role, demanded a knowledge of Old English sound changes which did in fact require tutors to thrust the pill of philology – in the pejorative sense of the word – down their pupils' throats when there was no need to do so. It is not misology to oppose the unnecessary teaching of sound changes to first year undergraduates. It is common sense. In 1941, H. M. Chadwick of Cambridge, opposing such syllabuses, rhetorically asked:

What would be thought of a Latin course which took no account of ancient Rome, or indeed of any question except the phonetic process by which – in later times – the word “homo” became “uomo” or “homme”?

(Chadwick, 1941, p. ix)

As I said in the other place, “this was to be sure somewhat below the belt. But it was not a complete caricature of the atmosphere which prevailed at Oxford when I came up to Merton in 1952” (Mitchell, 1992, p. 13). This atmosphere, I am glad to say, no longer prevails.

The part played by J.R.R. Tolkien in the development of the English School is to be discussed in this morning's panel “Tolkien and Oxford University”. Three things of importance, however, demand mention here. The first, his attitude to Old English, has already received it. The second is his continuing and justified opposition to the still prevailing hostility between what he described as “the bogeys *Lang* and *Lit*”. He saw this division as false and dangerous, a smouldering fire of which he said: “It would have been better if it had never been kindled” (Tolkien, 1979, pp. 23-24). The third is research. To older generations of academics like myself, it seems that teaching now counts for nothing, that research is increasingly the only criterion of success, and that the good teacher without publications is damned. J.R.R. Tolkien saw the writing on this wall well before his retirement. He had met people who “took to research like otters to swimming” and recognised the existence of “natural researchers . . . [who] knew what they wanted to do” (Tolkien, 1979, p. 21). But he expressed more than disquiet about the general run of research in the Oxford English School, referring to

activities, which have in recent years shown such rapid growth, forming what one might call our “hydroponic” department. A term which, I fear, I only know from science-fiction, in which it seems to refer to the cultivation of plants without soil in enclosed vehicles far removed from this world.

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 19)

How right he was! He would have approved the verdict of a Texan scholar that “the average PhD thesis is nothing but the transference of bones from one graveyard to another”. Fortunately, he did not live to see the time when the jibe could be extended to much of the work churned out by academics in English Schools or Departments throughout the world. It may have been this doubt about the value of research which resulted in the one act of academic casualness on his part of which I am personally aware: his

failure in 1952 to send me to the scholar most fitted to supervise my DPhil. But it was more probably a momentary aberration. He never adopted the cavalier attitude shown by his predecessor in the Merton Chair who, after being told by the young New Zealander who was to be J.R.R. Tolkien's successor in that Chair of his intention to read Schools rather than to do research, replied (the story goes) along these lines: “Young man, what makes you think that your decision is of any conceivable interest to me?”

On the contrary, he exuded warm friendliness to all he met, a characteristic pleasantly revealed in the story of how he moved into 21 Merton Street in March 1972, “typically”, as Humphrey Carpenter put it, “making friends with the three removal men and riding with them in their pantechicon from Bournemouth to Oxford” (Carpenter, 1977, p.253). His pupils all felt this friendliness. I have always thought it strange that the editors of the *Studies* presented to him on his seventieth birthday did not include any reference to his qualities as a man; the book starts with W.H. Auden's poem “A Short Ode to a Philologist” and moves from there to an article on “The Old English Epic Style” (Davis and Wrenn, 1962). Those who know Oxford will perhaps be less surprised at this reticence than those who do not. But I am sure that I wrote for many in the letter of 8 September 1989 in which I accepted Christina Scull's invitation to give this talk:

I am indeed conscious of the debt I owe to Professor Tolkien for the stimulus of seminal ideas which I received from his writings, his lectures, and in personal correspondence and conversation. I am also aware that I am not alone in this, for Tolkien was very generous with his ideas to those who sat at his feet. If I am in Oxford in August 1992 (and I hope to be), I would be very willing to acknowledge this in a brief contribution to your Conference.

Let me now fulfil this promise on behalf of myself and all those interested in Old English.

First, there is the elusive question of what J.R.R. Tolkien did by personal contact. Here I cannot speak for others; I can merely point to the many scholars who acknowledge a personal debt to him and from there go on to relate the story of how one of his successors in the Rawlinson and Bosworth Chair of Anglo-Saxon was wont to tell his audience to read a certain book and then to say, “This much-used and praised work bears on its title-page the name of X. But everybody knows that it was dictated by Tolkien.” This was, no doubt, an exaggeration. But it does underline how generous Tolkien was with his ideas.

Second, I consider what J.R.R. Tolkien did by his Oxford lectures for undergraduates and graduates; in his day, there were no formal classes in research methods and resources for graduate students working in Old and Middle English. He himself, in his Valedictory Address, confessed his “ineffectiveness as a lecturer” (Tolkien, 1979, p. 16). He spoke quickly and was not always audible; connoisseurs of what he had to say soon learnt to arrive early and get seats in the first few rows. He sometimes spoke above his audience. He was apt to veer into enthusiastic discussion of points not

central to his theme. But his love of the subject was always apparent and those who listened attentively gleaned much. Rapid delivery, however, was not apparent in one particular area, for he was wont to repeat the very necessary warning that most people today read Old English poetry too fast, thereby concealing the subtle semantic links and losing the music. (In this, they are not helped by the prevailing use of modern punctuation by editors of Old English poetry.) To hear J.R.R. Tolkien recite – or better, perform – Old English poetry was an unforgettable experience. The point is tellingly made in two tributes quoted by Carpenter:

As one former pupil, the writer J.I.M. Stewart, expressed it: “He could turn a lecture room into a mead hall in which he was the bard and we were the feasting, listening guests.” Another who sat in the audience at these lectures was W. H. Auden, who wrote to Tolkien many years later: “I don’t think I have ever told you what an unforgettable experience it was for me as an under-graduate, hearing you recite *Beowulf*. The voice was the voice of Gandalf.”

(Carpenter, 1977, p. 133)

He also had a gift for the vivid and evocatory phrase. He characterised a Victorian rendering of a line of *Beowulf* – “ten timorous trothbreakers together” – as reminiscent of “the two tired toads that tried to trot to Tetbury”. He pictured the Anglo-Saxon poet as a man filling in the half-lines of his poem with blocks of different colours, repeating himself with variation and advance. He saw, in the words of the *Exodus* poet (l. 43), *hleahorsmidum handa* “the hands of the laughter-smith” fashioning a pattern with his hands on the harp as he recited a poem, just as a blacksmith fashions a delicate piece of metalwork. Inspirational remarks – and sometimes valuable pearls – regularly dropped from his lips for those who were alert enough, and near enough, to catch them. Recently, when discussing a book by Daniel Donoghue (Donoghue, 1987), I recalled one such example:

Even more exciting to me was his [Donoghue’s] verdict on *Exodus*: “It may not be too fanciful to see these features in *Exodus* as a fossilized, literary preservation of a poem originally composed orally and transmitted by word of mouth” (p. 103). This carried me back thirty-five years to a room in the Examination Schools at Oxford where I strained to hear Tolkien, whose lectures were like a badly presented and served Cordon Bleu meal, and scribbled what I could catch about the *Exodus* poet:

If we have anything left by Cædmon apart from the *Hymn*, it is *Exodus* . . . marvellous word pictures . . . too excitable . . . at the Red Sea he just foams . . . if he’d only stood back, heard it from the top of the hill, he’d have done better . . . great scene . . . he’s there . . . what happens? . . . blows up like a bullfrog!

(Mitchell, 1988, p. 340)

On a larger scale, J.R.R. Tolkien’s own lecture notes (and sometimes those taken by his pupils) have resulted in the production of two posthumous books which bear his name – *The Old English Exodus: Text, Translation, and Commentary*,

edited by Joan Turville-Petre, and *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, edited by Alan Bliss.

Third, I ask what J.R.R. Tolkien did for Old English studies by his publications and public lectures. I have already spoken of the article entitled *Sigelwara Land*. He contributed the section on “Philology: General Works” to *The Year’s Work in English Studies* for 1923, 1924, and 1925. In these he showed the grasp of a master. One illustration, which contains a cautionary tale, must suffice: his comments on Eduard Sievers’ article “Ziele und Wege der Schallanalyse” [Aims and Methods of Sound Analysis], published in 1924 (Tolkien, 1926, p. 34 fn. 3 & pp. 40-4). Here Sievers’ thesis was that “motorics” – those who possessed the necessary qualities in their motor nerves – were capable of distinguishing the “personal curves” (*Personalkurve*) and the “voice quality or style” (*Stimmart*) of different authors and that these characteristics enabled Sievers to detect that certain lines in the poem *Genesis A* were composed by Cædmon. The problem was that, while no other scholar was able to claim that he possessed these qualities and was therefore able to test Sievers’ conclusion, there was great reluctance to condemn him out of hand because some thirty years earlier he had dramatically been proved right in a controversy about the poem *Genesis B*. In 1887, Henry Bradley wrote thus:

Professor Sievers, who was the first to call attention to the facts, has endeavoured to prove that this portion of the “Genesis” is a translation of an Old-Saxon poem by the author of the “Heliand”. His principle argument is that several words and idioms characteristic of this passage are good Old-Saxon, but are found nowhere else in Anglo-Saxon. It is needless to say that the judgement of this distinguished scholar is deserving of the highest respect; but his conclusion appears to be open to grave objection. We must remember that the continental Saxons were evangelised by English missionaries; and, as Professor Stephens has forcibly urged, it is highly improbable that an ancient and cultured church like that of England should have adopted into its literature a poem written by a barbarian convert of its own missions. Moreover, Professor Sievers’ linguistic arguments are not of overwhelming force.

(Bradley in Stephen and Lee, 1908, p. 651)

Later, however, he was forced to recant:

Several distinguished scholars endeavoured, by various complicated hypotheses, to account for the peculiar features of the passage without accepting the seemingly paradoxical theory of Sievers. The matter might have remained till this day in dispute, but in 1894 Professor Zangemeister of Heidelberg discovered among the manuscripts of the Vatican some leaves of parchment containing not only some portions of the *Heliand*, but fragments of an Old Low German poetical version of the story of Genesis, among which were twenty-five lines of the original postulated by Sievers for the Old English poem. After this discovery, it was no longer possible to doubt that the interpolated passage

of the Old English paraphrase was of continental origin. (Bradley, 1920, p. 12)

So scholars were understandably reluctant to condemn too readily what C. L. Wrenn called "the *soi-disant* scientific work of one of the very greatest of philologists" (Wrenn, 1946, p. 3). Working within this inevitable limitation and stressing that "a non-motoric, and even a potential but uninstructed motoric, can clearly not successfully criticise this work" (Tolkien, 1926, p. 42), J.R.R. Tolkien described "with diffidence" as he put it, "what appears to be the kernel of the matter" (Tolkien, 1926, p. 41). Many will wish that they could crystallize a difficult argument in difficult German with such lucid diffidence. He then perceptively drew attention to a major weakness:

None the less, and possibly through lack of comprehension, one cannot help feeling doubts as to the view of the manner in which, say, poems are composed, which appears implicit in the argument . . . Indeed, the assumption which appears to be made throughout that written composition is virtually identical with unpremeditated speech, and is patient of the same analysis, causes one much uneasiness. This uneasiness increases when these methods are applied to other languages than the investigator's own, and to the monuments of dead languages, or the past stages of living ones.

(Tolkien, 1926, pp. 42-3)

His conclusion was a brilliant warning which ought to be heeded today by many practitioners of modern linguistics:

A suspension of judgement is inevitable until we can have opportunity of instruction in a more direct manner; condemnation out of hand merely because these two lectures read at first as nonsense is not called for by the desert of Sievers, or of his only less distinguished following. But neither is submission without understanding. The attitude, frequently to be observed in current German philological writings, that allows Sievers to be quoted as to the light his methods throw upon this or that form, while the quoter seems to remain unable to follow the process or to check the results, can only be called unhealthy; a dictatorship of this esoteric sort is not good, even if it dictate the truth.

(Tolkien, 1926, pp. 43-4)

Turning now to more specifically literary publications and letters, I salute in passing, because of the pressure of time, two items. First, his memorable Prefatory Remarks to C. L. Wrenn's revision of John R. Clark Hall's prose translation of *Beowulf*, which discusses both "Translation and Words" and "Metre" and ends with this verdict on *Beowulf*: "It may not be, at large or in detail, fluid or musical, but it is strong to stand: tough builder's work of true stone" (Tolkien, 1950, p. xliii). Second, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's son" (Tolkien, 1953, pp. 1-18), which – along with discussions of the issues involved in interpreting the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* and of the keyword *ofermod* – offers us a dramatic poem in Modern English in

which we are told how the body of the dead leader Beorhtnoth was found among the slain and brought from the battlefield to the monastery of Ely. But our loudest notes of praise must be for his 1936 British Academy Lecture "*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*" (Tolkien, 1937). In all three of these, we see J.R.R. Tolkien, in his own Valedictory words, trying "to awake *liking*, to communicate delight in those things that I find enjoyable" (Tolkien, 1979, p. 18).

Trying – and succeeding. The Greenfield and Robinson *Bibliography* records seventy items on "Literary Interpretations" of *Beowulf* before J.R.R. Tolkien's lecture and two-hundred-and-fifty between its publication and the end of 1972 (Greenfield and Robinson, 1980, pp. 176-89). I dare not guess how many items have appeared in the twenty years since then. But that lecture was seminal. J.R.R. Tolkien may not have produced "the first effective defense of the structure of the poem as a whole" as one critic argued.¹ However, I have no hesitation in repeating what I wrote in 1963 in a "withered nosegay of an article . . . my personal Festschrift" for J.R.R. Tolkien entitled "'Until the Dragon Comes . . .': Some Thoughts on *Beowulf*" (1963, p. 126):

. . . that *Beowulf* is now viewed rather more as a poem and rather less as a museum for the antiquarian, a sourcebook for the historian, or a gymnasium for the philologist, is due in large measure to Professor Tolkien's famous British Academy Lecture of 1936 "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*".

It is fun to read. It is also a stylistic education, an intellectual challenge, a literary experience, and (for those who have ears to hear) a moral lesson. It ends with this verdict on the poem *Beowulf*:

Yet it is in fact written in a language that after many centuries has still essential kinship with our own, it was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal – until the dragon comes. (Tolkien, 1937, p. 36)

He expanded this in 1963 in a treasured private letter:

[*Beowulf*] died in sorrow, fearing God's anger. But God is merciful. And to you, now young and eager, death will also come one day; but you have hope of Heaven. If you use your gifts as God wills. *Bruc ealles well!*

(Mitchell, 1988, p. 53)

All this does not mean that I agree with every opinion he expressed. I do not agree that Beorhtnoth's action in allowing the Danes to cross the causeway was an "act of pride and misplaced chivalry" (Tolkien, 1953, p. 1); a good case can be made out for the view that it was his duty to bring the Danes to battle. I do not agree that *Beowulf*, in his fight with the dragon, was similarly guilty of excessive pride and chivalry (Tolkien, 1953, pp. 13-18 and Mitchell 1988, pp. 8-9). I am inclined to detect what I describe as "a tendency towards over-sentimental identification" in his

¹ Jerome Mandel; see Stanley, 1990, pp. 379-80.

view that the Hengest of *Beowulf* is “very probably the Hengest who led the first Germanic invasion of Britain” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 338). And I find it hard to subscribe wholeheartedly to his view that lines 180a-88 of *Beowulf* are suspect as altered or interpolated (Tolkien, 1937, pp. 45-7; see Stanley, 1975, pp. 44-7 & 51-2). However, I do not think such disagreements would have worried J.R.R. Tolkien. He made me think and deepened my enjoyment. The same tribute would, I think, be paid even by the most severe critics of the views on the structure of *Beowulf* he expressed in the British Academy lecture; these included his sometime tutor Kenneth Sisam, who, however, wrote that the lecture gave “a general view of *Beowulf* as poetry, with a fineness of perception and elegance of expression that are rare in this field” (Sisam, 1965, p. 20).

Such then were the contributions to Old English studies of a man who, in them, displays the qualities which he himself praised in his poem on W.H. Auden:

Woruldbúendra sum bið wōðbora,
giedda giffæst; sum bið gearuwyrdig,
tyhtend getyngre torhte mæðleð;
sum bið bóca gléaw, on bréosthorde
wisdóm haldeð, worn fela geman
ealdgesægena þæra þe úðwitan
fróde gefrugnon on fyrndagum;

...

Among the people of earth one has poetry in him,
fashions verses with art; one is fluent in words,
has persuasive eloquence sound and lucid;
one is a reader of books and richly stores
his mind with memory of much wisdom
and legends of old that long ago
were learned and related by loremasters;

...

(Tolkien, 1967, pp. 96-7)

But one question remains to be asked: What could he have done if his attention had not been fixed elsewhere? Anyone who was actually taught by him or taught at Oxford while he was a professor there cannot avoid thinking of the intuitive hints he did not follow up, of the ideas to which he alone could have done justice, of the books and articles he planned but did not write. The edition of *Exodus* published posthumously under the editorship of Joan Turville-Petre (Tolkien, 1981) gives a glimpse of what we have lost. His edition of *The Wanderer* never came out; it would have been greatly different from but not necessarily superior to that produced by his friends and pupils Tom Dunning and Alan Bliss. His verse translation of *Beowulf* was never published . . . The catalogue could be extended even without reference to Middle English. Contributory factors to his failure to publish such works have been adduced. They include the administrative work expected of a professor (Carpenter, 1977, pp. 135-7), the tedious burden of examining (d’Ardenne, 1979, p. 34 and Carpenter, 1977, pp. 136 and 138) – neither of these was his alone – and the fact that he was a perfectionist (Salu & Farrell, 1979, pp. 14-15 and Carpenter, 1977, p. 138). But the major factor was that revealed in Carpenter’s description of Professor Simone

d’Ardenne’s 1951 dilemma: “She realised sadly that collaboration with him was now impossible, for his mind was entirely on his stories” (Carpenter, 1977, pp. 140-1).

There are or have been those who think that J.R.R. Tolkien did not fulfil his research responsibilities during his thirty-four years as an Oxford professor and who argue that, since he could have achieved so much more than lesser mortals, Anglo-Saxon and Middle English studies would have been more in his debt if he had stuck to his scholarly last instead of writing *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the other works, which have made him admired by so many throughout the world. One such was the colleague who, when I asked him outside Blackwells in 1954 whether he had read the newly-published *The Fellowship of the Ring*, replied savagely, “No! When he writes a book on Old or Middle English, I’ll read it.” Such men challenge or have challenged the wisdom of electing him. J.R.R. Tolkien himself signalled his own awareness of such challenges. With his habitual generosity, he spoke in his Valedictory Address of his astonishment “at the time of my first election . . . a feeling that has never quite left me” (Tolkien, 1979, p. 16); of “1925 when I was untimely elevated to the *stól* of Anglo-Saxon” (Tolkien, 1979, p. 32); and said:

If we consider what Merton College and what the Oxford School of English owes to the Antipodes, to the Southern Hemisphere, especially to scholars born in Australia and New Zealand, it may well be felt that it is only just that one of them should now ascend an Oxford chair of English. Indeed it may be thought that justice has been delayed since 1925.

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 31)

This was a reference to the controversial election of 1925 to the Anglo-Saxon chair, in which J.R.R. Tolkien defeated his sometime tutor the New Zealander Kenneth Sisam – on, persistent rumour has it, the casting vote of the Vice-Chancellor. There are those who think or have thought that, if the decision had gone the other way, Old and Middle English scholarship might have been able to have its cake and eat it, to have not only the works of scholarship Sisam could not produce because of his full-time commitment to the Oxford University Press but also J.R.R. Tolkien’s imaginative writings.

Here two points must be made. First, J.R.R. Tolkien’s scholarly output, even excluding the posthumous work, exceeds that of at least some of his critics in quality and sometimes indeed in quantity. His 1936 British Academy Lecture has had more influence than most of their products. His stimulating influence on his pupils cannot be measured. (Nor, to be fair, can that which Sisam would have exercised.) Second it is only right to say that this dispute is not just one of ACADEMICS v. LITERARY ENTHUSIASTS. Jessica Yates, in discussing the relationship between J.I.M. Stewart’s Dr. Timbermill and J.R.R. Tolkien, writes:

At a party, a Professor gives Patullo his opinion of Timbermill: “A sad case . . . A notable scholar, it seems. Unchallenged in his field. But he ran off the rails somehow and produced a long mad book – a kind

of apocalyptic romance." Sounds familiar?

(Yates, 1992, p. 25²)

It certainly does. But there are literary as well as academic unenthusiasts; they include or have included Edmund Wilson, Edwin Muir, Philip Toynbee, and Michael Moorcock.³

I leave posterity to adjudicate on the election issue and to decide on the abiding value of J.R.R. Tolkien's works of imagination. Like Beowulf, he lived a good life, doing what he felt compelled to do, choosing not to do what some critics thought he should do, achieving fame. Various epitaphs can be adduced:

Oxford is as much the richer for having produced Tolkien as for having produced Lewis Carroll

(Grassi, 1973);

. . . a lot of us are grateful for

What J. R. R. Tolkien has done

As bard to Anglo-Saxon

(Auden, 1962, p. 12);

Scholar and Storyteller

(Salu and Farrell, 1979, title);

I am afraid that what I would do is what I have usually done

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 17);

Þū þē self hafast

dǣdum gefremed, þæt þīn dōm lyfað

āwa tō aldre. Alwalda þec

gōde forgylde . . . !

You yourself have accomplished by your deeds that your fame will live for ever. May the Ruler of All requite you with good . . . !

(*Beowulf*, ll. 953b-95)

In 1992, the centenary of his birth, we leave him and his wife to the *sōdfæstra dōm* "the judgement [reserved] for the righteous" (*Beowulf* l. 2820b):

REQUIESCANT IN PACE

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² The quotation is from Stewart, 1976.

³ See *The Times Saturday Review*, December 28 1991, pp. 30-3.

⁴ This volume was a re-issue of volumes first published in 1886 and 1887.

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