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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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Baggins Remembered

Abstract

Reprinted from *The Hobbiton Advertiser*, for 15 Astron 1521 S.R.

Baggins Remembered

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John Ellison¹

The events which are taking place all over the Shire during the Baggins Centenary Year will reach their peak during the month of Wedmath. This will be the Baggins Centenary Conference, to be held in Hobbiton for one week beginning on the 26 Wedmath. It is being jointly organised by the Baggins Society and the Mythopoeic Society of Tol Eressëa. Papers will be read by distinguished Baggins scholars and other aficionados, dealing with the lives and work of the late Bilbo and the late Frodo Baggins; their work as philologists, linguists and scholars of the early history and legends of Middle-earth will be covered, as well, of course, as the celebrated “fantasy” writings, the romances and stories which have made their names household words in the Shire, and spread their fame across the length and breadth of Middle-earth. A banquet will, obviously, feature as a principal highlight; and among the numerous other special events we may mention the pony tours being arranged to places, such as Crickhollow, which have special Baggins associations. The Mayor will, in addition, be hosting a number of “At Holes”, in Bag End itself.

The Took and Thain, the Master of Buckland, and sundry other distinguished guests from near and far-off will be attending for all or part of the Conference; those who have registered for it, we are told, comprise not only Hobbits from the Shire and Bree, and Elves returning from the Uttermost West, but Men and Dwarves hailing from far-distant lands in Middle-earth, and even a few reformed Orcs as well. In this latter connection, we hear that the organisers found themselves facing a most awkward impasse presenting itself in the shape of the well-known edict of King Elessar, S.R. 1427, prohibiting Men from entering the Shire. However, officials of the King’s civil service in Minas Tirith came to the rescue, it seems, at the eleventh hour, by devising a highly ingenious solution to the problem. As, owing to a curious legal anomaly no such prohibition affects those Orcs who have registered and propose to attend the Conference, all Men who declare their intention of coming are being sent an application form on receipt of their registration, whereby they can apply for temporary legal status as Orcs for the duration of the festivities. The provision of accommodation for the large number of guests expected to attend is, of course, the organising committee’s principal headache, though one of many. We understand that the residential places at Keyhole which has been taken over for the duration

of the Conference, are now almost fully booked.

It all began, of course, one warm summer afternoon as Bilbo Baggins sat in the garden at Bag End long ago, engaged in the tedious chore of marking student’s examination papers in Elvish, and encountered, in the midst of them, a blank sheet of paper. What would he have thought, we ask ourselves, could he have foreseen the outcome of the simple sentence that he idly scribbled on the sheet: “In a college in Oxford there lived a don”?

“I didn’t know who dons were, or where Oxford was”, he later wrote, “so I thought I had better find out.” And so, as everybody knows, he proceeded to write down, late in the long evenings at Bag End, as a diversion from his serious scholastic labours, the first of his Middle-earth-famous tales, *The Don*, set in an imaginary land called “Britain”, most of whose inhabitants are Men, in the midst of whom dwell a race called “Dons”, who wear square black caps, and dress in black robes called “gowns”, and who live in a place called “Oxford”, mostly in clusters of holes called “colleges”. We have all read, or most of us have, the story of how a Don is visited one spring morning by a wizard, a wise Professor, who sends him off on an adventure far away from his comfortable college. The story goes on to tell of how he finds, with the Professor’s aid, another colony of Dons inhabiting a remote clearing in the midst of the fens in the east of Britain, of how he and thirteen other Dons journey on to reach a perilous city called “London”, where he enters a mysterious Garden and finds a magic Ring there which holds him trapped in the Garden for four days and nights, and of how a friendly Dragon he finds there helps him to escape with a share of the treasure in its cave, and of how he returns home – rich!

The Don was first read aloud by Mayor Samwise to his children – as a result of their favourable reviews of it, it was published, and the success of the venture led to the appearance of the three volumes of its successor, *The Fellowship of the Don*, *The Two Cultures* and *The Return of the Don*, (originally called *Hitler Defeated*). All these books have carried the name of Baggins far and wide over Middle-earth, and away over the Sea to the Uttermost West. They have been translated into Quenya, Sindarin and every other tongue known to Elves, Dwarves or Men. Persistent rumours of the existence of translations into the Black Speech have always been officially denied; the truth of the matter is

¹ First printed in *Oxonmoot 92 Programme Book*, The Tolkien Society and the Mythopoeic Society: Milton Keynes, 1992.

probably that the vocabulary of the B.S. is simply not large enough. Illustrations of the Baggins œuvre are, of course, a study in themselves, and an exhibition of book illustrations and dust-jackets will be one of the features of the Conference.

There have always been, of course, the few voices of dissent raised among hobbits- and elves-of-letters, the voices of those that question the relevance of the “Baggins cult”, as they describe it, condemning it as “escapist fantasy, whose only consequence is to distract hobbits from the real concerns of life as they face it in today’s Shire”, and claiming that the books portray a morally simplistic world where the “goodies”, merely fight it out with the “baddies”, winning out, of course, in the end. It will be remembered that one of the earliest of these so-called “knocking” reviews entitled “Oo, these awful Nazis!”, came from a critic called “Edmund”, who claimed to be an Elf of Tol Eressëa. Some people have identified him with the recently late Edmund Sandyman, “Cap’n Ted”, as he was known to his employees in his lifetime, who never ceased from excoriating “the Baggins cult” for its part, as he saw it, in retarding the industrial development of the Shire and stifling its entrepreneurial spirit. We shall no doubt hear somewhat less of this as a result of Cap’n Ted’s demise following his

unexplained disappearance from his private barge on the Brandywine river, and the subsequent revelations regarding the financial catastrophes overtaking his business enterprises inside and outside the Shire.

At least one business enterprise is very far from any such fate. This is the well-known publishing house of HarperBaggins, which today announces the publication of volume 10 of *The History of Britain* series; Frodo Baggins’ scholarly reconstruction of the genesis and development of the whole legendarium of *The Matter of Britain*, from its first beginnings: this, the latest volume, is to have the original title, *Hitler Defeated*. This great enterprise provides the best answer to those colleagues of the late Bilbo and the late Frodo Baggins who complained that the time and energy they lavished on the writing of *The Don* and its successors, and the creation of *The Matter of Britain*, would have been better spent on the writing of learned articles and longer works on Elvish linguistics and related topics, and who disregarded or pooh-poohed the invention of the imaginary languages of “Greek”, “Latin”, “English”, “French”, “German”, “Italian” and “Russian”, which are such a prominent feature of their imaginary world. Clearly the material exists for many successful Baggins Conferences in future years, and is being added to year by year.