



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 43
Number 1

Article 20

10-15-2024

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Recommended Citation

Fernández Portaencasa, María (2024) "*The Literary Role of History in the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien*, by Nicholas Birns," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 43: No. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol43/iss1/20>

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The Literary Role of History in the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, by Nicholas Birns

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THE LITERARY ROLE OF HISTORY IN THE FICTION OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN.

Nicholas Birns. New York, London: Routledge, 2024, 219 p. 978-1-032-59768-3. \$180.

“Like history, and am moved by it, but its finest moments for me are those in which it throws light on words and names!” (*Letters* 381, #205). These words, written in 1958 in a letter addressed to his son Christopher, shed a great deal of light on what were the views on history of *The Lord of the Rings*’ author. J.R.R. Tolkien was well instructed in it—as well as in archaeology—but he was, above all, a philologist, and had a *philo-logical* (in the very etymological sense of the term) conception of both the real world and that of his own worldbuilding (or, to put it in his own words, sub-creation). It would have been pleasant for the reader to learn in *The Literary Role of History in the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* how much of Tolkien’s interest in his homeland’s early Medieval history, for instance, had to do with the different stages of development of the English language at that time. Or how several real-world civilizations and peoples (the Goths, the Ancient Egyptians, the Byzantines, the Anglo-Saxons . . .) are more or less mirrored in the fictitious peoples and civilizations imagined by Tolkien in order to give them solid and coherent traits, but particularly and mainly in linguistic terms.

However, it was not that quote which caught the attention of Nicholas Birns, teacher at the New York University and expert in literary criticism, in setting the framework for his study, but another one. In the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (1966), Tolkien states how he much prefers history (whether that be true or feigned) over allegory, which he is displeased by, and which he overtly rejects. According to Birns, this would mean that Tolkien preferred the concrete over the abstract (albeit the reader is left wondering what exactly there is of abstract in allegory). He then aims to consider these “concrete” details and establishes two different categories in which history can be found in Tolkien’s fiction: in the archive (such as the historical documents that can be found in the repositories at Rivendell or Minas Tirith), and what he calls “on the road,” that is, the way in which the knowledge about the past unfolds as the characters travel, both physically and with the plot: as they move through different scenarios, Frodo and his companions learn about the history of lands and about peoples little known to them, as well as reveal their own history and family stories (5-6). Furthermore, “one might say that there is an ‘archival’ Tolkien, Tolkien as he lived and wrote in his lifetime, and a Tolkien ‘on the road,’ one who is evolving [...] after the author’s death” (8).

Apart from the evident difference between cultivated, written narratives, and the oral tradition, it is difficult for a historian like myself to understand the point which Birns is trying to make with this categorization.

History, whether in the real world or in fiction, is never to be understood as a collection of past events: to that end, one would need a time machine. It is, however, the *narrative* (whether written or oral, rigorous or mythical) of those past events, based on a variety of sources. A chronicle kept at an archive in the Citadel of Minas Tirith is not more or less “historical” than a first-hand memory spoken by Treebeard, nor should the nature of both testimonies be considered separately, but treated as valuable sources (of different kind, but of the same category) which would then need to be re-elaborated and merged within the narrative of a historian.

Aside from these initial pages in which Tolkien’s views on history are assessed rather scantily, the book moves on to seven very different (and some of them quite remarkable) chapters, each of which deal with particular historical aspects which can be related to or play a role in Tolkien’s fiction.

Chapter 2, “Forehistories: Prehistory to the Pre-Roman,” deals with some resonances of early stages of history in Tolkien’s world (although it is not entirely clear how the author delimits chronology, as he addresses not merely prehistorical times but also much of Antiquity, especially Middle Eastern). Birns states that “Tolkien’s father possessed M.C. Burkitt’s book on cave art” and that “this influence can perhaps be seen in the cave-dwellers in the Father Christmas Letters” (30). This is not accurate: it was J.R.R. Tolkien, not Arthur Tolkien, who possessed Burkitt’s *Prehistory: A Study of Early Cultures in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin*, a book published in 1921 (Tolkien’s father died in 1896). Birns’s reference (Hammond and Scull 569) doesn’t seem to address the matter. Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull actually have written on this, not in *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader’s Companion* (Birns cites the 2014 edition) but in their *Companion and Guide* (Scull and Hammond *Guide* 492 [2017 edition]) where they state that the information comes from Christopher Tolkien, whose father (that is, J.R.R., not Arthur) had the volume amongst his personal collection (as listed by Cilli 2019). Besides, Burkitt’s is not a “book on cave art” but does contain a number of plates with illustrations of some European Paleolithic artistical representations. Its influence did not just slightly inspire the cave-dwellers in the Father Christmas letters: in the drawings which Tolkien made to accompany the letters, he copied out full illustrations taken from the book; not versions, but actual copies of real-life cave art from Magdalenian and Solutrean archaeological sites such as Altamira, La Colombiere, or Valltorta. This is quite illuminating in terms of confirming the Professor’s proficiency in archaeology.

In this vein, Birns also notes how this and Tolkien’s forehistories “cannot be reconciled with a Christian fundamentalist view of the young age of the Earth” (30). This is unquestionably true, as is unquestionably true that Tolkien’s Catholicism never prevented him (or any of his contemporary co-religionaries) from acquiring a perfectly solid scientific instruction. To suggest

otherwise is to fall into quite a stereotypical and inaccurate belief. Already by 1950, Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Humani generis* stressed how there was no contradiction between the scientific theory of evolution and the Catholic faith. Indeed, the problem with fundamentalist Christians and anti-evolutionism has (ever since the 20th century) been more a problem of some Protestant denominations in America (Johnson et al.) and seems somehow out of place while describing the worldview of a Catholic European. Someone in Tolkien's position, a professor in Oxford surrounded by daily archaeological and paleontological discoveries (which he was quite enthusiastic about), would have never adopted such anti-scientific views as present-day Christian fundamentalists do.

The chapter jumps from one period to the next, discusses some aspects of Tolkien's historical inspiration such as its namely Eurocentric character, and how the metallurgy of the Chalcolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age are somehow merged into the legendarium as one. As Birns rightly spots, "this was not because Tolkien did not know the history of metals, but because he wanted to keep his world deliberately vague" (33). He describes Tolkien's world as "pre-Abrahamic," which is true, but nonetheless may be far too close to the real-world description for a text which intends to avoid allegories. This gives Birns a way to discuss the legendarium as a *corpus* corresponding to the age of legends, and thus, speak of the different mythologies of the Great Flood (Noah, Gilgamesh, Atlantis) and the various ways in which these stories were used by Tolkien. Birns brilliantly explores how Tolkien was influenced by Mesopotamian myths in the shaping of Númenor, and acknowledged Ancient Egypt as a source of inspiration, but did not focus on the neighboring Hittite world, for instance, something which might have been more expectable (as it belonged to the Indo-European linguistical family).

Chapter 3 addresses the role played by the Goths and the Gothic language in Tolkien's imagination. Birns deals very competently with this difficult topic, and does so without overextending already well-known platitudes, such as the similarities between the battle of the Catalaunian Fields and the Pelennor. As he states, "[it] is a thorny issue because it is in one way an essential element [but] in another way [...] the Gothic element is easy to overrate, overinflate, or misunderstand" (51). Tolkien knew well the Gothic language—the oldest Germanic language known to have been written down. He was particularly influenced by his teacher Joseph Wright and the latter's book, *A Grammar of the Gothic Language*. Towards the end of his life, Tolkien was especially fond of the Gothic language and of its historical and cultural significance, and, according to Birns, he wished that "allegiances that in real life were not reconcilable in some ways could be joined" (53). He is speaking of both the Germanic and the Catholic worlds, based on a memory passed down by

Tolkien's friend, Fr. Robert Murray, in an obituary for the Professor published in *The Tablet* September 15th, 1973. Birns quotes the text from Scull & Hammond's *Chronology*, and not from Murray's article. In it, Tolkien lamented the fact that the Goths turned Arian, thus, preventing their language from having its own vernacular liturgy, after which he proceeded to declaim the Our Father in Gothic.

This lengthy chapter also allows Birns to explore how this problem with the Arianism adopted by the Germanic peoples made Tolkien slightly less hostile to the Roman (Nicene) sphere than his natural preference for the North (versus the Mediterranean) could have made him. According to the author, this regret on Tolkien's part regarding the Arianism of the Goths must have been meant for the Ostrogoths, not the Visigoths, given that the latter converted voluntarily to Catholicism at the end of the 6th century (54). But this seems perhaps far too elaborate: on the one hand, the conversion of the Visigoths in Spain was anything but straightforward (it was implemented by King Recared in the Third Council of Toledo, and not immediately accepted, after the failed rebellion and later assassination of his brother Hermenegild). On the other, regardless of the conversion of both or neither of the Gothic peoples, the question that Tolkien addresses does not depend on it: the historical path of both Gothic peoples was sealed quite some time before, when they adopted Arianism and lost the possibility of having had their own Nicene liturgy. This may be as well applied to other Germanic peoples, such as the Vandals, who converted early to Arianism and developed a vernacular liturgy forever lost. Moreover, this "estrangement" from the Goths was further emphasized for Tolkien by the emergence of Nazi propaganda and its misuse and appropriation of Norse and Germanic elements (79-80).

The next chapter is entirely devoted to the presence of Byzantine history in Tolkien's legendarium. It is one of the most powerful sections of the book, where Birns stands out as accomplishing an acute cultural analysis. He also thoroughly acknowledges the previous literature on the matter, particularly, the work of Myriam Librán-Moreno (2011), who studied how Tolkien knew well the history of the Eastern Roman Empire and used many Byzantine referents but did not entirely enjoy it due to its connection to Charles Williams.

According to Birns, "by the late 1940s, Tolkien found that he needed Byzantium in his legendarium for two reasons" (100). These would be, following his reasoning, on the one hand, that the Medieval aesthetic of his worldbuilding should be founded on an older Mediterranean civilization, which by the Middle Ages was not Rome but Byzantium. On the other, that "the Second World War brought home that Germanic Europe could not have a positive meaning unless embedded in a classical and Biblical framework" (100). This is probably going

too far, as Tolkien did not truly despise the “meaning” of Germanic Europe, but the *false* meaning imprinted on it by the Nazis. However, Birns succeeds in presenting how Minas Tirith shows explicit similarities with Constantinople: neither was the original capital of their respective “empires,” they were both splendid in a “later” time (end of Antiquity / end of the Third Age), etc. Particularly interesting—and honest—is Birns’s statement that “it would be wise to say not, Minas Tirith ‘is’ Byzantium, but Minas Tirith is, among other aspects, ‘a’ Byzantium” (105)—although one would assume that he is referring to Constantinople. Further on, however, he affirms with no justification other than a geographical juxtaposition to the real world that “there is no denying in the inherently anti-Islamic thrust” held by the location of Minas Tirith that “makes the complex and admirable world of Islam analogous to the despicably evil Sauron” (105). A very debatable statement, especially due to its allegorical implications.

In chapter 5, the author attempts to explore how Victorian and Anglo-Saxon England are mirrored, respectively, in the Hobbits and the Rohirrim through the shared trait of “politeness.” It is almost the only section of the book where Birns tackles the topic of Anglo-Saxons, something that the reader of a book dealing with the role of history in Tolkien’s work would certainly expect, and, disappointingly, he does not go into much detail, nor does he mention the influence of the Sutton Hoo discoveries or the Marcho and Blanco/ Hengest and Horsa parallel. Besides, Birns refuses to use the term “Anglo-Saxon” following Rambaran-Olm and Wade in favor of “early England” or “pre-Conquest” (21) which at some points is rather confusing. It is not an entirely accepted categorization in historiography, and certainly it is a strange one to Tolkien studies, especially given the importance of underlining the academic production of Tolkien as an Anglo-Saxonist. Precisely due to its “Britishness” (that is, related to Britain: the Celtic-speaking world of the Britons, amongst others, who inhabited the British Isles before the Anglo-Saxons), Tolkien did not consider the Arthurian legends (originated in Early Medieval Wales, later to be developed in the Norman sphere) to be properly English. He felt closer to *Beowulf*, a Scandinavian-set story which belonged to the cultural sphere of the original homeland of Anglo-Saxons. In this context, the term has absolutely no ethnical significance and should not be considered as part of a race-based cultural debate, because it primarily concerns linguistics. Moreover, in rejecting the “Anglo-Saxon” terminology, Birns missed the opportunity to discuss “Sigelwara Land” (a 1932 paper in which Tolkien describes the Anglo-Saxons’ attitudes towards Ethiopians), and of reflecting on the place that the term has within Tolkienian scholarship.

If there were to be a revised edition of this book, Birns might certainly benefit from John Garth’s early 2024 lecture “Inventing on the Hoof: How the

Riders of Rohan Suddenly Became Anglo-Saxon,” where the general (and, particularly, Tom Shippey’s) assumption that the Rohirrim are “Anglo-Saxons on horseback” is questioned (it had already been questioned by Honegger 2011), and Garth explores other (surprising) influences, such as that of the Romani. But as Birns correctly remarks, “the identity of the Rohirrim should not be overly fixed” (117).

Concerning the very topic of “politeness,” it would act as a way of communication between two peoples—the Hobbits, a non-heroic Victorian sort of countrymen—and the Rohirrim—inhabitants of a kingdom with clear Germanic traits and heroic values—which both share that particular trait. Apparently, Birns uses “politeness” not as a way of describing a gentlemanly society but as a means of transcending cross-cultural encounters. It is a very suggestive proposal, but a further or deeper development of the term would help the reader better understand the point which the author is trying to make.

The last three chapters analyze, respectively, the Romantic element in the conception and development of Silvan Elves (see Sherwood and Eilmann, 2024), the use of the term “philology” by Tolkien in contrast to other contemporary authors (particularly, but not exclusively, Erich Auerbach and Edward W. Said), and, finally, what he calls “the issue of restoration in Tolkien’s world, after the great victory has been won” (183). The latter is the only one of these final three sections with actual relevance concerning the “literary role of history.” The author discusses how the monarchy in Gondor is restored, as are other kingdoms such as the Lonely Mountain, but Moria is not. Birns gives a truly brilliant answer to this paradox, which closes the book: “Tolkien acknowledges that there is damage in the world that historical awareness cannot heal or restore. What history can do, though, is testify [...] even if [it] cannot provide any final word” (197).

The Literary Role of History in the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien has some inconsistencies, is at some points unbalanced, and could have used some external advice from a historical point of view (particularly in terms of structure, and to acquire a stronger historiographical foundation). However, it tackles boldly some problematic topics concerning Tolkien’s historical influences and thus it is overall a fine piece of research which should be considered as part of the Tolkienian scholarship and literary criticism from now on.

—María Fernández Portaencasa

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MANY TIMES AND MANY PLACES: C.S. LEWIS AND THE VALUE OF HISTORY. K. Alan Snyder and Jamin Metcalf. Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-935688-52-5.

OWEN BARFIELD ONCE OBSERVED THAT "[a] fairly unsophisticated person who [...] had read the whole or most that has been written about [C.S. Lewis], might be pardoned for wondering if it were not one writer, but three, with whom he was becoming acquainted; three men who just happened to have the same name and the same peculiar vigor of thought and utterance" (Barfield 129). He went on to describe these three writers respectively as "a distinguished and original literary critic," "a highly successful author of fiction," and a "writer and broadcaster of popular Christian apologetics" (129–130). In *Many Times and Many Places*, Alan Snyder and Jamin Metcalf provide us with an accessible and engaging introduction to another Lewis that did not make it onto Barfield's list: Lewis the historian—and not just "the historian of literature," but also "the historian" *simpliciter*.

Early in the book, especially in chapter 1, Snyder and Metcalf examine various aspects of Lewis's personal, academic, and professional life that support their claim that he is properly regarded as a historian in all but the strictest