# The Dragon and the Railway Station

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*retired*

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### Abstract
The curious substitution of Bletchley Station for Paddington Station between two versions of "On Fairy-stories" may have a simple origin in Tolkien's interest in code-breaking, but on investigation (as with most things Tolkien-related) goes deeper.

### Additional Keywords
"On Fairy Stories"; Bletchley Park; code-breaking; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of World War II; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge of codes and code-breaking; World War, 1939-1945—Cryptography

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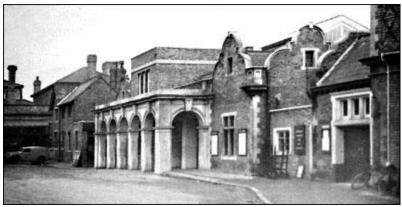
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# THE DRAGON AND THE RAILWAY STATION
## VERLYN FLIEGER

J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S ESSAY "ON FAIRY-STORIES" is an *omnium gatherum* of his knowledge of and opinions about fairy-stories, primitive societies, children, tale-telling, the origin of language, King Arthur, Charlemagne's mother, and banana-skins. An odd collection; but perhaps the oddest of all are his subsequent comments on dragons, motor-cars, clouds, railway stations, and rainbows. For example, his statement that "[t]he notion that motor-cars are more

'alive' than […] dragons is curious" ("On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 149),[1] seems equally as curious as the original notion itself. Likewise, his admission further down the same page that he cannot convince himself "that the roof of Bletchley[2] Station is any more 'real' than the clouds" (149). The implied analogy is that dragons are to motor-cars as clouds are to station roofs. But the central issue in both sets is the relative nature of reality. Moreover, the second comparison is flawed in its component parts. Bletchley Station is not a generic category like motor-cars; it is a single item, a locality with a specific address—quite a solid bricks-and-mortar building in comparison to a cloud, as the photograph shows.[3] The bricks and mortar, of course, are the very reasons why Tolkien picked a railway station. It may have been that the busy to and fro of ordinary travel provided just the humdrum everyday contrast with the celestial tranquility of a cloud that he needed to make his point. And the railway station also offered scope for more elaborate comparison, allowing him to go inside the building, to declare that "[t]he Bridge to Platform 4 is to me less interesting than Bifröst [the rainbow bridge between heaven and earth of Norse mythology] guarded by Heimdall with the Gjallarhorn" (149).



Bletchley Station as Tolkien knew it before renovation in 1965-66.

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[1] Except where otherwise indicated, quotations from "On Fairy-stories" are taken from the version printed in *The Monsters and the Critics*.

[2] From Fr. *Blechelai*, 'Blecca's Leah.' One of those colorful English place-names, like Tooting or Nether Wallop that through the accident of modern spelling (and in this case because of its association with the dialectal word *bletch* "dirt," "smear," "smudge"), communicates a meaning entirely divorced from its municipal identity.

[3] For more information on Bletchley Station I recommend the excellent article on Bletchley's Railway Heritage archived on the Heritage website at www.mkheritage.org.uk/archive/jt/railway/railway.html#chapter5.

Cloud > station, Rainbow Bridge > Platform bridge. So far, so good. But why Bletchley in particular? The question gains interest when we learn that not only was the railway bridge less interesting than the rainbow bridge, Bletchley Station itself wasn't Tolkien's first choice as an example of reality.[4] A previous (1939) draft of the essay cited the better-known Paddington Station *(Tolkien on Fairy-Stories* [*TOFS*] 238), and didn't replace it with Bletchley until 1947, nearly a decade later. The post-war shift from a London hub to a regional branch—and the added detail of the platform bridge—invites speculation that the new example might have been more germane to Tolkien's own travel history than was the old. Moreover, the bridge to Platform 4 is not a neutral example like the motor-car but one with as much symbolic meaning as the dragon. Platform 4 is the arrival and departure point for travel between Tolkien's Oxford and Bletchley Park, a mansion near Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire established in 1938 as a secret center of Allied code-breaking operations, later known as the Government Code & Cypher School and later still as GCHQ.

The intrusion of Platform 4 introduces an ultra-railway association into what has up to this point been a mere citation of comparative realities. It changes the equation, and the nature of the change may reveal the process of Tolkien's associative thinking. At this point in the essay Bletchley Station can be seen as more than a railway terminus; it is the port of entry to a specialized venue whose focus is the manipulation of words to disguise reality. What is more, the Platform bridge, like the Norse rainbow bridge, connects the traveler to a destination whose meaning transcends its locality. The proximity in the essay of the dragon to the railway station and via Platform 4 to Bletchley Park suggests that these items came together in Tolkien's mind as he wrote. The same proximity also raises the vexed question of Tolkien's connection with code-breaking at the time of World War II. Just before the outbreak of the War, Bletchley Park ran courses for hand-picked individuals who might join the organization in the event of war. One of them was Tolkien, at the time a professor at Pembroke College Oxford, who was enrolled in just such a course, as the list below shows ("J.R.R. Tolkien was Keen").

Enrollment would not have been not unusual at a time when experts in language and communication were being recruited as part of the national war effort by MI 5, the British domestic counter-intelligence service. The roster names are listed alphabetically and next to each is the relevant area of specialization, which for Tolkien included "Scandinavian" (he was fluent in Old Norse) and "Spanish," a language he would have heard from Father Francis Morgan, the half-Spanish half-Welsh Catholic priest who became his guardian

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[4] Pointed out by Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond in their comprehensive three-volume *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide, Guide* (Part I, 206, 705).

after his mother died. Some names on the list have hand-jotted annotations in pen or pencil beside them. One scribble says "good"; another notes "Naval intel." Next to Tolkien's name is written the word "keen," which might be a comment on his enthusiasm, but could as easily be a directive on how to pronounce the last syllable of his name.



| | March 27th | March 28th | March 29th | March 30th |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| D. J. Allan ② | Commercial | Commercial | | |
| Dr. Beeston ③ | Near East | Near East | Near East | Near East |
| ① Professor A.H.Campbell | Air | Air | Military | Military |
| J.M.Dawkins — | Near East | Near East | Near East | Near East |
| ⑤ L. Forster | Naval | Naval | Naval | Naval |
| ⑥ Professor Fraser | Mr. Turner | Mr. Turner | Mr. Turner | Mr. Turner |
| ① E.Lobel | Research | Research | Research | Research |
| ② Professor Norman | Military | Military | Air | Air |
| ③ Dr.H.O.C.Poole | Research | Research | Research | Research |
| ④ F.A.Taylor | French | French | | |
| ⑧ Professor Tolkien | Scandinavian | Scandinavian | Spanish | |
| ⑨ Professor Waterhouse | Naval | Naval | Naval | Naval |
| ① Professor Willoughby | Naval | Naval | Naval | Naval |

Tolkien's possible/probable connection to the railway platform and the code-breaking center to which it leads seems real enough for argument. His relationship to dragons is even more demonstrable, for in life, as in art, dragons seem never to have been far from his mind. On 1 January 1938 he gave a lecture on dragons to children in the University Museum, Oxford, a talk which offered a kind of literary taxonomy of the dragon in myth and legend complete with illustrations (Scull & Hammond *Reader's Guide* Part I, 310). Of coincidental interest in the context of the present discussion linking dragons with railway stations is the closing paragraph of the Museum talk in which Tolkien compares an express train with its puffing engine to "a smoking dragon" ("Dragons" 62). Dragons also come in for discussion in both of Tolkien's two great essays, "On Fairy-stories" (discussed above) and *Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." In addition to the already-mentioned dragons no less real than motor-cars, the fairy-story essay extols "the prince of all dragons" (OFS 135), Fáfnir, the mesmerizing wyrm of the Volsung story who beguiles Sigurd the Volsung with his human speech. The *Beowulf* essay devotes considerable space to Beowulf's dragon, which though it is not sufficiently "plain, pure fairy-story dragon" for Tolkien, and does not speak, is nevertheless described as the "personification of

malice, greed […] a foe more evil than any human enemy of house or realm" ("*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics*"* 17). And in Tolkien's own fiction there are dragons aplenty: Farmer Giles's wily Chrysophylax, Bilbo's chatty Smaug and Túrin's taunting Glaurung, all dragons with a mythological pedigree attached to a modern spin on how and to whom they talk.

A talking dragon is a mythic embodiment of the power of words, usually to persuade, confuse, deceive, spin, or distort reality. I want to suggest that this is not unlike encoding, whose purpose is essentially the same, and that Tolkien's train of thought in the fairy-story essay may have taken a wandering route by way of a dragon to a motor-car, from there to the clouds and Bletchley Station analogy and thence to codes and code-breaking activities at Bletchley Park against a "foe more evil" than any dragon. If so, this says something worth pondering about the relationship of his own fairy-story to the real world. Far-fetched as it may seem, I propose a connection in Tolkien's mind between the word-spinning Glaurung and his role in the lives of the children of Húrin, and the more general idea of coding/code-breaking as a feature of war at Bletchley Park, a connection not so much in content as in idea, which is in both cases the distortion of reality. Glaurung's destructive word-spinnings in his encounters with Túrin—his lies and half-truths, his distortions of fact and re-inflections of meaning, revealing truth when it will carry the most shock and withholding information when it would do the most good—are very like a code in that both are efforts at linguistic misdirection.

Glaurung's litany after the fall of Nargothrond, his recital of Túrin's sins both of omission and commission—his description of Túrin as: "thankless fosterling [of Thingol]] outlaw [with Mîm and the dwarves], slayer of your friend [Beleg], thief of love [Finduilas and Gwindor], usurper of Nargothrond [from Orodreth], captain foolhardy [in building the bridge], and deserter of your kin [Morwen and Nienor]" (*CoH* 179, *S* 213-14)—all this infects Túrin with guilt and distorts his self-awareness so that he sees himself "as in a mirror misshapen by malice" (*S* 213-14, *CoH* 179). Every word of what the dragon says is true, but the slant he puts on his accusations ignores all mitigating circumstances. Only his persona as a dragon marks as fantasy what in real life would simply be called spin—selective presentation of facts to emphasize a partial truth. Both methods of treating fact—the imaginary and the real—are designed to mis-direct the uninformed; both are instruments of data manipulation; both are hostile activities designed to bemuse and bewilder a target audience. Finally and most contextually similar, both are parts of a particular war effort.

To sum up my argument: the close proximity in Tolkien's essay of the fantastic dragons of myth and legend to the concrete realities of Bletchley Station and Platform 4 seems to me a coincidence more causal than casual. The point I wish to make is that encoding and word-spinning are related manipulations of

language in that both deploy symbol-using systems to obfuscate, disguise and/or conceal meanings. It seems to me obvious that breaking a code involves the same process as devising one, but in reverse. The road goes in both directions. Tolkien's dragon fulfills the same function in Middle-earth as Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. To posit a direct connection between Glaurung's speech in Nargothrond and Tolkien's awareness of activities at Bletchley Park may seem like a bridge too far, though as we have seen, a number of factors contribute to the connection. Dragons are no less real for Tolkien than motor-cars, and the roof of Bletchley station is not more real than the clouds. Art and life imitate one another, as Tolkien was well-aware. "Mythology is language," he sweepingly declared in that early draft of the fairy-story essay, "and language is mythology" (*TOFS* 181).

How right he was.

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