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### J.R.R. Tolkien and the Journey North

#### Abstract

Analyzes the symbolic importance of directions in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Notes the pervasive Nordic influence in particular, especially in the similar symbolic attributes of North and East.

#### Additional Keywords

Cardinal Directions—Symbolism; Celtic mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; The East in J.R.R. Tolkien; Nordic culture—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Northernness in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Journeys; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Journeys

# J.R.R. Tolkien and the Journey North

Marjorie J. Burns

Tolkien's journeys are Northern journeys and follow a Northern track. In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, when Bilbo or Frodo leave their doorstep and head out into the unknown, a Nordic terrain awaits them and a Nordic array of events. Even the directions they travel (North and East and down) are the same as the gods take from Asgard on missions or quests, or on those more plebeian outings: giant-bashing sprees.

This device of emphasizing the North or of borrowing from Nordic literature is, of course, not original with Tolkien. It began with the Romantics (with their penchant for the ancient, the unsophisticated, and the energetic) and has continued as a literary focus on into the twentieth century. Before the advent of Romanticism, the North was not so highly esteemed. It was Southern and Classical ties that earned the world's respect, and so influential was this preference for the South that British convention based their nation's foundation on heroes from Rome and Troy.

But by 1892, when Tolkien was born, English popular thought had for some time been turning from the classical world. Southern tastes and southern considerations, particularly from mid-century onward, had been increasingly replaced by Northern ideals. Britain's Nordic ancestry was taken up like a banner and pointed to as indicative of all that the nation should hold in highest esteem. "Tis the hard gray weather/Breeds hard English men," Charles Kingsley wrote in his 1854 poem, "Ode to the Northeast Wind" (311-12).

What's the soft South-wester?

'Tis the ladies breeze

Bringing home their true-loves

Out of all the seas:

But the black North-easter,

Through the snowstorm hurled,

Drives our English hearts of oak

Seaward round the world.

Come, as came our fathers,

Heralded by thee,

Conquering from the eastward,

Lords by land and sea.

Come; and strong within us

Stir the Vikings' blood;

Bracing brain and sinew;

Blow, thou wind of God!

It is not just an idealization of the North that Kingsley calls for in this poem to the Viking wind; emphatic rejection of the South is called for as well. The English, who had previously down played their Northern ties, now chose to deny their Southern past, to see the South as un-English,

as decadent, feeble, and lacking in vigor or will. "Languid" is the word John Ruskin applies (174-76). Neither position is just, of course. Culturally, linguistically, racially, England's heritage is mixed; but Northern Romanticism, and that human knack of ignoring what doesn't appeal, now allowed the English to see themselves basically as Norsemen only slightly diluted in race, as Vikings only slightly tempered by time. Oddly enough, up until the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's own Celtic North was mostly ignored, being perhaps too full of fancy for the latter-day English mind. This is not to say that Celtic themes or Celtic awareness were entirely absent, but it was the Viking North, with its more acceptable and almost Calvinistic austerity, that dominated English thought, and dominated it so thoroughly that writer and social critic, William Morris, for example, took up the study of Icelandic, translated and imitated its mythology, and journeyed twice to Iceland (in 1871 and in 1873). There, this civilized and not particularly outdoorish man traveled by pony and with primitive gear across that cold, barren, and forbidding terrain.

By the twentieth century, when Tolkien began his career, Nordic idealism was at a peak. At the same time, however, Britain's awareness of its own Celtic heritage had greatly increased.<sup>1</sup> Tolkien was heir to all those who had come before. He was heir to Macpherson, whose Ossian poetry strongly inspired the Northern movement at the close of the seventeen hundreds; heir to Sir Walter Scott's popular Highland romances; and heir especially to William Morris, to Morris' Northern tales and Morris' *Icelandic Journals*. Like Morris, Tolkien studied Icelandic; like Morris, he wrote his own literature strongly based on the Icelandic world. And once again like Morris, in the midst of Nordic idealism, Tolkien somewhat reluctantly betrays a Celtic side.

Given Britain's renewed interest in the Celtic, it is perhaps surprising to realize that Tolkien in the twentieth century would continue to feel a certain ambivalence over the suitability of borrowing from Celtic settings and Celtic motifs; but in the eyes of mainstream England the Celtic revival tended to remain more an aesthetic side issue than a fitting and enduring literary concern; and Tolkien in this matter is true to his culture and age. He knew and deeply loved, for example, the fourteenth-century, Celtic *Sir Gwain and the Green Knight* and translated this tale (which centers on a northward, winter journey) into twentieth-century English; and in his original scheme for the Middle-earth cycles, Tolkien had apparently once intended to include something of that "fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic" (Carpenter 90). And yet it is far more typical of Tolkien to prefer the Nordic and deny any Celtic influence

at all. Names in *The Silmarillion*, he writes, "needless to say... are not Celtic! Neither are the tales" (Carpenter 184).

In this matter of Celtic versus Nordic, it is important to remember that purity of mythology is itself a myth. The very Eddas from which Tolkien borrowed so heavily were themselves influenced by contact with the Celts. Inevitably, whatever position Tolkien chose, the Celts would be there too, leaving their haunting and magical touch on incident, setting, character, and tone. It shows most clearly in *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly in the high elves, in their ability to live at once in both the world of spirits and the world of hobbits and men. Lothlorien, with its mystical bridging of time, is strongly Celtic in tone, as are the Dead Marshes and the Paths of the Dead in a less comfortable way. Nevertheless the Celtic is secondary, more decorative than substantive, and Tolkien's world remains primarily that of the Scandinavian/Germanic North, the North of ancient Europe and Britain at a time, we might add, when Britain, less domesticated, seemed more "Northern" itself.

To those familiar with Tolkien and his Middle-earth, there is no surprise in this. Geographically, historically, mythologically, Tolkien's fantasy world is clearly related to medieval Scandinavia and to medieval Northwest Europe. The very word "Middle-earth," and "Mirkwood" too, are terms found in the Eddas. Tolkien's dwarf names, and Gandalf's name come from there as well, as do elves and orcs and trolls and dragons and giants; skin-changers, "attercopps" riddle games, treasures, magically augmented weapons, and emphasis on the number nine. On and on it goes, all part of the "soup," to use Tolkien's own phrase, the soup of accumulated myth, legend, and motif, with a flavor distinctively North.

An important aspect of Tolkien's borrowing from the North is his attachment to the Nordic world view, to the Nordic emphasis on imminent or threatening destruction, a destruction which, in Norse mythology, appears to be in motion even at the dawn of creation, with Black Surt sitting in the fire realm, Muspell, "already waiting for the end" and the Frost Giant Ymir, "evil from the first," oozing from his armpits a sweat that gives form to humankind (Crossley-Holland 3). Here is a mythology where even the gods can die, and it leaves the reader with a vivid sense of life's cycles, with an awareness that everything comes to an end, that, though Sauron may go, the elves will fade as well.

In Tolkien's Middle-earth, this sense of inevitable disintegration is unquestionably more evident in *The Lord of the Rings* than it is in the earlier *Hobbit*, but *The Hobbit* too has its depressing note. The adventure culminates in battle, in contention for riches and power, and even back in the Shire (as the returning Bilbo learns) greed will take its toll.

This Nordic sense of doom is not, of course, difficult to understand. A geographical reality lies behind the tales.

Look, for example, at a map of Iceland. Reyjavik and the heaviest population lie to the west and south. Mountains, glaciers, volcanoes – the realm of fire and ice – lie east and to the north. It was much the same for medieval Norway. Most settlement was on the western coast and heaviest in the south; mountains, and therefore danger, lay inland and to the north. Not surprisingly, the same pattern holds in the world of Norse mythology. East is where the giants dwell, in the mountains of Jotunheim. Hel, or Niflheim, is found by journeying to the North, a concept that still exists today in the Norwegian expression "a ga nordover og ned" (to go northward and down). And this expression is not the only remnant of such thinking to have survived the arrival of Christianity. Early Christian churches were built windowless and doorless to the North (no entrance there for evil), and Nordic folklore lists water that flows from the North as an ingredient for hostile spells.

It needs to be understood that East in this mythology is also part of the Northern realm. Direction, of course, is relative, and the North is also an abstraction and more than a compass point. The North, the Viking North, has a spatial, territorial, meaning and a conceptual one as well. Spatially it is an area, a latitudinal band (if we ignore the uninhabitable polar cap), and this band across the face of the world includes a more civilized western side as well as a mountainous and barbarian East; within this terrain one may move east or south or west and still in the North. Finally, there is a meaning of "North" which is more than the sum of its directional and geographical components. This is the sense of North as Northernness, its mood or spirit or tone.

All of this translates to Middle-earth; and, in certain ways, does so more clearly in *The Hobbit* than in *The Lord of the Rings*. This is true particularly in matters of simple direction (through in either work the North seems in some ways to be that which exists in any direction outside of the Shire's domain). Danger in *The Hobbit* clearly lies to the North and East, as it does for the Nordic gods. But – and this is most important – it is there as well, "over the Edge of the Wild" (*Hobbit* 65), where heroes are made, where, at the very least, heroic qualities are tested in hobbits, dwarves, and men. Look, for example, at Bilbo, at his journey to Smaug and back. Bilbo is no Viking. He is the middle class, landed (or burrowed) hobbit gentry, the best hobbit in the Shire perhaps but nonetheless a lover of comforts and security and peace, in other words a hobbit, in other words ourselves – for hobbits, Tolkien once explained, "are just rustic English people, made small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination" but *not*, Tolkien hastened to add, "the small reach of their courage or latent power" (Carpenter 176).

We begin with security, with hobbit comfort and a hobbit frame of mind. We begin in the Shire, in a peaceful, domesticated, and agricultural world, but in a matter of three sentences Tolkien has Bilbo (and his readers as well) out of civilization and into the Northern realm.

At first they passed through hobbit-lands, a wild respectable country inhabited by decent folk, with good roads, an inn or two, and now and then a dwarf or a farmer jmlbing by on business. Then they came to lands where people spoke strangely, and sang songs Bilbo had never heard before. Now they had gone far into the Lone-lands, where there were no people left, no inns, and the roads grew steadily worse. (43)

Movement and direction in *The Lord of the Rings* are clearly more complex than they are in *The Hobbit*; but even by the end of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien w<sup>1</sup> have used the journey in multiple ways and moved us in multiple directions, "there and back again." Spatially, we move down as well as across; temporally, we seem to enter the past while moving forward in time. In fact, these basic directional movements can in some ways be most easily discerned in the earlier and simpler tale. Follow Bilbo's journey on Tolkien's map. Like Odin or Thor out of Asgard, Bilbo moves eastward and north. And -- though it shows less clearly by map -- he journeys (again like the Nordic gods) in downward directions as well. He descends into dark, discomfoting, goblin-infested holes, to Gollum's subterranean lake and Smaug's grim and fiery lair, a far cry from burrow life as he knew it in Bag End. Bilbo rides from spring to fall, from temperate valley to storm and dragon-fraught mountain, from fertile garden to a warrior's battle field, from sun and air to darkness and underground stagnation, from warmth and ease to chill, hunger, and danger, -- discomfots that rarely relent. He travels, in a sense, from the benign coziness of rural England (flavored with a pre-industrialized serenity) into a more purely Northern terrain: the medieval, Scandinavian world (touched, of course, with borrowings from Northwestern Europe and England's Celtic past).

Tolkien moves us as well from the security of childhood, from the hobbit's homogeneous Shire -- with its seemingly endless summer holiday --, and he thrusts us, along with Bilbo Baggins, into adult concerns. Bilbo moves from the settled unity of one's own kind to the multiplicity of wizards, dwarves, elves, trolls, giants, dragons, and men, altogether a rougher and more complex association. This is the forward movement, the growth direction, but to achieve this growth Tolkien also draws us backwards, for looking backwards at history and perceiving the workings of time is another way to grow. We move backwards, then, from civilization to wilderness, from the everyday into magic and mythology. And at its extreme in *The Lord of the Rings*, we are led into the more Celtic and shamanistic worlds of elf and black rider perception. Bilbo hears the songs and tales of peoples and ages past; Frodo does more; he meets their very ghosts and perceives as they perceive.

The journey east most clearly represents this journey back in time. Movement east is movement against the sun and therefore (in a manner of speaking) against the clock, so that, traveling east, we feel ourselves moved in time and direction both. We are drawn into the past, into a more

primitive world, as we are drawn eastward over the hills and plains, forests and mountains of Tolkien's Middle-earth.

To move in such a direction is to move deeper and deeper into risk, more so in *The Lord of the Rings* with its east-lying Mordor<sup>2</sup> but also in *The Hobbit* where trouble comes soon from the East, as Gandalf is quick to explain. In the East lie Tolkien's mountains, anthropomorphized, hostile, and cold. There too lies Mirkwood, "over the Edge of the Wild"; and at the East's extreme, at the very "East of East," live the briefly mentioned but clearly unsavory "wild Were-worms in the Last Desert" (31).

Eastward movement is what shows most clearly on the map; and yet the North, Northern dangers, and the party's northward turnings, are mentioned considerably more often in the text so that one feels a growing sense of Northernness even while moving further and further East, but only slightly North. "We are," says Gandalf, with typical understatement, "too far to the North and have some awkward country ahead" (101).

The North (like mountain terrain) is an easy symbol: cold, hostile, barren and as dark as death, during the wintertime. Trolls come out of the North and Goblins too, in endless, raging hoards. Beneath "the great mountain Gundabad of the North" lies the goblin capital itself (266). The concept is so basic that the very term "North" can serve in its own right as an emblem of terror, a device which Tolkien uses over and again. That vilest of Goblins, "Bolg of the North," has a title that says it all.

Dragons live in the North, live there and breed there on the Withered Heath at the edge of the Northern Waste (an area so Northern and unknown that it appears as a bland on Tolkien's map). Consistently, in *The Hobbit*, invasion moves out of the North to descend upon the South. When goblin parties, wargs, or trolls, when Smaug or his kind hurtle down upon settlements of men or dwarves, they come invariably "from the North."

But the North, or course, is more than a breeding ground for evil in multiple forms and serves as more than thriller material holding us to the tale; it is a testing ground as well, a dramatic and demanding terrain where strength and courage are fostered among the worthy and the true. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Rangers belongs to this terrain -- those rugged, lean, resolute, restless men, a people saddened, somehow, like expiating souls, but staunch and learned and wise, living symbols of the Northern ideal, as are the "North-men" themselves and Legolas who comes from Mirkwood's North.<sup>3</sup>

The mood and atmosphere of Northernness is, if anything, strongest in *The Lord of the Rings*, though the northernmost regions of Middle-earth are less specifically described in that work, since Mordor lies to the East and the journey must lead that way. In *The Hobbit*, we travel

further North and meet more of the Northerness in their own terrain. Beorn lives in the North, "under no enchantment but his own," a man (or a bear) "appalling" when angry but forthright and hospitable to those who earn his trust (118). The eagles "of the northern mountains," are found here as well, that ancient race "the greatest of all birds... proud, strong, and noble-hearted" (108). Here too one Bilbo Baggins discovers the Took within.

There is a comic element to this, of course -- the hobbit revealed as hero; but, in fact, what Bilbo goes through is quite in line with tradition. He faces his adversary (whether troll, spider, Gollum, or Smaug) alone and in the dark. "Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else, made a great difference to Mr. Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach" (154). This is always what the Northern journey comes down to in the end. Bilbo, like any Northern hero, has acted on *his own* (Tolkien more than emphasizes this point) and in the dark as well. He has faced the ultimate terror, the terror which in Norse mythology is most often represented by adventures leading North and down, by adventures that symbolically descend -- inward, under, through, or beneath -- and which bring the adventurer finally to discover the self within. In Norse mythology, only those who seek the greatest wisdom and who take the greatest risks choose the journey down, and the journey is always one the hero takes alone. Odin descends to Niflheim, realm of the dead, "nine days ride northwards and downwards from Midgard" (Crossley-Holland xxi), to decipher Balder's dreams; Svipdag to learn from Groa, from his mother called from her grave. Bilbo, alone in Smaug's dark lair ("the bravest thing he ever did" facing "the tunnel alone" 205), he gains wisdom, assurance and -- for a space of time -- the cherished Arkenstone. In either case, Bilbo comes to the mountain's inner core, to a symbolic and final center, confronting both good and ill. Gollum dwells there, one of those "strange things" found in the "hearts of mountains," at the mountain's "very roots" (78). And almost the same expressions are used for the Arkenstone, that "globe of a thousand facets," the "Heart of the Mountain" itself (220). It too comes from "the roots of the mountain," a gem beautiful and "bewildering" at once.

One can never be sure of what will emerge from the dark. A gem of wondrous beauty may lead to evil or good; a ring from a goblin passage may turn the fate of a world. Choices are made in the dark while the self confronts the self, and evil urges its own. Nonetheless, there in the inner darkness, at those moments of deepest threat, courage and grace and simple charity may come and visit the soul. It may be eternal, as when Sam feels his orc; or it may be rich in meaning, as when Gandalf, the fire wizard, confronts his own negation and is matched with a Balrog's flame. It may appear as nothing more than simple understanding, the "pity mixed with horror," that stays Bilbo's hand and sends him, "as if lifted by a new strength" (93), over

Gollum's head; for sometimes too a higher order seems to tip the scales, so that Frodo, having spent his will, having yielded, it seems, to evil, still does not fail in his quest.

There is a Christian theme here (blessing following self-abnegation), a theme best exemplified by the resurrection of Gandalf after Khazad-dûm. But Tolkien's emphasis on self-sacrifice comes from Nordic mythology as well. Tyr gives up his hand so that Fenrir the wolf may be bound. Odin (like Christ on the Cross) hangs on Yggdrasil, the World Tree, -- a sacrifice that brings him the occult wisdom of the dead. Frodo loses a finger; Odin loses an eye. One has journeyed into Mount Doom in order to save a world; one has descended to Yggdrasil's roots for a draught of Mimir's spring. In either case, loss occurs in order for there to be gain, and those who succeed in their quests are always somehow marred. Even Bilbo fails to emerge unscathed from the dragon's lair.

Admittedly, not all decisive moments (Nordic or Tolkienian) take place at times of descent. Tyr makes his choice in Asgard, the high level realm of the gods. Boromir yields to temptation on the slopes of Amon Hen; there too, at its very summit, Frodo confronts the Eye. But in those darkened moments, when the tunnel leads in and down, when the uttermost and innermost lie bare, when the roots of things hidden are exposed, Tolkien is at his best and seems most Nordic as well. These are the times in his stories when the link between spirit and journey is most clearly defined, and Tolkien liberally fills his adventures with variations on the theme.<sup>4</sup> Inward exploration (with its temptations and despair) is represented by tunnels and burrows and barrows, by oppressive forest limbs, by doorways that yield into darkness, and by keys to such doors, keys and spells that are simple and evasive at once. Mountains and their symbolic passages appear again and again: Misty Mountains, Lone Mountain, Moria, Mount Doom, and the Paths of the Dead.

There are other descents as well. The Barrow-wight episode is clearly a journey beneath and symbolically a death, as is the incident at Weather-top with its pale king, its otherworldly vision, and the voice of Frodo coming "from under the earth" (*Fellowship* 264). But journeys beneath and under can occur in less obvious ways. The path through Mirkwood leads "under." The entrance, we are told, "was like a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel," and here the company travels through a world without sun or sky, "everlasting still and dark and stuffy" (*Hobbit* 104-1). In Old Forest too perception is dimmed and deceptive, "down under the Forest-roof," and the entrance, with its "tunnel-gate," further suggests descent (*Fellowship* 158). Even Fanghorn, though more "tree-ish" and "dim" than threatening, begins with an arching darkness that Tolkien compares to night (*Two Towers* 77, 81).

To enter into such forests (Lothlórien as well) is to enter, shaman-like, into another realm.<sup>5</sup> In these forests, time and perception seem altered and ancient things live again. Ents

and walking trees are there and paths that forest can change. In Lothlorien voices are heard and the cries of sea-birds "whose race had perished from the earth" (*Fellowship* 455). To Frodo it seems as though he has crossed "a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days" (*Fellowship* 453). Such moments, particularly among the elves, are Celtic in their effect, for the shaman journey in Tolkien is usually touched with Celtic overtones, most clearly in moments when time is bridged and two worlds or two ages meet.

All of this ties together. The journeys North and East, the journeys under, through, and down, can finally in some ways be seen as nothing more than different aspects of a single theme. All journeys are, in a sense, bridges between separate states or realms and are made of meetings and partings, and losses that come with gain; and having traveled outward and under and backwards into time, the traveler can never fully return again to home. We begin in the Shire and return to the Shire, but lessons learned through trials always take their toll. Bilbo, "child of the kindly West" (*Hobbit* 273) will carry -- through less vividly than Frodo -- the marks of his Northern journey through to the end of his days.

"My dear Bilbo," says Gandalf at the closing, when Bilbo recites his verse. "You are not the hobbit that you were" (284). And certainly "the little fellow bobbing on the mat" (30) has grown greatly indeed. He has learned to tighten his belt, to confront a dragon in a dragon's lair; he has witnessed the death of a friend, seen war, and gained a sense of proportion, "some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure" as the dying Thorin knows (273).

What Bilbo has gained is his Northernness -- in an English and hobbitish way. He has gained self-reliance and a Northern sense of will, "blended in measure" with a love of earth and of simple song and cheer. The two realms and two ages, the Third Age of Middle-earth and the twentieth century of England, have met and blended as well, for the process of reading is also a journey between two worlds, "there and back again." The reader, in hobbit-guise, has wandered in Northern realms and found, perhaps, a Northern self, as Tolkien had hoped to do.

The North, its weather and topography, its history and its link with an ancestral Britain, gave Tolkien the setting he needed, gave him a bloodline of heroes and (with a sprinkling of Celtic enchantment) a harsh philosophy of perseverance in the face of troubling times. "Fearlessness," goes the Eddic saying, "is better than a faint-heart for any man who puts his nose out of doors. The length of my life and the day of my death were fated long ago" (Crossley-Holland, opening). This is the Northern spirit that Tolkien takes for the end of *The Lord of the Rings* endings are inevitable, change will always come, and evil is never fully deposed. The best that any of us can do is simply that: our best, and do it against all odds, having left our hearths and our comforts for the sake of ourselves and the world. ♀

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Renewed interest in the Celtic began in the nineteenth century (see Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, 1867) but did not develop into a literary movement until the Celtic Renaissance in Ireland gained momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century.
- <sup>2</sup> Mordor must be thought of as belonging to the East in spite of its Southeastern position on the map. The dangers of Mordor, its "winds" and "storms," are repeatedly described as coming from "out of the east." For Tolkien's conception of Mordor as Eastern, see Carpenter 189.
- <sup>3</sup> Here perhaps lies something of the difference between the Eastern North and the Northern North. Heroes may live in the far North as well as venture there, but the East remains somehow more foreign, a region for heroes to journey through but not so often a home.
- <sup>4</sup> It is significant that Boromir, outwardly brave and undaunted, shrinks from inward journeys, from Moria and the dark trees of Fangorn, as well as from the "change" Lothlorien can bring.
- <sup>5</sup> In Northern literature and mythology, crossings from one realm to another are strongly associated with journeys under and down. For the gods of Asgard, all other worlds lie below; in Celtic mythology, the underworld has been assigned to the fairy folk; in Norwegian folk tales "de underjordiske" (the underground people) is a common term for magical or supernatural beings. Clearly any journey to these realms or peoples requires at least symbolic descent.

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