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An Unexpected Guest

Abstract

Traces the unexpected influence of William Morris's *Icelandic Journals* and *News From Nowhere* on *The Hobbit* and the world of The Shire.

Additional Keywords

Iceland—Relation to J.R.R. Tolkien; Iceland—Relation to William Morris; Morris, William. *Icelandic Journals*; Morris, William. *News from Nowhere*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Sources

An Unexpected Guest

Anne Amison

J. R. R. Tolkien, always a very private man, was frequently irritated to receive letters suggesting “sources” or “inspirations” for *The Lord of the Rings* in the work of other writers. However, he was proud to acknowledge one influence, that of William Morris. Replying to a correspondent who had asked about the effects of his First World War experiences on his work, Tolkien had this to say about the landscape of Middle-earth, the setting for both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*: “The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme. They owe more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans, as in *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains*” (*Letters* 303). All Tolkien’s biographers make a passing reference to the influence of Morris, as does Fiona McCarthy in her biography of Morris. With one notable exception (Burns), most writers have concentrated on studying the echoes of Morris’s poems, sagas and romances to be found in Tolkien’s work. However, two of Morris’s other works, an account of a trip to Iceland and a utopian fantasy, may also have influenced Tolkien.

J. R. R. Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892, but spent the bulk of his childhood and adolescence in the industrial Birmingham of the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries. There were also two brief, but important, sojourns in the West Midlands countryside. A clever boy, Tolkien attended King Edward VI School in New Street, Birmingham and then Exeter College Oxford, following the same route as another Birmingham boy whose childhood had been without beauty, Edward Burne-Jones.

Tolkien certainly read Morris’s fiction whilst at Oxford, and it seems likely that this was the first time he had read any of Morris’s work. Tolkien’s biographer Humphrey Carpenter states “Morris had himself been an undergraduate at Exeter College, and this connection had probably stimulated Tolkien’s interest in him” (Carpenter 69). In his third year at Oxford Tolkien was awarded the Skeat Prize for English, and spent his five

pounds prize money on three of Morris's works: *The Life and Death of Jason*, Morris's translation of *The Volsunga Saga*, and *The House of the Wolfings* (Carpenter 69).¹ In the same year Morris's writing inspired the 22 year-old Tolkien to an attempt of his own. He wrote to tell his fiancée that he was turning a story from the Finnish *Kalevala* "into a short story somewhat on the lines of Morris's romances with chunks of poetry in between" (*Letters* 7).

Morris's translation of *The Volsunga Saga* led Tolkien into the world where he was to spend most of his academic life: he was to specialize, as undergraduate and later as professor, in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English and he had a passion for the Icelandic sagas. As professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford he formed a society called "The Coalbiters," which met to read the Icelandic sagas aloud (Carpenter 119-20).

However, when reading *The House of the Wolfings* (published in 1888) and Morris's late romances such as *The Well at the World's End* (1894), Tolkien entered a world that was, before the publication of his own novels, unique. The late romances are devoid of the childish or twee approaches that beset so many other early "fantasy" novels; from the first sentence the reader is placed within a perfectly realized and ordered sub-creation: "Long ago there was a little land" (*The Well at the World's End*), or "A while ago there was a young man dwelling in a great and goodly city by the sea" (*The Wood Beyond the World*). Without rabbit holes or fairy dust the reader is immersed within an actual world. One of Tolkien's biographers writes of "Morris's aptitude, despite the vagueness of place and time in which the story is set, for describing with great precision the details of his imagined landscape," and continues, "Tolkien himself was to follow Morris's example in later years" (Carpenter 70).

There can be little doubt, then, that Morris's fiction was a considerable influence on Tolkien. Much of what he found in Morris's work—names such as Mirkwood in *The House of the Wolfings*, for example—he was later to re-discover in the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic poems whose characters and landscapes were to become as real to him as his own family and the streets of Oxford. However, this article intends to explore the impact on Tolkien of two of Morris's other works, *The Icelandic Journals* and *News From Nowhere*.

¹ Richard Mathews, in his book *Fantasy: The Liberation of the Imagination*, states that at the end of his life Tolkien owned eleven books by Morris (Mathews 87).

The Icelandic Journals

Tolkien has left no evidence in his published writings about when he read William Morris's journals of his two Icelandic expeditions of 1871 and 1873, but I hope to make it clear, using evidence from both authors' work, that he did so. Given the dearth of literature about Iceland, he was no doubt eager to read anything relating to the land of his beloved sagas. The influence of Morris's *Icelandic Journals* is most apparent in *The Hobbit*, first published in the UK in 1937.

Both Morris, in the *Journals*, and Tolkien, in *The Hobbit*, wrote in a consciously light-hearted tone. Morris (rotund, like Tolkien's Mr. Baggins—both have their weight commented upon²) consciously presents himself as the buffoon of his party, cared for and irritating by turns. He regularly loses things which are returned by kindly Icelanders.³ This is the exact attitude which Tolkien's dwarves (all of whose names come from the Icelandic poem *Voluspa* [Shippey 16-17]) adopt towards Mr. Baggins who, like Morris, is used to a comfortable middle-class life and is thrust into an "adventure."⁴

Burne-Jones' well-known caricature of Morris on a pony could equally apply to Tolkien's Mr. Baggins. Both are often homesick, both dislike rivers and streams. Morris's obvious discomfort when fording the fast-flowing Icelandic rivers (for example, crossing the Markaflljot he clings to his horse's mane and "quite lost my sense of where I was going" [*Icelandic Journals* 40]) is a characteristic which Tolkien transferred wholesale to hobbits who, interestingly, look upon rivers and boats as "wild horses" (*Fellowship* 384).

Morris, to his own surprise, proves to be a good camp cook, producing fried bacon and plovers, a highly-praised stew, and a leg of lamb on various occasions. Likewise, Tolkien gives this quality to hobbits. All hobbits are fond of food (hence Mr. Baggins's girth—we are told that his

² Compare the priest who "tapped [Morris] on the belly and said very gravely: "Besides you know you are so fat" (*Journals* 126) to Bilbo Baggins's treatment in the house of Beorn (*Hobbit* 141).

³ For example, his pannikin (*Journals* 26) and his slipper (28).

⁴ "May Morris reminds us that her father at this period was used to a largely sedentary life and six hours in the saddle were a new experience" (McCarthy 292).

hobbit-hole has lots of pantries) and in *The Lord of the Rings* Sam, the hobbit servant, is described as “a good cook, even by hobbit reckoning, and he had done a good deal of the camp-cooking on their travels” (*Towers* 261).

Bilbo Baggins, therefore, is torn from his comfortable middle-class existence by dwarves with names from the sagas. William Morris left his comfortable life for a time in order to explore the landscape of the sagas. Marjorie J. Burns has outlined many similarities between the landscape Morris describes with such clarity in the *Journals* and the landscape of Tolkien’s Middle-earth. Like Morris, Tolkien could describe landscape in great detail. Here Morris describes his party’s climb up and inside the volcano Eiriksajokull. Climbing “over the lava till we come to a steep-sided hollow,” they entered “first into a ragged sort of porch, and then into a regular vaulted hall” from whence ran a long dark passage (*Journals* 66). Compare Bilbo and the dwarves on the Lonely Mountain: “Silently, clinging to the rocky wall on their right, they went in single file along the ledge till [...] they turned into a little steep-walled bay” (*Hobbit* 219). Later, Bilbo goes inside the Mountain: “It was a passage made by dwarves [...] straight as a ruler” (225).

There are other correspondences. Morris writes comically of his party’s difficulties making a fire in the Icelandic damp: “It soon comes on to rain again,” and despite everyone’s attempts it was not possible to light the fire (*Journals* 56). Tolkien depicts a similar situation as the dwarves “sat glum and wet and muttering, while Oin and Gloin went on trying to light the fire” (*Hobbit* 42) until, like Morris and Charlie Faulkner on several occasions, they began to fight.⁵

The ponies ridden by Bilbo and the dwarves owe much to the Icelandic ponies about which Morris writes with such obvious affection. The Morris party’s ponies are always running away, chased by the guides. On Morris’s second visit to Iceland a baggage pony bolts “and he had soon banged off both bundles and then galloped away as hard as he could split” (*Journals* 160). Similarly, one of the dwarves’ ponies bolts at nothing, losing all the baggage he was carrying. Indeed, on the subject of ponies, Morris and Tolkien have an almost exact correspondence of language. Morris writes of making camp in a storm, while the ponies have their “tails turned

⁵ *Icelandic Journals* includes a comic account of Morris and Faulkner falling out over who was snoring (122-23).

to the wind and heads hanging down, shaking again with the cold" (*Journals* 69). When Bilbo and the dwarves make camp in a storm "their ponies were standing with their heads down and their tails between their legs" (*Hobbit* 68).

The dwellings of Tolkien's hobbits have a great deal in common with the houses Morris saw and described in Iceland. Morris was fascinated by the thick turf walls: "both walls and roof are just as green as the field they spring from; all doors are very low," necessary insulation in the hostile climate (*Journals* 31). Hobbit-holes "were usually long, low and comfortable [...] thatched with dry grass or straw, or roofed with turves, and having walls somewhat bulged" (*Fellowship* 16).

Although Morris loved Iceland, he found it a very melancholy place in many ways. Everywhere he went were reminders of the heroic days of the sagas: Gunnar's Howe, the home of Gudrun, places associated with Grettir the Strong. One guide, Thorstein, points out saga sites as if the inhabitants were still his neighbors, and a host almost quarrels with Morris "for saying some ill of Snorri the Priest" dead a thousand years (*Journals* 99). Although this immediacy was very important to Morris—it was after all what he had gone to Iceland in order to find—he also found it depressing to compare the glories of the past with the deprivation of the present: "What a mournful place this is—Iceland I mean [...] how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory [...]. But Lord! What littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once—and all is unforgotten" (*Journals* 84).

It is perhaps from passages such as this, which contrast past heroism and present poverty, that Tolkien took one of his most important inspirations from the *Journals*. By the time he wrote *The Hobbit* in the early 1930s, Tolkien had already been working for twenty years on his "mythology for England," *The Silmarillion*. In common with the sagas which Morris and Tolkien both loved, *The Silmarillion* is a tale of nobility and heroism, love and loss. Descendants of the great heroes who people *The Silmarillion* appear in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. As with the people of Iceland described by Morris, they are sadly diminished. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien describes the Dúnedain of Arnor, descendants of great kings, "their power departed and their people dwindled" so that they are scattered and, like the Icelanders, live in isolated settlements (*Return*

324). Yet they still recall the deeds of their forebears as if millennia were a few days.

News From Nowhere

News From Nowhere (1890), a Utopian revolutionary novel, may seem an unlikely influence on a man considered by many to be a purveyor of escapist fiction. However, the landscape, lifestyle and even, in part, the attitudes of Nowhere are reflected in Tolkien's Shire.

Of course, *News From Nowhere* is not the only place Tolkien could have found an idealized English rural landscape: many authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described rural idylls. George Eliot is only one example of someone who wrote about the largely pre-industrial Midland landscape (a similar area to that in which the young Tolkien spent his two brief "rural idylls") of the 1820s and 1830s. However, Tolkien was no enthusiast for what he called "modern" English literature, by which he meant anything post-Chaucer. So the two most likely sources for the Shire are Tolkien's childhood recollections of two brief periods living in the West Midlands countryside and *News From Nowhere*. Again, Tolkien has left no published account of when he read the work, but internal evidence from both writers points very strongly to his having done so.

Tolkien, conservative in outlook throughout his life, would doubtless have small interest in the chapters in *News From Nowhere* concerning the 1952 revolution. However, he would instantly have sympathized with Morris's description of the de-urbanization of England, which fitted so well with his own association of the rural landscape with happiness and freedom.⁶ The lifestyle of Nowhere is described in the book by Old Hammond: "[England] is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty" (*News from Nowhere* 61). It would have seemed perfection to Tolkien. When he wrote about the Shire, home of the Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, this is almost exactly what he described. The Shire is Nowhere seen through the lens of Tolkien's natural conservatism.

⁶ Tolkien lived at Sarehole, south of Birmingham, from 1896-1900 and at Rednal, Worcestershire, for a few months in 1904. He regarded these as the happiest times of his life.

In *News From Nowhere*, Morris carefully describes work, transport, food, housing and the upbringing of children. Each of these finds a close parallel in Tolkien's writing. First, work. In *Nowhere*, of course, Morris described his own ideal: no unnecessary mechanization, "useless toil" obliterated and replaced by "useful work." Old Hammond states that: "All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without" (*News* 82). The pleasurable work which Morris goes on to describe includes house-building, gardening, farming, the work of the smithy and weaving. He also comments upon the "abundance of mills" along the Thames (*News* 172).

Tolkien shared Morris's dislike of mechanization. Indeed, he was almost virulently opposed to technology, having seen the devastation caused by then state-of-the-art machinery during his time in the trenches. He only briefly owned a car and, prophetically, was concerned about the damage done to the landscape by new roads. In a filmed interview, his son recalled Tolkien's belief, so like that of Morris, that labor-saving machinery simply created worse labor: it put slavery out of sight in the factories (*J.R.R.T.*). Hobbits of the Shire, then, share the lifestyle of *Nowhere*. They are farmers, millers, gardeners. "[Hobbits] do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom" (*Fellowship* 10). A related area, of course, is transport, and here the match is exact. In *Nowhere*, William Guest (the name which Morris adopts in his guise as narrator) travels, or witnesses transport, by foot, horse and cart or river, and these are exactly the modes of transport used by hobbits of the Shire.

Morris speaks with great relish of the meals enjoyed by Guest in *Nowhere*. All the food is "simple" and "excellent" (*News* 86). Guest tucks into pies and wine, and is lucky enough to find a pipe and tobacco shop. Hobbits, like William Morris himself, love eating and drinking, and will have "six meals a day (when they could get them)" (*Fellowship* 11). They, like Morris and Tolkien, also love smoking and are renowned for their cultivation of excellent tobacco.

Guest is struck by the houses in *Nowhere*, "amongst the fields with pleasant lanes leading down to them, and each surrounded by a teeming garden" (*News* 19). Tolkien made a picture of his ideal hobbit village as an

illustration for *The Hobbit*. It shows exactly what Morris described: cottage gardens, pleasant lanes, a farm and a water-mill—rural perfection.

Guest is at first perplexed, then delighted, to find that the children of Nowhere are not being crammed full of useless knowledge but live a free, outdoor life camping and cooking in the woods. Book-learning, he finds, is delayed for as long as possible: “As a rule, they don’t do much reading, except for a few story-books, till they are about fifteen years old” (*News* 25). Tolkien gave this excellent way of life to Hobbits, who were easy-going with their children, preferring them to learn cooking rather than their letters, “which many never reach” (*Towers* 261).

What of government? Nowhere is an anarchist society, and Tolkien wrote of the Shire as having “hardly any ‘government’” (*Fellowship* 18). In a letter written during the Second World War, Tolkien expressed a preference for “Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control [...])” (*Letters* 63). However, Tolkien, whose years of maturity coincided with the Russian Revolution and Stalinism, was not a socialist. He believed that socialism was synonymous with state control and interference. Morris predicted just such an outcome in his 1893 lecture “Communism,” arguing that Fabian “gas and water” socialism would lead to a soulless, state-run future. Morris’s argument is reflected in Tolkien’s statement: “I am not a ‘socialist’ in any sense—being averse to ‘planning’ [...] most of all because the ‘planners’, when they acquire power, become so bad” (*Letters* 235). Tolkien included this belief in the concluding chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, when the Shire is at the mercy of ‘gatherers’ and ‘sharers,’ ruined by soulless new building and industrial blight.

Unlike Nowhere, the Shire is not completely egalitarian. Although it has no aristocracy, it has a clearly-defined middle class with inherited wealth and a working/servant class of farmers, gardeners and servants who show “proper respect” to their “betters” addressing them as “Master Frodo” or “Mistress Lobelia.”⁷ Tolkien, therefore, seems to have drawn on Nowhere as a rural ideal whilst discarding its political aspects. It also seems possible that Tolkien pays his own homage to Morris for (as Tolkien wrote in a different context in *The Lord of the Rings*) those to see who can.

⁷ Mr. Baggins inherited his home from his father (*Hobbit* 11). Farmer Cotton, Sam Gamgee and his father Gaffer Gamgee are presented as working class characters. Sam refers to his employer as “Mr. Frodo” throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s own opinion was “Touching your cap to the squire may be damn bad for the squire but it’s damn good for you” (*Carpenter* 128).

Traveling up the Thames in *News From Nowhere*, Guest, Dick and Clara are invited by an old man to stay in a little house at Runnymede on “the rise of the hill” with “little windows [...] already yellow with candle-light” (*News* 126). Compare *The Lord of the Rings*, where the four hobbit travelers see “high above them on a further slope [...] the twinkling lights of a house. [...] Suddenly a wide yellow beam flowed out” (*Fellowship* 133). Guest and his friends find themselves in “a very pretty room, panelled and carved [...] the chief ornament of which was a young woman, light-haired” —her name is Ellen, and this is Guest’s first meeting with her (*News* 127). The hobbits come to “a long low room, filled with the light of lamps [...]” Here they find “a woman. Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders” (*Fellowship* 134). Her name is Goldberry.

Ellen welcomes Guest and his companions and brings them food, her movements “as beautiful as a picture” (*News* 128); Goldberry “busied herself about the table [...] the slender grace of her movement filled [the hobbits] with quiet delight” (*Fellowship* 135). After their respective meals, Guest has a night of good sleep in the house for “there were no rough noises to wake me” (*News* 132), whilst the hobbits are bid to sleep well and “Heed no nightly noise” (*Fellowship* 138).

Tolkien was a careful writer with an almost compulsive desire to revise his work, so these correspondences cannot be the result of chance. Perhaps the most telling parallel is this. On the morning after his restful sleep, Guest, Dick and Clara are looking at Ellen. Dick remarks “we have come to a fairy garden, and there is the very fairy herself amidst of it” (*News* 133). Ellen’s grumpy grandfather is compared to a “gnome or wood-spirit.” To the hobbits, Goldberry seems like “a fair young elf-queen clad in living flowers” (*Fellowship* 134). But what of the “gnome or wood-spirit,” Ellen’s cantankerous grandfather? In his place Tolkien, like Morris a great lover of trees and nature, has put Tom Bombadil, the guardian of the woods and natural world. In Tolkien’s description of Bombadil we seem to have an affectionate portrait of Morris himself: “a large and heavy” man “stumping along with great yellow boots on his thick legs, and charging through grass and rushes like a cow going to drink. He had a blue coat and a long brown beard” (*Fellowship* 131). The contrast between the “slender grace” of Goldberry and the “merry and odd caperings of Tom” (*Fellowship* 143) are reminiscent of the contrast between Jane and William Morris in one of Rossetti’s mischievous caricatures.

William Morris, always a lover of woods and fields and little rivers, would no doubt be both amused and pleased to find himself transformed in this way.

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