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In Memoriam: Marquette Memories of Christopher Tolkien

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Abstract

The curator of the Marquette University Archives remembers Christopher Tolkien (1924–2020) through a brief history of his relationship with the archives.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, Christopher



NOTES AND LETTERS

IN MEMORIAM:

MARQUETTE MEMORIES OF CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN

WILLIAM M. FLISS

IN 1957 J.R.R. TOLKIEN SOLD THE MANUSCRIPTS for four of his fictional works, including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, to Marquette University, guaranteeing that this Jesuit school in the midwestern United States would play an important role in the work of his youngest son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien (1924-2020).

On behalf of the Marquette University Archives and all who have worked here, I want to express deep admiration and gratitude for everything that Christopher did to advance Tolkien Studies. Thanks to Christopher Tolkien we know so much about his father's unpublished writings. Christopher enhanced our understanding of him: both Tolkien the scholar and Tolkien the sub-creator of the immensely popular secondary world, Arda.

Marquette University is especially grateful to Christopher Tolkien for enriching our own collection of manuscripts. Christopher maintained a close working relationship with the Marquette Archives for many years. By the time I became Tolkien Archivist in 2012, direct communication with Christopher had subsided; but even though I never developed a personal relationship with Christopher, I feel as if I have come to know him a little through the administrative files that support Marquette's collection. Based on these sources, I want to briefly sketch Christopher Tolkien's relationship with the Marquette Archives and offer a few impressions of this remarkable man.

Marquette first learned of Christopher Tolkien when it received a copy of his father's will identifying Christopher as literary executor and therefore contact person for matters concerning the manuscripts. Christopher first wrote to Marquette in 1974 seeking copies of his father's drafts of the unpublished epilogue for *The Lord of the Rings*. Christopher was working on *The Silmarillion*, and he wished to know if the epilogue had any bearing on it. Christopher was aware of the mass of manuscripts at Marquette, but he was too busy with the legends of the Elder Days to give them further thought.

By 1985 Christopher had brought his study of the *Legendarium* to the point where his father embarked on the “New Hobbit.” The golden age of contact between Christopher and the Marquette Archives was 1985-1996 while he worked on those volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* that covered *The Lord of the Rings* (i.e. Vols. VI-VIII and parts of IX and XII).

Christopher still held in his possession a vast quantity of manuscripts for *The Lord of the Rings*, and he needed to understand how these meshed with the manuscripts his father had shipped to Marquette in 1958. There followed what Christopher termed “The Great Exchange.” Photocopies of the manuscripts crossed the Atlantic accompanied by correspondence that sought to puzzle out the relationships among the pieces. While Christopher labored at his home in France, a team at Marquette supervised by Archivist Chuck Elston worked diligently to assist him. Christopher’s closest collaborator on the team was a young fan named Taum Santoski, who volunteered countless hours to work in the Archives on Christopher’s behalf. Christopher also received assistance from John Rateliff, a doctoral student in English at Marquette. When John and Taum expressed interest in co-writing a history of *The Hobbit*, based on Marquette’s manuscripts, Christopher endorsed their effort. After Taum’s death in 1991, John continued the project alone and completed it with his magisterial *The History of the Hobbit*, originally published in two volumes (2007).

Marquette had known there were additional manuscripts for *The Lord of the Rings* since 1965 when Tolkien mentioned their existence in a letter to Marquette’s library director. Tolkien wanted these manuscripts to eventually join the collection at Marquette. Christopher fulfilled his father’s wish, transferring the manuscripts to Milwaukee in four installments over the course of 1987-1997, as he completed work on *The History of Middle-earth*. To Christopher Tolkien these transfers were not donations; they merely completed the original transaction. The four installments amounted to over 3,000 pages and increased Marquette’s manuscript collection for *The Lord of the Rings* by fifty percent.¹

Christopher Tolkien emerges from the files at Marquette as a consummate scholar—exacting, judicious, and insightful. As any of Christopher’s personal correspondents can attest, he was a masterful letter writer with a prose style delightful to read. Although Christopher’s letters to Marquette were work-related, enough of his personality shone through to reveal a self-deprecating sense of humor. His work ethic was extraordinary.

¹ For more on Marquette’s acquisition of these additional manuscripts, see William M. Fliss, “‘Things That Were, and Things That Are, and Things That Yet May Be’: The J.R.R. Tolkien Manuscript Collection at Marquette University.” *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2017, pp. 21-38.

Christopher was already in his early seventies when he wrote *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, and yet he reported continuous days of working 9-10 hours per day. Christopher possessed the ability to concentrate on one task for weeks on end to the exclusion of other projects clamoring for his attention. One casualty was his personal correspondence: he often lamented the unanswered letters that piled up in his study, and he expressed remorse over the tardiness of his replies.

The greatest beneficiary of Christopher's labors was the audience of Tolkien scholars and fans that consumed his publications. In October 1988 Christopher informed Marquette that since May he had finished writing *The Treason of Isengard* and begun work on *The War of the Ring*. By the following October he reported completing a draft of it. Such prodigious output is remarkable given the high quality of his books. Anyone who reads *The History of Middle-earth* must be struck by the tremendous thought and care Christopher put into those volumes, providing his readers with close textual analysis and resolving complicated cruces.

After his father's death, Christopher Tolkien was presumably secure enough financially to have been able to retire in complete obscurity to southern France had he so chosen. Instead, he committed his remaining life to editing and publishing his father's works, a task in which the Marquette Archives is proud to have played a role. In Christopher Tolkien a more devoted and loving son can scarcely be imagined.

WILLIAM M. FLISS is the Archivist for the J.R.R. Tolkien Collection at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA.



IN MEMORIAM:
THE LAST INKLING
JOHN D. RATELIFF

THE PASSING OF CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN marks the end of an era. He was the Last Inklings. Already an established scholar (a don at New College, Oxford) and experienced editor² by the time of his father's death, Christopher—appointed literary executor with explicit permission from his father's will to

² See his translation and edition of *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (1960).