

Did Tolkein write ‘juvenile trash’?

When it was first published, critics called *The Lord of the Rings* backward-looking and unimaginative. In his new book, Dominic Sandbrook explores the backlash.

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tragically and very unfairly, has never quite recovered, Tolkien’s star remains undimmed. Not even Peter Jackson’s shameful *Hobbit* adaptations have damaged his popularity. Shippey suggests that, in the future, literary historians will rank *The Lord of the Rings* alongside other 20th Century classics such as Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Lord of the Flies* and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. But there is an obvious difference. *The Lord of the Rings* is much more popular.

One of the things about *The Lord of the Rings* that most annoys its critics is that it is so unrepentantly backward-looking. But it probably could never have been otherwise.

For good private reasons, Tolkien was a fundamentally backward-looking person. He was born to English parents in Bloemfontein, then the capital of the Orange Free State, in 1892, which made him 16 months

younger than Agatha Christie. When little Ronald (as he was known) was three, his mother, Mabel, brought him back from South Africa to her native Birmingham. The plan was for his father, Arthur, to join them later. But Arthur was killed by rheumatic fever before he even boarded ship, so Mabel raised her two boys alone in the village of Sarehole, then in north Worcestershire, on the fringes of the great Midlands metropolis.

Tolkien had a very happy middle-class childhood, devouring the great Victorian children’s classics and excitedly exploring the countryside near his home, including Sarehole’s old mill, the bog at nearby Moseley and Worcestershire’s Clent, Lickey and Malvern Hills. But in November 1904 his mother succumbed to diabetes, which was then often fatal.

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aunt in Stirling Road, Edgbaston. But their new home, close to Birmingham’s present-day Five Ways roundabout, felt very different from the sleepy tranquility they had known in Sarehole. They had moved from the city’s leafy fringes to its grey industrial heart: when Tolkien looked out of the window, he saw not trees and hills, but “almost unbroken rooftops with the factory chimneys beyond”. It was little wonder that, from the first moment he put pen to paper, his fiction was dominated by a heartfelt nostalgia.

In his trenchant defense of Tolkien, the literary scholar Tom Shippey suggests that much of the criticism is rooted in pure social and intellectual condescension, not unlike the snobbery that upper-class grotesques like Virginia Woolf directed at his fellow Midlander Arnold Bennett in the early part of the century. The difference, though, is that while Bennett’s reputation,



Tolkien, seen here in his study at Merton College, Oxford, was a fundamentally backward-looking person

An amateur psychologist could have a field day with the fact that both JRR Tolkien and Agatha Christie lost parents in their childhood and nursed a sense of loss for the rest of their careers. (Perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that the only writers of their generation to rival them in terms of sales – Enid Blyton, who was born in 1897; Barbara Cartland, who was born in 1901; and of course Catherine Cookson, born in 1906 – all had similar memories of loss and upheaval. Cookson hated her mother and never knew her father, Blyton’s father walked out when she was 13, and Cartland’s father was killed in Flanders when she was a teenager.)

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On the surface, it would be hard to imagine two writers more different than Tolkien, lost in a medieval landscape of trolls, orcs and dragons, and Christie, meticulously working out the details of the murder at the vicarage. What they had in common, though, was that although they continued writing into the

early 1970s, they were most deeply influenced by the popular fiction of late Victorian Britain. Tolkien’s particular favorites were the fantastic fairy stories of George MacDonald, notably *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and the folk and fairy stories collected by the Scottish poet Andrew Lang. Today fairy stories have a rather weedy, effeminate image: a century ago, however, this was not the case at all. As the Tolkien scholar John Garth notes, many of the soldiers who fought for Britain on the Western Front had been reared on the tales of MacDonald and Lang, as well as JM Barrie’s *Peter Pan*.

Tolkien’s other great enthusiasm, meanwhile, was more stereotypically masculine: the rousing adventure stories of H Rider Haggard. The American critic Jared Lobdell has even argued that when considering Tolkien’s influences, Haggard’s should be “the first name” on the list, and that when Tolkien began work on *The Lord of the Rings*, his real aim was to produce “an adventure story in the Edwardian mode”, not unlike Haggard’s rip-roaring romances *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887).

The most obvious influence on Tolkien, though, was that Victorian one-man industry, William Morris. It is a pretty safe bet that when most people see Morris’s name today, they think: ‘Wallpaper.’ But in the first years of the 20th Century, what earnest young men like Tolkien loved about Morris was his nostalgic idealism: his evocation of a lost medieval paradise, a world of chivalry and romance that threw the harsh realities of modern, materialistic industrial Britain into stark relief. Both Morris and his friend Edward Burne-Jones were arch-medievalists, besotted with the legends of King Arthur and, in Morris’s case, the ancient myths of northern Europe. In 1876 Morris had published *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Nibelungs*, adapted from the Old Norse sagas that won so much international popularity in the late Victorian period. Largely forgotten today, Morris’s epic poem made an enormous impression on his contemporaries. Tolkien seems to have first read Morris at King Edward’s, the outstanding Birmingham boys’ school that had previously educated Burne-Jones. Addressing the King Edward’s literary society, the young Tolkien even claimed that the story of Sigurd the dragon-slayer – the Norse equivalent of Wagner’s Siegfried – represented ‘the highest epic genius struggling out of savagery into complete and conscious humanity’.

And while other boys grew out of their obsession with the legends of the ancient North, Tolkien’s fascination only deepened. After going up to Oxford in 1911, he began writing his own version of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, in a distinctly Morris-esque blend of prose and poetry. When his college, Exeter, awarded him a prize, he spent the money on a pile of Morris books, notably the epic poem *The Life and Death of Jason*, the proto-fantasy novel *The House of the Wolfings* and Morris’s translation of the *Volsunga Saga*. Indeed, to the end of his life, Tolkien continued to write in a style heavily influenced by Morris, not just mixing prose and verse, but deliberately imitating the vocabulary and rhythms of the medieval epic. In this sense, it was as though his clock had stopped before the Great War.

Other clocks, however, ticked on. On 7 June 1914 Tolkien and his fellow students enjoyed a lavish

dinner to celebrate Exeter's 600th anniversary. Two years later, on 7 June 1916, he awoke in northern France, having just landed on a troop transport from Folkestone. Tolkien was 24 years old, an Oxford graduate with a young wife. He ought to have been establishing a name for himself in his chosen career: academic philology, the study of language. Instead, he was a signals officer in the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, commanding miners and weavers from the industrial north-west.

By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead – Tolkien

But this was not war as it had been portrayed in the adventure stories he had loved as a boy; this was carnage on an industrial scale. In early July his unit moved to the Somme, and there Tolkien

remained until the end of October, when he was invalided home with trench fever. What he experienced there was a chaotic, muddy, bloody nightmare. Tolkien himself might easily have been killed: in the three and a half months he spent on the Somme, his battalion lost almost 600 men. Unpleasant as trench fever might have seemed, it was probably the best thing that ever happened to him. For the war fell like a scythe on his generation. Among the dead were no fewer than 243 boys from King Edward's, as well as 141 young men from Exeter College. John Garth opens his book *Tolkien and the Great War* with a rugby match between the Old Edwardians and the school's first fifteen, played in December 1913. Tolkien himself captained the old boys' team. Within five years, four of his teammates had been killed and four more badly wounded. The sense of loss haunted him for the rest of his life. "To be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years," he wrote in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead." There is no doubt that the Great War was one of the genuinely defining moments in Tolkien's life, as it was for so many other young men. The extraordinary thing, though, is that it was at precisely this point, amid the horror and suffering of war, that he began work on his great cycle of Middle-earth stories. Years later, in a letter to his son Christopher, then serving with the RAF in another world war, Tolkien recalled that he had begun writing "in grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire". And despite the lazy assertions of the Philip Pullman tendency, Tolkien never saw his work as pure escapism: quite the opposite, in fact. He had begun writing, he explained, "to express [my] feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering".

Tolkien believed that medievalism, myth and fantasy offered the only salvation

Given that this was the age of high modernism, it might seem odd that Tolkien should have chosen to express his feelings in the form of a pseudo-medieval fantasy. But unlike many writers of his

generation, he remained true to the principles of Morris and Burne-Jones. For Ezra Pound and his fellow modernists, the only way to deal with the horrors of the modern world was to "make it new". For Tolkien, however, the reverse was true. More than ever, he believed that medievalism, myth and fantasy offered the only salvation from the corruption of industrial society.

And far from shaking his faith, the slaughter on the Somme had only strengthened his belief that to make sense of this shattered, bleeding world, he must look backwards to the great legends of the North.

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