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Professor J.R.R. Tolkien: A Personal Memoir

Abstract

Personal reminiscences, including how Tolkien asked Havard to become his personal physician and how Lewis usurped a party at Tolkien's house.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Biography; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Personal reminiscences

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PROFESSOR J.R.R. Tolkien

A Personal Memoir

R.E. Havard

My first meeting with the Professor, or 'Tollers' as we all called him, must have been early in 1935 in C.S. Lewis' rooms in Magdalen College, Oxford, during one of the Inklings sessions, to which Lewis had invited me. I gradually became aware of a smallish slender man settled in the depths of an armchair, with a pipe always in his mouth. He spoke relatively little. It was Lewis and Dyson who were in perpetual competition, if not conflict, in the mutual struggle to hold the floor. 'Tollers' contributions were usually brief, but witty, and to the point, so far as they could be heard. His speech, always rapid and indirect, presented inspired difficulties as it escaped between his pipe and closed lips. To quote his *Times* obituary, 3rd September 1973, "He has been described as 'the best and worst talker in Oxford' — worst for the rapidity and indistinctness of his speech, and best for the presentation, learning, humour and "race" of what he said." These qualities became quickly apparent during the Thursday evening sessions in Magdalen. Apparent also, but never paraded, was the depth of feeling behind his Roman Catholic religious convictions. Such was my introduction to Tolkien before he became the world figure as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. I was impressed by the breath of his learning and the sharp edge of his wit, also by the way that neither was ever paraded or used to inflict pain. I was in awe of his standing as a Professorial Fellow of Merton, and soon became aware of his international reputation as a philologist, and also that, in spite of this, he was extremely good company. But we were, I felt, worlds apart in outlook, apart from our common religion.

So it was with surprise, and with much pleasure, that I heard him ask me to become his family doctor. It was about the time of the '39-'45 war, but I forget the exact date. He was a courteous, considerate patient, as were most, but not all, of those who came to me, or called on me.

He lived in Northmoor Road when I first came to know him, and I remember the occasion of a party — was it for his daughter Priscilla's 21st birthday? — when Lewis and others with myself went there to help celebrate it. The party was not a total success, as Lewis, in his overwhelming way, rather took charge of it, and Tolkien, looking back on it some years later, complained to me that Lewis had altogether spoiled it for him. However I was unaware of these undercurrents at the time.

As his family grew up and gradually separated, he moved to smaller quarters. His first move was to Holywell and later in March 1953 to a smaller house, 56 Sandfield Road. I lived at the time in 28 Sandfield Road, so that I saw a little more of him. He used to attend the same church, and I often drove him home and we sat in the car chatting for half an hour or so outside his house. He had become, early in 1943, godfather to my youngest son David, to whom he was very generous. This provided a further link between us.

In the course of 1968 the Tolkiens moved to a bungalow in Bouremouth and I have a letter from him dated August 9th describing some of the misfortunes attending the move. I also retired from Practice in September 1968 and went to live in the west of the Isle of Wight, a few miles across Bournemouth Bay from Bournemouth, easily visible on a clear day. But this narrow stretch of sea is a barrier to social intercourse, and I ceased to see much of the Tolkiens. I can remember only two visits to the bungalow in Lakeside Road, which had an attractive outlet at the back to Branksome Chine, leading down towards the sea. I remember nothing of what we talked about.

When Mrs Tolkien died suddenly on November 29th 1971, the Professor moved back to Oxford in March 1972 into a College home on Merton Street. I saw him only once during this short period. He gave me lunch in the Eastgate Hotel nearby, appearing not greatly changed from the man I have known before. His room was lined with books, his floor was covered with manuscript in various stages of completion, his mind and conversation were filled with complaints of settling down to it. He was surprised and pleased by the phenomenal success of *The Lord of the Rings*, but chiefly because it meant he was able to provide adequately for the surviving members of the family.

I am well aware of the scappy and unsatisfactory nature of this memoir. It is hard to add anything to the well researched and penetrating 'life' by Humphrey Carpenter written in 1977, and supplemented by the publication of the Professor's letters in 1983, edited by Mr Carpenter, and assisted by Christopher Tolkien.

In conclusion I would add that my experience has resembled or echoed Nerd Nyren's, who woke up one day, he tells us, to find himself famous. I woke up one day to find two of my friends famous, in many ways a happier discovery.