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## Roger Lancelyn Green: A Personal Memoir

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## Roger Lancelyn Green: A Personal Memoir

### Abstract

Personal reminiscences of the author's interactions with Roger Lancelyn Green

### Additional Keywords

Green, Roger Lancelyn—Personal reminiscences

# Roger Lancelyn Green

A Personal Memoir by Jessica Yates

The official obituaries have been published, and this memoir will not duplicate them, though at its conclusion I will sum up the literary career of a scholar whose achievement in research and communicating knowledge and love of the ancient myths and legends was unique.

For a few years before the illness which forced first of all a period to his literary career and then his untimely death, I had an occasional correspondence with Roger Lancelyn Green. Naturally as a student of children's literature I was aware of his eminence in the field, and of his many books which were stocked in the school library where I worked, especially the myths and legends he edited and rewrote for Puffin. In February 1977 I received an invitation to attend an evening called "Facets of Lewis" on 2nd March 1977 – the same day that the Tolkien exhibition opened at the National Book League.

It was my policy as Secretary to attempt to recruit scholars in the field to join the [British Tolkien] Society, or at least to draw their attention to our existence, and also to print any specialist material they might have written on Tolkien. I therefore wrote to Roger Lancelyn Green to introduce myself, and sent him various comments on C.S. Lewis – for instance, that I have discovered that Narnia is a real town in Italy – and said that I hoped he would autograph my copy of his biography of Lewis which already carried Walter Hooper's autograph. A week later I received a postcard from Mr. Green – his typical method of correspondence – written in tiny but readable hand, thanking me for my letter, looking forward to our meeting, and saying that he had meant to join the Tolkien Society months ago, had been rather unwell.

Accordingly we met and I secured his autograph. As well as RLG, the other speaker were Hooper, Barfield, and Swann, and there was a special treat; the evening was held to launch the new Lewis book *The Dark Tower*, and the eminent actor Robert Eddison, who is related to E.R. Eddison, read extracts from that, and from *The Screwtape Letters*.

I next wrote to RLG in April, sending him a copy of a "Lewis-bashing" article, and inviting him to our Chester dinner as an ordinary member – guest speaker was Michael Tolkien. He wrote back to apologize as continuing illness made the journey impossible. Continuing:

"I have so many happy memories of 'Tollers' – from the first lecture of his that I attended as an undergraduate at about the time when *The Hobbit* was published, via many meetings with C.S. Lewis and the 'B&B' Inklings,

to the last glorious evening the year before he died, when we sat up talking until 2 in the morning...

I should have joined your Society sooner – but one feels an odd reluctance when it's someone who has been a personal friend. Please keep me posted re. further meetings. Yours very sincerely, Roger Lancelyn Green.

The next time I met him was in the summer of 1978, at the launch party for the first edition of *Twentieth Century Children's Writers* at the Children's Book Center, Kensington (Now there's a second edition, published in 1984). I was proud of my essay on Tolkien, among others; RLG had been one of the 25 advisers, whereas I had just been a contributor, and it is pleasant to think that he might have approved my application to write the Tolkien essay. At the party he asked me to find out something for him. Several years before he had been asked to write the introduction for a lost SF classic entitled *Lieut. Gulliver Jones: his vacation*, by Edwin Lester Arnold, for the Master SF series edited by Aldiss and Harrison for the NEL. He had written the introduction and heard nothing more. Had the book been published yet? Some time later I found the book in DTWAGE and posted him a copy, together with one of his books, *The Land Beyond the North*, which I hoped he would autograph. He wrote back enclosing the autographed book, and letting me know that Brian Aldiss had got him his fee for the introduction a while back, but he just hadn't been sent his review copy. So that was all right. He also pointed out that in the original edition of the book, the hero's name was spelt "Gullivar", but the NEL edition had changed it to "Gulliver" throughout.

He added that he had bought *The Inklings* and enjoyed it very much:

It made me very nostalgic for the days when Lewis would come over to join me in the Bodleian and whisper: "King's Arms - 12.30!" and Tolkien and Dyson would join us there. . . . And letter, many a Tues. - later Monday – meeting with most of the other Inklings at the "B&B" . . . I felt more and more how fortunate I was to be welcomed into that set.

He apologized for his "crabbed writing" because of a minor illness which had left his right hand slightly paralyzed, and sent "All good wishes to you and the Tolkien Society."

My last exchange of letters with him came in early 1980. I had just agreed to review Martha Sammon's *A Guide through Narnia*. I was surprised that the Chief of Police in *The Lion...* was named Fenris Ulf instead of Maugrim [as in the British editions], and I wrote to RLG asking him if he knew which was the original name and which was the alteration, and noting that the wolf was also called Fenris

Ulf in the cartoon film. I had another postcard, again apologizing for delay and illness. He didn't actually know the answer. Having also written to Walter Hooper, I heard from him that Lewis had changed this for the American edition, and that he didn't know why because the publisher's files were lost. (Later, when I got Paul Ford's *Companion to Narnia*, I had more help from the entries for Fennis Ulf and World Ash tree, but we have to speculate why Lewis made these changes as he left no record.)

The last time I saw this gentle man was at the gala performance of *Song of the Lion* on 15th January 1981, at the Westminster Theatre, a real gathering of Inklings and their friends. There was a marvelous reception with speeches. Priscilla Tolkien and Walter Hooper were there, and Roger Lancelyn Green, though obviously frail, had made the effort to come. Alas, we only exchanged a brief greeting, and he may not have recognized me, so I did not force a conversation upon him.

And now he is dead, untimely so. His main loves were Andrew Lang, Lewis Carroll, Sherlock Holmes and C.S. Lewis, as far as special authors and characters go, so he did not have energy left over for Tolkien studies. Had he been as vigorous in body as in mind, we might have heard more from him.

There is a comprehensive bibliography of his books in *20th Century Children's Writers*, but of course there are many other articles and reviews scattered about, of which I'll mention the few that I have. The introduction to *Gulliver Jones*, a survey of minor adventure stories preceding Edgar Rice Burroughs' invention of Barsoom – for Gulliver travelled to Mars before John Carter. This book, then, might have been a direct influence on Burroughs, and thus on the whole American sword-and-sorcery tradition. An essay reprinted in *Only Connect*, on "The Golden Age of Children's Books," first published in *Essays and Stories* – a

survey of the Victorian Age, and the move away from didactic literature towards delight and fantasy.

RLG was closely associated with Puffin Books, and the first two Puffin Annuals featured articles by him. In *Puffin Annual 1* there is a three page article about C.S. Lewis with a new illustration by Pauline Baynes depicting a number of Narnian characters in montage-style. There is also a full-page color photograph of Green sitting in a library alcove at home, where you can see how many Victorian and Edwardian books he owned, on bookshelves going up to the ceiling. In *Puffin Annual 2*, accompanying a double-spread portrait of Pauline Baynes' life, there is an extract from RLG's family tree, beginning with Scirard and Richard de Lancelyn from Norman times, and concluding with his three children: Scirard, Priscilla and Richard. He was actually a "lord of the manor" occupying a manor house, and managed his estate as well as carrying on a literary career. Amateur dramatics were also a feature of life at Poulton Lancelyn, and one of his sons has taken up stage management as a supplier of back-stage equipment (Lancelyn Lighting). The other, Richard, is a well-known Sherlockian in his own right.

RLG wrote from many audiences – retellings for the popular market, scholarly works on the Victorians. Even the retellings were based on scholarship – just look at the Note to *The Tale of Troy*, where he lists some of the ancient Greek sources he used. All Tolkien fans should see his *Book of Dragons*, dedicated to J.R.R. Tolkien, which includes Lewis' poem "We were talking of DRAGONS" and Tolkien's "The Hoard." *Teller of Tales* is his history of British children's literature, several times revised. His eight children's novels may still be found by specialist collectors. Now he has gone, earlier than we would have wished, but he has left the memory of a scholar who spoke to a wide audience, a researcher who shared his research in private correspondence, and who wrote as much for love as for fame and fortune. ☿

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[Editor's afternote: I wish to confirm the kindness, warmth, and erudition of Roger Lancelyn Green. I was able to meet him when I traveled to England in 1975 to see the people and places known to the Inklings. At his very kind invitation, I was able to spend the night and following day at his manor at Poulton-Lancelyn, near Liverpool on the Wirral peninsula. It was an impressive place, full of history. His upstairs library was a large room with several alcoves, with every wall covered with books from floor to ceiling, primarily on fantasy, fairy tales, and particular authors such as Burroughs, Lang, Carroll, and Doyle. The visit was both informative and very pleasant, but was cut short by a scheduled trip to Ireland. We corresponded after that, and every year he sent a special family Christmas card until his death. His passing brought sadness; his presence is missed. – G.G.]

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