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Tolkien and I: A Brief Memoir

I had already discovered *The Hobbit* and been enchanted by it. To sit (literally — the room was packed out) at Tolkien's feet on that evening, was unforgettable.

I have tried to describe in various articles the enchantment of that evening during which the "Loving Cup" of Lovelace circulated until all were cheerfully mellow. The subject of Dragons was raised; I maintained with great erudition and scores of examples from the world's literature that the universal awareness of what a dragon should be like must be based on something; he also produced a Leprechaun's shoe, which he declared to be genuine. I was amused by the contents of the great man's pockets which he emptied to find the shoe. I remember that Tolkien's delivery of *Farmer Giles* was animated and delightful (though his lectures in the English School were reputed sometimes to be rather dry). I often wonder if I am the last survivor of that magic evening.

Apart from adoring *The Lord of the Rings* I had no further contact until, shortly before his death, Tolkien wrote to me about the houses in Ladywood, Birmingham, England, where he had spent part of his boyhood.

In one of these houses, the one on Duchess Road, Tolkien met his future wife. I had not the heart to tell him both houses had been demolished; I don't think the loss of the Oliver Road house would have upset him. However he might well have been grieved by the loss of the one on Duchess Road.

I had already been Vicar of Ladywood for 21 years. With Tolkien's last letter (July 8th 1973) came a gift. This treasure, which Tolkien kindly inscribed and signed, is a critique of a Victorian novel *John Inglesant* by J.H. Shorthouse. It was a most thoughtful gift because Shorthouse had been Churchwarden of my church over a hundred years before my time — naturally I was fascinated by *John Inglesant*. In various publications I have tried to write about this as one of many possible influences on Tolkien; if I had time and health I'd love further to explore it.

When I first came to Ladywood in 1952, the house of Shorthouse (it was called "Inglesant") was still there in Beaufort Road. It has been demolished, with no plaque to mark its former existence. Every day, on his way to "The Orator" Tolkien would pass this house. (I think the East side of the end of Beaufort Road — some forty yards — should be named "Tolkien's Walk."

The book Tolkien sent me certainly gives the impression that *John Inglesant* could have been an influence — one the critics don't know about, though Humphrey Carpenter is aware of it. The eucatastrophe in *John Inglesant* is a powerful saving act of renunciation — as Bilbo renounced the Arkenstone; Frodo renounced the ring. Other points of contact can be illustrated in some detail. This could be a fascinating study — the story of the publication of *John Inglesant* is remarkable in its own right — and this link with Tolkien gives it a new and great interest.

In a letter (with photographs) which I sent recently to *Mythlore*, readers may have noticed an amusing postscript to Tolkien's association with my old parish of Ladywood.

A huge building has gone up opposite the end of Oliver Road (where Tolkien lived as a boy before his mother died) called GAMGEE HOUSE (a sort of Medicare Centre). The point is that Gamgee house is named after a local worthy, a Dr. Gamgee who achieved fame as the inventor of cotton wool. And he happened to be a neighbor of the Tolkiens in Oliver Road. I don't suppose those who built and named Gamgee house knew the immortal Sam Gamgee had already been named after the good Doctor, whose name, by the way, was of Huguenot origin.

I'm afraid I sometimes told pilgrims who came to Ladywood to visit Tolkien sites that Gamgee House was named in tribute to Sam Gamgee.....and, in an odd unintentional sort of way, I suppose it was.



Tolkien and I

A Brief Memoir by Richard Plotz

Sunday, 18 August 1963. I am visiting my cousin John Plotz, who lives a few blocks from me in Brooklyn. His older sister Sally will be 19 the next day. A student of Old English at Vassar, Sally unwraps her birthday present from her grandmother. It is *The Lord of the Rings*, the Houghton Mifflin hardcover with the CJRT foldout maps. A lifelong map person, I am fascinated. Sally assures me that one needs to study Old English to appreciate these books.

July 1964. Those maps are still on my mind. Some day I'll ask Sally the name of those books. I am on a cross-country trip with my family when I receive a letter from my best friend, Bob Foster. I must read *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. That's the one! I drag my parents to a book store in Santa Fe, which has *The Hobbit*. The clerk assures me that *The Hobbit* is strictly a children's book.

August 1964. Back in New York, I make tracks for the (alas, now long gone) 8th Street Bookshop, where they do have *The Lord of the Rings*. It costs (gasp) \$4.95 per volume. I can afford one volume. I buy *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I finish it that night. The next day is Sunday. Monday I buy *The Two Towers* (only, more fool I). By Tuesday someone else has bought *The Return of the King*. I have to wait a week with Frodo in the hands of the Enemy for the new order to arrive. Finally, having been assured by Bob Foster that *The Hobbit* is not just for children, I buy it.

January 1965. I see the (later so well-known) Tengwar subway graffiti, which I can't yet read. My first Tolkien fan meeting takes place on a frigid, blustery, but sunny day

outdoors on the steps of Low Library at Columbia. Four other fans arrive, including, if I remember correctly, Ruth Berman. I am assured that someone out there actually knows Elvish — the language, not just the Tengwar. I advertise, hoping to snare the someone....

May 1966. I announce a Tolkien Society meeting for Midyear's Day, Saturday, 25 June, at my (parents') house in Brooklyn. I get a phone call from a new member, Judy Anker, who lives in Albany. I have received probably fewer than a dozen long-distance calls in my life. Judy wants to come to the meeting but doesn't have a place to stay. Can I find her a place? Of course I can. I ask my girl friend Rebecca. Judy stays with Rebecca after the meeting. On Sunday, Rebecca takes Judy shopping in Greenwich Village. Judy will be going to Brandeis, near Boston, in the fall.

1 November 1967. I am in Oxford to interview J.R.R. Tolkien for *Seventeen* magazine. I am overwhelmed, so overwhelmed that I forgot to take notes. The interview is in his study, in the converted garage of the Sandfield Road house. I get only a glimpse of Mrs. Tolkien and the interior of the house that W.H. Auden, in an unguarded moment, calls "hideous...with hideous pictures on the walls, I can't tell you how awful it is." After the interview I am sicker than I can remember, probably from last night's lamb curry. And I can't throw up. I am miserable for two or three days. In the end, I am unable to write up the interview; I dictate an account which is edited by *Seventeen*.

November 1966. I am a floundering freshman at Harvard, eager for any excuse not to think about classes. I'm back from England and need a different distraction. My cousin John is organizing a Happening at Lowell House. Would I like to put up some flyers? My uncle teaches at Brandeis, far enough away to take up some time, so I offer to take some flyers to post there. Oh, by the way, I look up Judy Anker and invite her to the Happening.

September 1967. I start Harvard all over again, having dropped out the previous fall. I am no longer distracted by the Tolkien Society, which I have passed along to Ed Meskys. This time I stay four years.

Summer 1969. I get my first car, an ancient VW Beetle. Its license plate reads NAZGUL. One day, approaching Harvard Square, I see FRODO a few cars ahead. I give chase, but the Baggins gets away.

29 March 1971. Judy and I are married on Brandeis campus.

Summer 1973. Peter Beagle and I are co-GoH's at the Mythopoeic Conference in Santa Barbara. I start medical school in Pittsburg. The passing of the Demiurge.

18 September 1978. Our daughter Martha is born in Providence.

5 July 1980. Our son Michael is born.

1985. I read *The Hobbit* to Martha and Michael.

1 September 1988. I start reading *The Lord of the Rings*

to M & M. The reading, about half an hour's worth almost every evening, takes until February. It is one of the few works of fiction that Michael rereads to himself. Years have passed since I last read it, and I am again astonished at what wonderful storytelling and what wonderful writing this is.

3 January 1992. The Centennial. No special celebration, but I spend the evening with my family — Judy, whom I would not know, and Martha and Michael, who would not exist, but for this master.

5 March 1992. And yet it continues. I receive an invitation from the Dukes of Numenor and Anorien to the King's Council-General, meeting later this month in Cambridge to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Harvard's second Tolkien Society. I wonder who these people are. I probably know them. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

Providence, Rhode Island, 7 March 1992



MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. To be a general help, the following might be considered a core reading list, with the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954, *The Two Towers* 1954, *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977.

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadows of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Talesin through Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944