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Author's note

This book is based upon the letters, diaries, and other papers of the late Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, and upon the reminiscences of his family and friends.

Tolkien himself did not entirely approve of biography. Or rather, he disliked its use as a form of literary criticism. 'One of my strongest opinions,' he once wrote, 'is that investigation of an author's biography is an entirely vain and false approach to his works.' Yet he was undoubtedly aware that the remarkable popularity of his fiction made it highly likely that a biography would be written after his death; and indeed he appears to have made some preparation for this himself, for in the last years of his life he annotated a number of old letters and papers with explanatory notes or other comments. He also wrote a few pages of recollections of his childhood. It may thus be hoped that this book would not be entirely foreign to his wishes.

In writing it I have tried to tell the story of Tolkien's life without attempting any critical judgements of his works of fiction. This is partly in deference to his own views, but in any case it seems to me that the first published biography of a writer is not necessarily the best place to make literary judgements, which will after all reflect the character of the critic just as much as that of his subject. I have however tried to delineate some of the literary and other influences that came to bear on Tolkien's imagination, in the hope that this may shed some light on his books,

H.C.

Oxford, 1976

A Visit

It is mid-morning on a spring day in 1967. I have driven from the centre of Oxford, over Magdalen Bridge, along the London road, and up a hill into the respectable but dull suburb of Headington. Near a large private school for girls I turn left into Sandfield Road, a residential street of two-storey brick houses, each with its tidy front garden.

Number seventy-six is a long way down the road. The house is painted white and is partially screened by a tall fence, a hedge, and overhanging trees. I park the car, open the arched gate, go up the short path between rose bushes, and ring the front door bell.

For a long time, there is silence, except for the rumble of distant traffic in the main road. I am beginning to think of ringing again or of turning away when the door is opened by Professor Tolkien.

He is slightly smaller than I expected. Tallness is a quality of which he makes much in his books, so it is a little surprising to see that he himself is slightly less than the average height - not much, but just enough to be noticeable. I introduce myself, and (since I made this appointment in advance and am expected) the quizzical and somewhat defensive look that first met me is replaced by a smile. A hand is offered and my own is firmly grasped.

Behind him I can see the entrance-hall, which is small and tidy and contains nothing that one would not expect in the house of a middle-class elderly couple. W.H. Auden, in an injudicious remark quoted in the newspapers, has called the house 'hideous', but that is nonsense. It is simply ordinary and suburban.

Mrs. Tolkien appears for a moment, to greet me. She is smaller than her husband, a neat old lady with white hair bound close to her head, and dark eyebrows. Pleasantries are exchanged, and then the Professor comes out of the front door and takes me into his 'office' at the side of the house.

This proves to be the garage, long abandoned by any car - he explains that he has not had a car since the beginning of the Second World War - and, since his retirement, made habitable and given over to the housing of books and papers formerly kept in his college room. The shelves are crammed with dictionaries, works on etymology and philology, and editions of texts in many languages, predominant among which are Old and Middle English and Old Norse; but there is also a section devoted to translations of *The Lord of the Rings* into Polish, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, and Japanese; and the map of his invented 'Middle-earth' is pinned to the window-ledge. On the floor is a very old portmanteau full of letters, and on the desk are ink-bottles, nibs and pen-holders, and two typewriters. The room smells of books and tobacco smoke.

It is not very comfortable, and the Professor apologises for receiving me here, but he explains that there is no space in the study-bedroom in the house where he actually does his writing. He says that in any case this is all temporary: soon he will, he hopes, manage to finish at least the major part of the work promised to his publishers, and then he and Mrs Tolkien will be able to move to more comfortable quarters and congenial surroundings, away from visitors and intrusions. He looks slightly embarrassed after the last remark.

I climb past the electric fire and, at his bidding, seat myself in a wheel-back chair, as he takes his pipe from the pocket of his tweed jacket and launches into an explanation of his inability to spare me more than a few minutes. A shiny blue alarm clock ticks noisily across the room as if to emphasise the point. He says that he has to clear up an apparent contradiction in a passage of *The Lord of the Rings* that has been pointed out in a letter from a reader; the matter requires his urgent consideration as a revised edition of the book is about to go to press. He explains it all in great detail, talking about his book not as a work of fiction but as a chronicle of actual events; he seems to see himself not as an author who has made a slight error that must now be corrected or explained away, but as a historian who must cast light on an obscurity in a historical document.

Disconcertingly, he seems to think that I know the book as well as he does. I have read it many times, but he is talking about details that mean little or nothing to me. I begin to fear that he will throw some penetrating question at me that will reveal my ignorance - and indeed now he does ask me a question, but fortunately it is rhetorical and clearly requires no more than the answer 'yes'.

I am still nervous that there will be other and harder questions, doubly nervous because I cannot hear everything that he is saying. He has a strange voice, deep but without resonance, entirely English but with some quality in it that I cannot define, as if he had come from another age or civilisation. Yet for much of the time he does not speak clearly. Words come out in eager rushes. Whole phrases are elided or compressed in the haste of emphasis. Often

business to provide employment for his—sons. Arthur had tried to make a career in Lloyds Bank, but promotion in the Birmingham office was slow, and he knew that if he was to support a wife and family he would have to look elsewhere.

He turned his eye to South Africa, where the gold and diamond discoveries were making banking into an expanding business with good prospects for employees. Less than a year after proposing to Mabel he had obtained a post with the Bank of Africa, and had sailed for the Cape.

Arthur's initiative had soon been justified. For the first year he had been obliged to travel extensively, for he was sent on temporary postings to many of the principal towns between the Cape and Johannesburg. He acquitted himself well, and at the end of 1890 he was appointed manager of the important branch at Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State. A house was provided for him, the income was adequate, and so at last marriage was possible. Mabel celebrated her twenty-first birthday at the end of January 1891, and only a few weeks later she was on board Roslin Castle and sailing towards South Africa and Arthur, their betrothal now blessed with her father's approval.

Or perhaps 'tolerance' would be a better word, for John Suffield was a proud man, especially in the matter of ancestry which in many ways was all he had left to be proud of. Once he had owned a prosperous drapery business in Birmingham, but now like Arthur Tolkien's father he was bankrupt. He had to earn his living as a commercial traveller for Jeyes disinfectant; yet the failure of his fortunes had only strengthened his pride in the old and respectable Midland family from which he was descended. What were the Tolkiens in comparison? Mere German immigrants, English by only a few generations - scarcely a fit pedigree for his daughter's husband.

If such reflections occupied Mabel during her three-week voyage, they were far from her mind on the day early in April when the ship sailed into harbour at Cape Town, and she caught sight at last of a white-suited, handsome, and luxuriantly-moustached figure on the quay, scarcely looking his thirty-four years as he peered anxiously through the crowd for a glimpse of his darling 'Mab'.

Arthur Reuel Tolkien and Mabel Suffield were married in Cape Town Cathedral on 16 April 1891, and spent their honeymoon in a hotel at nearby Sea Point. Then came an exhausting railway journey of nearly seven hundred miles to the capital of the Orange Free State, and the house which was to be Mabel's first and only home with Arthur.

Bloemfontein had begun life forty-five years earlier as a mere hamlet. Even by 1891 it was of no great size. Certainly it did not present an impressive spectacle to Mabel as she and Arthur got off the train at the newly built railway station. In the centre of the town was the market square where the Dutch-speaking farmers from the veldt trundled in aboard great ox-wagons to unload and sell the bales of wool that were the backbone of the State's economy. Around the square were clustered solid indications of civilisation: the colonnaded Parliament House, the two-towered Dutch Reformed church, the Anglican cathedral, the hospital, the public library, and the Presidency. There was a club for European residents (German, Dutch, and English), a tennis club, a law court, and a sufficiency of shops. But the trees that had been planted by the first settlers were still sparse, and the town's park was, as Mabel observed, no more than about ten willows and a patch of water. Only a few hundred yards beyond the houses was the open veldt where wolves, wild dogs, and jackals roamed and menaced the flocks, and where after dark a post-rider might be attacked by a marauding lion. From these treeless plains the wind blew into Bloemfontein, stirring the dust of the broad dirt-covered streets. Mabel, writing to her family, summed up the town as 'Owlin' Wilderness! Horrid Waste!'

However for Arthur's sake she must learn to like it, and meanwhile the life she found herself leading was by no means uncomfortable. The premises of the Bank of Africa, in Maitland Street just off the market square, included a solidly built residence with a large garden. There were servants in the house, some black or coloured, some white immigrants; and there was company enough -to be chosen from among the many other English-speaking residents, who organised a regular if predictable round of dances and dinner-parties. Mabel had much time to herself, for when Arthur was not busy in the bank he was attending classes to learn Dutch, the language in which all government and legal documents were worded; or he was making useful acquaintances in the club. He could not afford to take life easy, for although there was only one other bank in Bloemfontein, this was the National, native to the Orange Free State; whereas the Bank of Africa of which Arthur was manager was an outsider, a uitlander, and was only tolerated by a special parliamentary decree. To make matters worse, the previous manager of the Bank of Africa had gone over to the National, and Arthur had to work doubly hard to make sure that valuable accounts did not follow him. Then there were new projects in the locality which might be turned to the advantage of his bank, schemes connected with the Kimberley diamonds to the west or the Witwatersrand gold to the north. It was a crucial stage in Arthur's career, and, moreover, Mabel could see that he was intensely happy. His health had not been consistently good since he arrived in South Africa, but the climate seemed to suit his temperament; seemed, as Mabel noticed with the faintest apprehension, positively to appeal to him, whereas after only a few months she

weeks on business. It was intensely cold, and the two sisters huddled around the dining-room stove while Mabel knitted garments for the baby and she and May talked about Birmingham days. Mabel was making little secret of her irritation with Bloemfontein life, its climate, its endless social calls, and its tedious dinner-parties. Home leave could be taken soon now, in a year or so - though Arthur was always suggesting reasons for postponing their visit to England. 'I will not let him put it off too long,' wrote Mabel. 'He does grow too fond of this climate to please me. I wish I could like it better, as I'm sure he'll never settle in England again.'

In the end the trip had to be postponed. Mabel found that she was pregnant again, and on 17 February 1894 she gave birth to another son. He was christened Hilary Arthur Reuel.

Hilary proved to be a healthy child who flourished in the Bloemfontein climate, but his elder brother was not doing so well. Ronald was sturdy and handsome, with his fair hair and blue eyes - 'quite a young Saxon', his father called him. By now he was talking volubly and entertaining the bank clerks on his daily visit to his father's office downstairs, where he would demand pencil and paper and scribble away at crude drawings. But teething upset him badly and made him feverish, so that the doctor had to be called in day after day and Mabel was soon worn out. The weather was at its worst: an intense drought arrived, ruined trade, spoiled tempers, and brought a plague of locusts that swarmed across the veldt and destroyed a fine harvest. Yet despite all this, Arthur wrote to his father the words that Mabel had dreaded to hear: 'I think I shall do well in this country and do not think I should settle down well in England again for a permanency.'

Whether they were to stay or not, it was clear that the heat was doing a great deal of harm to Ronald's health. Something must be done to get him to cooler air. So in November 1894 Mabel took the two boys the many hundreds of miles to the coast near Cape Town. Ronald was nearly three now, old enough to retain a faint memory of the long train journey and of running back from the sea to a bathing hut on a wide flat sandy shore. After this holiday Mabel and the children returned to Bloemfontein, and preparations were made for their visit to England. Arthur had booked a passage and had engaged a nurse to travel with them. He badly wanted to accompany them himself; but he could not afford to be away from his desk, for there were railway schemes on hand that concerned the bank, and as he wrote to his father: 'In these days of competition one does not like to leave one's business in the hands of others.' Moreover time spent away would be on half pay, and he could not easily afford this in addition to the expense of the voyage. So he decided to stay in Bloemfontein for the time being and to join his wife and children in England a little later. Ronald watched his father painting A. R. Tolkien on the lid of a family trunk. It was the only clear memory of him that the boy retained.

The S.S. Guelph carried Mabel and the boys from South Africa at the beginning of April 1895. In Ronald's mind there would remain no more than a few words of Afrikaans and a faint recollection of a dry dusty barren landscape, while Hilary was too young even to remember this. Three weeks later, Mabel's little sister Jane, now a grown woman, met them at Southampton; and in a few hours they were all in Birmingham and cramming into the tiny family house in King's Heath. Mabel's father was as jolly as ever, cracking jokes and making dreadful puns, and her mother was kind and understanding. They stayed on, and the spring and summer passed with a marked improvement in Ronald's health; but though Arthur wrote to say that he missed his wife and children very badly and was longing to come and join them, there was always something to detain him.

Then in November came the news that he had contracted rheumatic fever. He had already partially recovered, but he could not face an English winter and would have to regain his health before he could make the journey. Mabel spent a desperately anxious Christmas, though Ronald enjoyed himself and was fascinated by the sight of his first Christmas tree, which was very different from the wilting eucalyptus that had adorned Bank House the previous December.

When January came, Arthur was reported to be still in poor health, and Mabel decided that she must go back to Bloemfontein and care for him. Arrangements were made, and an excited Ronald dictated a letter to his father which was written out by the nurse.

9 Ashfield Road, King's Heath, February 14th 1896. My dear Daddy,

I am so glad I am coming back to see you it is such a long time since we came away from you I hope the ship will bring us all back to you Mamie and Baby and me. I know you will be so glad to have a letter from your little Ronald it is such a long time since I wrote to you I am got such a big man now because I have got a man's coat and a man's bodice Mamie says you will not know Baby or me we have got such big men we have got such a lot of Christmas presents to show you Auntie Gracie has been to see us I walk every day and only ride in my mailcart a little bit Hilary sends lots of love and kisses and so does your loving

Ronald.

with Rome was simply out of the question. Returning to Birmingham he forbade her to enter a Catholic church again, and she had to obey him; though for consolation -or was it revenge? - she turned to spiritualism.

Walter Incedon had provided a little financial help for Mabel Tolkien since Arthur's death. But now there would be no more money from that source. Instead Mabel would have to face hostility from Walter and from other members of her family, not to mention the Tolkiens, many of whom were Baptists and strongly opposed to Catholicism. The strain that this induced, coupled with the additional financial hardship, did no good to her health; but nothing would shake her loyalty to her new faith, and against all opposition she began to instruct Ronald and Hilary in the Catholic religion.

Meanwhile it was time for Ronald to be sent to school. In the autumn of 1899 at the age of seven he took the entrance examination for King Edward's, his father's old school. He failed to obtain a place, for his mother had probably been too easy-going in her teaching. But a year later he took the examination again and passed, entering King Edward's in September 1900. A Tolkien uncle who was uncharacteristically well-disposed towards Mabel paid the fees, which then amounted to twelve pounds per annum. The school was in the centre of Birmingham, four miles from Sarehole, and for the first few weeks Ronald had to walk much of the way, for his mother could not afford the train fare and the trams did not run as far as his home. Clearly this could not continue, and regretfully Mabel decided that their days in the country would have to end. She found a house to rent in Moseley, nearer the centre of the city and on the tram route, and late in 1900 she and the boys packed their belongings and left the cottage where they had been so happy for four years. 'Four years,' wrote Ronald Tolkien, looking back in old age, 'but the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life.'

King Edward's School could scarcely be missed by a traveller arriving in Birmingham on the London & North Western Railway, for it rose majestically above the subterranean smoke and steam of New Street Station. Resembling the dining-hall of a rich Oxford college, it was a heavy and soot-blackened essay in Victorian gothic by Barry, architect of the rebuilt Houses of Parliament.¹ The school, founded by Edward VI, was generously endowed, and the governors had been able to open branch-schools in many of the poorer parts of the city. But the educational standard of King Edward's itself, the 'High School', was still unrivalled in Birmingham, and many of the hundreds of boys who sat on worn benches construing their Caesar while the railway engines whistled below went on to win awards at the major universities.

By 1900 King Edward's had almost outgrown its buildings and was cramped, crowded, and noisy. It presented a daunting prospect to a boy who had been brought up in a quiet country village, and not surprisingly Ronald Tolkien spent much of his first term absent from school because of ill health. But gradually he became accustomed to the rough-and-tumble and the noise, and indeed soon grew to like it, settling down happily to the routine of school, although he did not as yet show any outstanding aptitude in classwork. Meanwhile, home life was very different from what he had known at Sarehole. His mother had rented a small house on the main road in the suburb of Moseley, and the view from the windows was a sad contrast to the Warwickshire countryside: trams struggling up the hill, the drab faces of passers-by, and in the distance the smoking factory chimneys of Sparkbrook and Small Heath. To Ronald the Moseley house remained in memory as 'dreadful'. And no sooner had they settled than they had to move: the house was to be demolished to make room for a fire-station. Mabel found a villa less than a mile away in a terrace row behind King's Heath Station. They were now not far from her parents' home, but what had dictated her choice was the presence in the road of the new Roman Catholic church of St Dunstan, corrugated outside and pitch-pine within. Ronald was still desperately forlorn at being severed from the Sarehole countryside, but he found some comfort in his new home. The King's Heath house backed on to a railway line, and life was punctuated by the roar of trains and the shunting of trucks in the nearby coal-yard. Yet the railway cutting had grass slopes, and here he discovered flowers and plants. And something else attracted his attention: the curious names on the coal-trucks in the sidings below, odd names which he did not know how to pronounce but which had a strange appeal to him. So it came about that by pondering over Nantyglo, Senghenydd, Blaen-Rhondda, Penrhiwceiber, and Tredegar, he discovered the existence of the Welsh language.

Later in childhood he went on a railway journey to Wales, and as the station names flashed past him he knew that here were words more appealing to him than any he had yet encountered, a language that was old and yet alive. He asked for information about it, but the only Welsh books that could be found for him were incomprehensible. Yet however brief and tantalising the glimpse, he had caught sight of another linguistic world.

Meanwhile his mother was becoming restless. She did not like the King's Heath house and she had discovered that she did not like St Dunstan's Church. So she began to search around, and once again she took the boys on long Sunday walks in search of a place of worship that appealed to her. Soon she discovered the Birmingham Oratory, a large church in the suburb of Edgbaston that was looked after by a community of priests. Surely she would find a friend and a sympathetic confessor among them? What was more, attached to the Oratory and under the direction of its clergy was the Grammar School of St Philip, where the fees were lower than King Edward's and where her

sons could receive a Catholic education. And (a deciding factor) there was a house to let next door to the school. So, early in 1902, she and the boys moved from King's Heath to Edgbaston, and Ronald and Hilary, now aged ten and eight, were enrolled at St Philip's School.

The Birmingham Oratory had been established in 1849 by John Henry Newman, then a recent convert to the Catholic faith. Within its walls he had spent the last four decades of his life, dying there in 1890. Newman's spirit still presided over the high-ceilinged rooms of the Oratory House in the Hagley Road, and in 1902 the community still included many priests who had been his friends and had served under him. One of these was Father Francis Xavier Morgan, then aged forty-three, who shortly after the Tolkiens moved into the district took over the duties of parish priest and came to call. In him Mabel soon found not only a sympathetic priest but a valuable friend. Half Welsh and half Anglo-Spanish (his mother's family were prominent in the sherry trade), Francis Morgan was not a man of great intellect, but he had an immense fund of kindness and humour and a flamboyance that was often attributed to his Spanish connections. Indeed he was a very noisy man, loud and affectionate, embarrassing to small children at first but hugely lovable when they got to know him. He soon became an indispensable part of the Tolkien household.

Without his friendship, life for Mabel and her sons would have shown scant improvement on the previous two years. They were living at 26 Oliver Road, a house that was only one degree better than a slum. Around them were mean side-streets. St Philip's School was only a step from their front door, but its bare brick classrooms were a poor substitute for the gothic splendours of King Edward's, and its academic standard was correspondingly lower. Soon Ronald had outpaced his class-mates, and Mabel realised that St Philip's could not provide the education that he needed. So she removed him, and once again undertook his tuition herself: with much success, for some months later he won a Foundation Scholarship to King Edward's and returned there in the autumn of 1903. Hilary too had been removed from St Philip's, but he had so far failed to pass the entrance examination to King Edward's; 'not my fault', his mother wrote to a relative, 'or that he didn't know the things; but he is so dreamy and slow at writing'. For the time being she continued to teach the younger boy at home.

On his return to King Edward's, Ronald was placed in the Sixth Class, about hah* way up the school. He was now learning Greek. Of his first contact with this language he later wrote: 'The fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, and with its surface glitter captivated me. But part of the attraction was antiquity and alien remoteness (from me): it did not touch home.' In charge of the Sixth Class was an energetic man named George Brewerton, one of the few assistant masters at the school who specialised in the teaching of English literature. This subject scarcely featured in the curriculum, and when taught it was confined chiefly to a study of Shakespeare's plays, which Ronald soon found that he 'disliked cordially'. In later years he especially remembered 'the bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of "Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill": I longed to devise a setting by which the trees might really march to war.' But if Shakespeare failed to please him there was other meat more suited to his taste. By inclination-his form-master Brewerton was a medievalist. Always a fierce teacher, he demanded that his pupils should use the plain old words of the English language. If a boy employed the term 'manure' Brewerton would roar out: 'Manure? Call it muck! Say it three times! Muck, muck, muck!' He encouraged his pupils to read Chaucer, and he recited the Canterbury Tales to them in the original Middle English. To Ronald Tolkien's ears this was a revelation, and he determined to learn more about the history of the language. At Christmas 1903 Mabel Tolkien wrote to her mother-in-law:

My dear Mrs Tolkien,

You said you like one of the boys' drawings better than anything bought with their money so they've done these for you. Ronald has really done his splendidly this year - he has just been having quite an exhibition in Father Francis' room - he has worked hard since he broke up on December 16th, and so have I, to find fresh subjects: - I haven't been out for almost a month - not even to The Oratory! - but the nasty wet muggy weather is making me better and since Ronald broke up I have been able to rest in the mornings. I keep having whole weeks of utter sleeplessness, which added to the internal cold and sickness have made it almost impossible to go on.

I found a postal order for 2/6 which you sent the boys some time ago - a year at least - which has been mislaid. They've been in town all afternoon spending this and a little bit more on things they wanted to give. - They've done all my Xmas shopping - Ronald can match silk lining or any art shade like a true 'Parisian Modiste'. - Is it his Artist or Draper Ancestry coming out? - He is going along at a great rate at school - he knows far more Greek than I do Latin - he says he is going to do German with me these holidays - though at present I feel more like Bed.

One of the clergy, a young, merry one, is teaching Ronald to play chess - he says he has read too much, everything fit for a boy under fifteen, and he doesn't know any single classical thing to recommend him. Ronald is making his First Communion this Christmas - so it is a very great feast indeed to us this year. I don't say this to vex you - only you say you like to know everything about them.

Mabel had appointed him to be guardian of her two sons, and it proved a wise choice, for he displayed unflinching generosity and affection to them. His generosity took a practical form, for he had a private income from his family's sherry business, and since as an Oratorian he was not obliged to surrender his property to the community he could use his money for his own purposes. Mabel had left only eight hundred pounds of invested capital with which to support the boys, but Father Francis quietly augmented this from his own pocket, and ensured that Ronald and Hilary did not go short of anything essential for their well-being.

Immediately after their mother's death he had to find somewhere for them to live: a tricky problem, for while ideally they should be housed by their own relatives there was a danger that the Suffield and Tolkien aunts and uncles might try to snatch them from the grasp of the Catholic Church. Already there had been some talk of contesting Mabel's will and of sending the boys to a Protestant boarding-school. There was however one relative, an aunt by marriage, who had no particular religious views and had a room to let. She lived in Birmingham near the Oratory, and Father Francis decided that her house would be as good a home as any for the moment. So a few weeks after their mother's death Ronald and Hilary (now aged thirteen and eleven) moved into their aunt's top-floor bedroom.

Her name was Beatrice Suffield. She lived in a dark house in Stirling Road, a long side-street in the district of Edgbaston. The boys had a large room to themselves, and Hilary was happy leaning out of the window and throwing stones at cats below. But Ronald, still numb from the shock of his mother's death, hated the view of almost unbroken rooftops with the factory chimneys beyond. The green countryside was just visible in the distance, but it now belonged to a remote past that could not be regained. He was trapped in the city. His mother's death had severed him from the open air, from Lickey Hill where he had gathered bilberries, and from the Rednal cottage where they had been so happy. And because it was the loss of his mother that had taken him away from all these things, he came to associate them with her. His feelings towards the rural landscape, already sharp from the earlier severance that had taken him from Sarehole, now became emotionally charged with personal bereavement. This love for the memory of the countryside of his youth was later to become a central part of his writing, and it was intimately bound up with his love for the memory of his mother.

Aunt Beatrice gave him and his brother board and lodging, but little more. She had been widowed not long before, and she was childless and poorly off. Sadly, she was also deficient in affection, and she showed little understanding of the boys' state of mind. One day Ronald came into her kitchen, saw a pile of ashes in the grate, and discovered that she had burnt all his mother's personal papers and letters. She had never considered that he might wish to keep them.

Fortunately the Oratory was near, and it soon became Ronald and Hilary's real home. Early in the morning they would hurry round to serve mass for Father Francis at his favourite side-altar in the Oratory church. Afterwards they would eat breakfast in the plain refectory, and then, when they had played their usual game of spinning the kitchen cat around in the revolving food-hatch, they would set off for school. Hilary had passed the entrance examination and was now at King Edward's, and the two boys would walk together down to New Street if there was time, or would take a horse-bus if the clock at Five Ways showed that they were late.

Ronald made many friends at school, and one boy in particular soon became an inseparable companion. His name was Christopher Wiseman. A year younger than Ronald, he was the son of a Wesleyan minister who lived in Edgbaston; he had fair hair, a broad good-natured face, and an energetically critical manner. The two boys met in the Fifth Class in the autumn of 1905, Tolkien achieving first place in the class - he was now showing distinct academic promise - and Wiseman coming second. This rivalry soon developed into a friendship based on a shared interest in Latin and Greek, a great delight in Rugby football ('soccer' was never played at King Edward's), and an enthusiasm for discussing anything and everything. Wiseman was a staunch Methodist, but the two boys found that they could argue about religion without bitterness.

Together they moved class by class up the school. Clearly Ronald Tolkien had an aptitude for languages - his mother had seen that - and King Edward's provided the ideal environment in which this aptitude could flourish. The study of Latin and Greek was the backbone of the curriculum, and both languages were taught particularly well in the First (or senior) Class, which Ronald reached shortly before his sixteenth birthday. The First Class was under the bright eye of the headmaster, Robert Gary Gilson, a remarkable man with a neat pointed beard who was an amateur inventor and an accomplished scientist as well as a skilled teacher of the classics; among his inventions were a windmill that charged batteries to provide electric light for his house, a species of hectograph which duplicated the school exam papers (illegibly, said the boys), and a small gun that could shoot golf balls. When teaching, he encouraged his pupils to explore the byways of learning and to be expert in everything that came their way: an example that made a great impression on Ronald Tolkien. But though he was discursive, Gilson also encouraged his pupils to make a detailed study of classical linguistics. This was entirely in keeping with Tolkien's inclinations; and, partly as a result of Gilson's teaching, he began to develop an interest in the general principles of language.

It was one thing to know Latin, Greek, French and German; it was another to understand why they were what they were. Tolkien had started to look for the bones, the elements that were common to them all: he had begun, in fact, to study philology, the science of words. And he was encouraged to do this even more when he made his acquaintance with Anglo-Saxon.

This was thanks to George Brewerton, the master who preferred muck to manure. Under his tuition Ronald Tolkien had shown an interest in Chaucerian English. Brewerton was pleased by this and offered to lend the boy an Anglo-Saxon primer. The offer was accepted eagerly.

Opening its covers, Tolkien found himself face to face with the language that was spoken by the English before the first Normans set foot in their land. Anglo-Saxon, also called Old English, was familiar and recognisable to him as an antecedent of his own language, and at the same time was remote and obscure. The primer explained the language clearly in terms that he could easily understand, and he was soon making light work of translating the prose examples at the back of the book. He found that Old English appealed to him, though it did not have the aesthetic charm of Welsh. This was rather a historical appeal, the attraction of studying the ancestor of his own language. And he began to find real excitement when he progressed beyond the simple passages in the primer and turned to the great Old English poem Beowulf. Reading this first in a translation and then in the original language, he found it to be one of the most extraordinary poems of all time: the tale of the warrior Beowulf, his fight with two monsters, and his death after battle with a dragon.

Now Tolkien turned back to Middle English and discovered Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Here was another poem to fire his imagination: the medieval tale of an Arthurian knight and his search for the mysterious giant who is to deal him a terrible axe-blow. Tolkien was delighted by the poem and also by its language, for he realised that its dialect was approximately that which had been spoken by his mother's West Midland ancestors. He began to explore further in Middle English, and read the Pearl, an allegorical poem about a dead child which is believed to have been written by the author of Sir Gawain. Then he turned to a different language and took a few hesitant steps in Old Norse, reading line by line in the original words the story of Sigurd and the dragon Fafnir that had fascinated him in Andrew Lang's Red Fairy Book when he was a small child. By this time he had acquired a range of linguistic knowledge that was remarkable in a schoolboy.

He continued his search for the 'bones' behind all these languages, rummaging in the school library and exploring the remoter shelves of Cornish's bookshop down the road. Eventually he began to find - and to scrape together enough money to buy - German books on philology that were 'dry-as-dust' but which could provide him with the answers to his questions. Philology: 'the love of words'. For that was what motivated him. It was not an arid interest in the scientific principles of language; it was a deep love for the look and the sound of words, springing from the days when his mother had given him his first Latin lessons.

And as a result of this love of words, he had started to invent his own languages.

Most children make up their own words. Some even have rudimentary private languages that they share with each other. This was what Ronald's young cousins Mary and Marjorie Incledon had done. Their language was called 'Animalic', and it was constructed principally out of animal names; for instance Dog nightingale woodpecker forty meant 'You are an ass'. The Incledons now lived outside Birmingham at Barnt Green, the neighbouring village to Rednal, and Ronald and Hilary usually spent part of their holidays there. Ronald learnt 'Animalic' and was amused by it. A little later Marjorie (the elder sister) lost interest in it, and when she dropped out Mary and Ronald collaborated to invent a new and more sophisticated language. This was called 'Nevbosh' or the New Nonsense, and it was soon sufficiently developed for the two cousins to chant limericks in it:

Dar fys ma vel gom co palt 'Hoc Pys go iskili far maino woe? Pro si go fys do roc de Do cat ym maino bocte De volt fact soc ma taimful gyroc!'

(There was an old man who said 'How/Can I possibly carry my cow?/ For if I were to ask it/To get in my basket/It would make such a terrible row I')

This kind of thing caused a good deal of amusement at Barnt Green, and as Ronald reached adolescence it gave him an idea. Already when beginning to learn Greek he had entertained himself by making up Greek-style words. Could he not take this further and invent a complete language, something more serious and properly organised than Nevbosh - most of which was only English, French, or Latin in disguise? Such a language might not have any particular use - though the invented language Esperanto was very popular at the time - but it would amuse him and allow him to put all his favourite sounds on paper. Certainly it seemed worth trying: if he had been interested in music he would very likely have wanted to compose melodies, so why should he not make up-a personal system of words that would be as it were a private symphony?

In adult life Tolkien came to believe that his impulse towards linguistic invention was similar to that felt by many schoolchildren. He once remarked, while talking about the invention of languages: 'It's not that uncommon, you know. An enormously greater number of children have what you might call a creative element in them than is usually supposed, and it isn't necessarily limited to certain things: they may not want to paint or draw, or have much music, but they nevertheless want to create something. And if the main mass of education takes a linguistic form, their creation will take a linguistic form. It's so extraordinarily common, I once did think that there ought to be some organised research into it.'

When the young Tolkien first set to work at linguistic invention on an organised basis, he decided to take an existing language as a model or at least a starting-point. Welsh was not available to him in sufficient quantity, so he turned to another favourite source of words, the collection of Spanish books in Father Francis's room. His guardian spoke Spanish fluently and Ronald had often begged to be taught the language, but nothing came of it, though he was given the freedom of the books. Now he looked at them again and began work on an invented language that he called 'Naffarin'. It showed a great deal of Spanish influence, but it had its own system of phonology and grammar. He worked at it now and then, and he might have developed it still further had he not discovered a language that excited him far more than Spanish.

One of his school-friends had bought a book at a missionary sale, but found that he had no use for it and sold it to Tolkien. It was Joseph Wright's *Primer of the Gothic Language*. Tolkien opened it and immediately experienced 'a sensation at least as full of delight as first looking into Chapman's Homer'. Gothic ceased to be spoken with the decline of the Gothic peoples, but written fragments survived for posterity, and Tolkien found them immensely attractive. He was not content simply to learn the language, but began to invent 'extra' Gothic words to fill gaps in the limited vocabulary that survived, and to move on from this to the construction of a supposedly unrecorded but historical Germanic language. He communicated these enthusiasms to Christopher Wiseman, who was a sympathetic listener since he himself was studying Egyptian and its hieroglyphics. Tolkien also began to develop his invented languages backwards; that is, to posit the hypothetical 'earlier' words which he was finding necessary for invention by means of an organised 'historical' system. He was also working on invented alphabets; one of his notebooks from schooldays contains a system of code-symbols for each letter of the English alphabet. But it was languages that occupied him most, and on many days he closeted himself in the room he shared with Hilary and, as he wrote in his diary, 'Did a lot of private lang.'

Father Francis had done a good deal for the Tolkien boys since their mother's death. Every summer he had taken them on holiday to Lyme Regis, where they stayed at the Three Cups Hotel and paid visits to his friends in the neighbourhood. Ronald loved the scenery of Lyme and enjoyed sketching it on wet days, though when it was fine he was happiest rambling along the shore or visiting the spectacular landslip that had recently occurred on the cliffs near the town. Once he found a prehistoric jawbone there, which he supposed to be a piece of petrified dragon. On these holidays Father Francis talked a good deal to the boys, and he observed that they were not happy in the drab lodging that was provided for them by their Aunt Beatrice. Back in Birmingham he looked around for something better. He thought of Mrs Faulkner who lived in Duchess Road behind the Oratory. She gave musical soirees which several of the Fathers attended, and she also let rooms. He decided that her house might be a more pleasant home for Ronald and Hilary. Mrs Faulkner agreed to take them, and early in 1908 the boys moved to 37 Duchess Road.

It was a gloomy creeper-covered house, hung with dingy lace curtains. Ronald and Hilary were given a room on the second floor. The other occupants of the house were Mrs Faulkner's husband Louis (a wine-merchant with a taste for his own wares), their daughter Helen, Annie the maid, and another lodger, a girl of nineteen who lived on the first floor beneath the boys' bedroom and spent most of her time at her sewing-machine. Her name was Edith Bratt.

She was remarkably pretty, small and slim, with grey eyes, firm clear features and short dark hair. The boys learnt that she too was an orphan, her mother having died five years previously and her father some time before that. In fact she was illegitimate. Her mother, Frances Bratt, had given birth to Edith on 21 January 1889 in Gloucester, where she had perhaps gone to avoid scandal, for her home was in Wolverhampton where her family owned a boot and shoe manufacturing business. Frances was aged thirty at the time of Edith's birth. Afterwards she returned to the Birmingham district to brave the gossip of the neighbours and to bring up her daughter in the suburb of Handsworth. Frances Bratt never married, and the child's father was not named on the birth certificate, though Frances preserved his photograph, and his identity was known to the Bratt family. But if Edith knew the name of her father, she never passed it on to her own children.

Edith's childhood had been moderately happy. She was brought up in Handsworth by her mother and her cousin Jennie Grove. The Grove connection was much prized by the Bratts, for it linked them with the renowned Sir George Grove, editor of the musical dictionary. Edith herself proved to have a talent for music. She played the piano very well, and when her mother died she was sent to a girls' boarding-school that specialised in music. By the time she left school she was expected to be able to make a career as a piano teacher or just possibly a concert

pianist But her guardian, the family solicitor, did not seem to know what he should do next. He found a room for her at Mrs Faulkner's, supposing that her landlady's fondness for music would provide a sympathetic atmosphere as well as a piano for practising. But he had no further ideas; nor was there any urgency, for Edith had inherited a small amount of land in various parts of Birmingham, and this produced just enough income to keep her. Nothing more need be done for the moment; and nothing was done. Edith stayed on at Mrs Faulkner's, but she soon found that while her landlady was delighted to have a lodger who could play and accompany soloists at her soirees, the question of actually practising the piano was quite different. 'Now Edith dear,' Mrs Faulkner would say, sweeping into the room as soon as the scales and arpeggios began, 'that's enough for now!' And Edith would go back sadly to her room and her sewing-machine.

Then the Tolkien brothers arrived in the house. She found them very pleasant. In particular she liked Ronald, with his serious face and perfect manners; while Ronald, though he was acquainted with few girls of his age, discovered that familiarity soon conquered any nervousness on his part. He and Edith struck up a friendship.

True, he was sixteen and she was nineteen. But he was old for his age and she looked young for hers, and she was neat and small and exceptionally pretty. Certainly she did not share his interest in languages, and she had received only a rather limited education. But her manner was very engaging. They became allies against 'the Old Lady', as they called Mrs Faulkner. Edith would persuade Annie the maid to smuggle titbits of food from the kitchen to the hungry boys on the second floor, and when the Old Lady was out, the boys would go to Edith's room for secret feasts.

Edith and Ronald took to frequenting Birmingham teashops, especially one that had a balcony overlooking the pavement. There they would sit and throw sugar-lumps into the hats of passers-by, moving to the next table when the sugar-bowl was empty. Later they invented a private whistle-call. When Ronald heard it in the early morning or at bedtime he would go to his window and lean out to see Edith waiting at her own window below.

With two people of their personalities and in their position, romance was bound to flourish. Both were orphans in need of affection, and they found that they could give it to each other. During the summer of 1909 they decided that they were in love.

Writing to Edith long afterwards, Ronald recalled 'my first kiss to you and your first kiss to me (which was almost accidental) - and our goodnights when sometimes you were in your little white nightgown, and our absurd long window talks; and how we watched the sun come up over town through the mist and Big Ben toll hour after hour, and the moths almost used to frighten you away - and our whistle-call - and our cycle-rides - and the fire talks - and the three great kisses.'

Ronald was now supposed to be working for an Oxford scholarship, but it was hard to concentrate on classical texts when one half of his mind was occupied with language-inventing and the other with Edith. There was also a new attraction for him at school: the Debating Society, highly popular with the senior boys. He had not yet spoken in debates, perhaps because of his still-squeaky adolescent voice and his reputation, already acquired, as an indistinct talker. But this term, spurred on by a new-found confidence, he made his maiden speech on a motion supporting the objects and tactics of the suffragettes. It was judged a good effort, though the school magazine thought that his talents as a debater were 'somewhat marred by a faulty delivery'. In another speech, on the motion (probably of his own devising) 'That this House deplores the occurrence of the Norman Conquest', he attacked (so the magazine reported) 'the influx of polysyllabic barbarities which ousted the more honest if humbler native words'; while in a debate on the authorship of Shakespeare's plays he 'poured a sudden flood of unqualified abuse upon Shakespeare, upon his filthy birthplace, his squalid surroundings, and his sordid character'. He also achieved much success on the Rugby football field. He was thin, almost scrawny, but he had already learnt to compensate for lack of weight by playing with ferocity. Now he 'made an extra effort, which was rewarded when he got into the school team. Once there, he played as he had never played before. Reflecting on this years later, he ascribed it directly to the impulse of chivalry: 'Having the romantic upbringing, I made a boy-and-girl affair serious, and made it the source of effort.'

Then one day towards the end of the autumn term of 1909 he arranged secretly with Edith that they should go for a bicycle ride into the countryside. 'We thought we had managed things very cleverly,' he wrote. 'Edith had ridden off on her bicycle nominally to visit her cousin Jennie Grove. After an interval I rode off "to the school sports-ground", but we reassembled and made for the Lickes.' They spent the afternoon on the hills and then went into Rednal village in search of tea, which they were given at a house where Ronald had stayed some months previously while working for his scholarship. Afterwards they rode home, arriving separately at Duchess Road so as not to arouse suspicion. But they had reckoned without gossip. The woman who had given them tea told Mrs Church, the caretaker at the Oratory House, that Master Ronald had been to call and had brought an unknown girl with him. Mrs Church happened to mention it to the cook at the Oratory itself. And the cook, who always liked telling tales, told Father Francis.

Ronald's guardian had been as a father to him, and his feelings can be imagined when he learnt that the ward on whom he had lavished so much affection, care, and money, was not concentrating his abilities on vital school-work but was (as quickly became apparent upon investigation) conducting a clandestine love affair with a girl three years his senior who was living in the same house. Father Francis summoned Ronald to the Oratory, told him that he was deeply shaken, and demanded that the affair should stop. Then he made arrangements for Ronald and Hilary to move to new lodgings, so as to get Ronald away from the girl.

It may seem strange that Ronald did not simply disobey Father Francis and openly continue the romance. But the social conventions of the time demanded that young people should obey their parents or guardian; moreover Ronald had great affection for Father Francis, and depended on him for money. Nor was he a rebellious young man. Given all this, it is scarcely remarkable that he agreed to do as he was told.

At the height of the storm about Edith, Ronald had to go to Oxford to take the scholarship exam. If he had been in a calmer state of mind he would have revelled in his first view of Oxford. Seen from Corpus Christi College where he was staying, the towers and parapets offered but a prospect of which his school was but a poor shadow. Oxford was new to him in every way, for his ancestors had never been university people. Here now was his chance to win honour for the Tolkiens and the Suffields, to repay Father Francis's affection and generosity, and to prove that his love for Edith had not distracted him from his work. But it was not so easy. Looking at the notice-board after the examination, he saw that he had failed to obtain an award. He turned his back in misery on Merton Street and Oriel Square and walked to the railway station, perhaps wondering if he would ever return.

But in truth his failure was neither surprising nor disastrous. Competition for Oxford scholarships was always extremely severe, and this had been only his first attempt. He could try again next December, although by that time he would be nearly nineteen, and if he failed once more to win an award there would be no chance of his going to Oxford, for a commoner's fees would be beyond his guardian's pocket. Clearly he must work much harder.

'Depressed and as much in dark as ever,' he wrote in his diary on New Year's Day 1910. 'God help me. Feel weak and weary.' (It was the first time that he had kept a diary; or at least this is the first of his diaries that was preserved. Now, as later in life, he used it chiefly as a record of sorrow and distress, and when later in the year his gloom dissipated he ceased to keep up the diary entries.) He was faced with a dilemma, for though he and Hilary had moved to new lodgings they were not far from Mrs Faulkner's house, where Edith was still living. Father Francis had demanded that the love affair be broken off, yet he had not specifically forbidden Ronald to see Edith. Ronald hated to deceive his guardian, but he and Edith decided to meet clandestinely. They spent an afternoon together, taking a train into the countryside and discussing their plans. They also visited a jeweller's shop, where Edith bought Ronald a pen for his eighteenth birthday, and he purchased a ten-and-sixpenny wrist-watch for her twenty-first, which they celebrated in a tea-shop the next day. Edith had now decided to accept an invitation to go and live in Cheltenham with an elderly solicitor and his wife, who had befriended her. When she told this to Ronald he wrote 'Thank God' in his diary, for it was the best solution.

But once again they had been seen together. This time Father Francis made his attitude quite clear: Ronald must not meet or even write to Edith. He could only see her once more, to say goodbye on the day she left for Cheltenham. After that they must not communicate again until he was twenty-one, when his guardian would no longer be responsible for him. This meant a wait of three years. Ronald wrote in his diary: 'Three years is awful.'

A more rebellious young man might have refused to obey; even Ronald, loyal to Father Francis, found it hard to follow his guardian's wishes. On 16 February he wrote: 'Last night prayed would see E. by accident. Prayer answered. Saw her at 12.55 at Prince of Wales. Told her I could not write and arranged to see her off on Thursday fortnight. Happier but so much long to see her just once to cheer her up. Cannot think of anything else.' Then on 21 February: 'I saw a dejected little figure sloshing along in a mac and tweed hat and could not resist crossing and saying a word of love and cheerfulness. This cheered me up a little for a while. Prayed and thought hard.' And on 23 February: 'I met her coming from the Cathedral to pray for me.'

Though these meetings were accidental, there was the worst possible consequence. On 26 February Ronald 'had a dreadful letter from Fr. F saying I had been seen with a girl again, calling it evil and foolish. Threatening to cut short my University career if I did not stop. Means I cannot see E. Nor write at all. God help me. Saw E. at midday but would not be with her. I owe all to Fr. F and so must obey.' When Edith learnt what had happened she wrote to Ronald: 'Our hardest time of all has come.'

On Wednesday 2 March, Edith set out from Duchess Road to go to her new home in Cheltenham. In spite of his guardian's ban, Ronald prayed that he might catch a final glimpse of her. When the time for her departure came he searched the streets, at first in vain. But then: 'At Francis Road corner she passed me on bike on way to station. I shall not see her again perhaps for three years.'

thorough knowledge of Latin and Greek literature; and from this balance of similar and dissimilar tastes, shared and unshared knowledge, friendship grew.

Tolkien's contribution to the 'T.C.B.S.', as they came to call it, reflected the wide range of reading he had already encompassed. He delighted his friends with recitations from *Beowulf*, the *Pearl*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and recounted horrific episodes from the Norse *Volsungasaga*, with a passing jibe at Wagner whose interpretation of the myths he held in contempt. These erudite performances in no way struck his friends as odd; indeed, in Wiseman's words, 'the T.C.B.S. accepted it as yet another instance of the fact that the T.C.B.S. itself was odd'. Perhaps it was; though such coteries were (and are) not uncommon among well-educated adolescents, who are going through a stage of enthusiastic intellectual discovery.

Later a fourth member was added to the group. This was Geoffrey Bache Smith, a year younger than Gilson and nearly three years junior to Tolkien. He was not a classicist like the others, but came from the Modern side of the school. He lived with his brother and their widowed mother in West Bromwich and possessed what his friends considered to be a Midland wit. The T.C.B.S. took him into its ranks partly for this and partly because he had a qualification all too rare at King Edward's: he was knowledgeable about English literature, especially poetry; indeed he himself was a practising poet of some competence. Under the influence of 'G. B. S.' the T.C.B.S. began to wake up to the significance of poetry - as indeed Tolkien was already doing.

Only two masters at King Edward's made any serious attempt to teach English literature. One was George Brewerton and the other was R. W. Reynolds. Once a literary critic on a London journal, 'Dickie' Reynolds tried to instil into his pupils some idea of taste and style. He was not particularly successful with Ronald Tolkien, who preferred Latin and Greek poetry to Milton and Keats. But Reynolds's lessons may have had something to do with the fact that when he was eighteen Tolkien began tentatively to write verse. He did not write much, and it was not very good, certainly no better than the average juvenile efforts of the time. Indeed, there was only one sign of anything even faintly unlikely, and that came in July 1910 when he wrote a descriptive piece about a forest scene, entitled 'Wood-sunshine'. It included these lines:

Come sing ye light fairy things tripping so gay,
 Like visions, like glinting reflections of joy
 All fashion'd of radiance, careless of grief,
 O'er this green and brown carpet; nor hasten away.
 O! come to me! dance for me! Sprites of the wood,
 O! come to me! Sing to me once ere ye fade!

Fairy spirits dancing on a woodland carpet seem a strange choice of subject for a rugger-playing youth of eighteen who had a strong taste for Grendel and the dragon Fafnir. Why should Tolkien want to write about them?

J. M. Barrie may have had a little to do with it. In April 1910 Tolkien saw *Peter Pan* at a Birmingham theatre, and wrote in his diary: 'Indescribable but shall never forget it as long as I live. Wish E. had been with me.' But perhaps of more importance was his enthusiasm for the Catholic mystic poet Francis Thompson. By the end of his school career he was familiar with Thompson's verse, and later he became something of an expert on him. In 'Wood-sunshine' there is a distinct resemblance to an episode in the first part of Thompson's 'Sister Songs' where the poet sees first a single elf and then a swarm of woodland sprites in the glade; when he moves, they vanish. It may be that this was a source of Tolkien's interest in such things. Whatever their origins, dancing elves were to appear many times in his early poems.

His principal concern during 1910 was to work hard in preparation for a second attempt at the Oxford scholarship. He put in as many hours of private study as he could manage, but there were numerous distractions, not least Rugby football. He spent many afternoons on the muddy school sports ground in Eastern Road, from which there was a long ride home, often in the dark with the oil-lamp flickering on the back of his bicycle. Rugby sometimes led to injuries: he broke his nose in one match, and it never entirely regained its original shape; on another occasion he cut his tongue, and though the wound healed satisfactorily he later ascribed to it much of his indistinctness of speech. (Though in truth he was known as an indistinct speaker before he cut his tongue, and his poor articulation was really due to having too much to say rather than to experiencing any physical difficulty in saying it. He could and did recite poetry with the greatest clarity.) He was also spending a good deal of time working at languages, both historical and invented. In the Lent term of 1910 he delivered to the First Class at King Edward's a lecture with the weighty title: 'The Modern Languages of Europe - Derivations and Capabilities'. It took three one-hour lessons to read, and even then the master in charge stopped him before he could reach the 'Capabilities'. He also devoted much time to the Debating Society. There was a custom at King Edward's of holding a debate entirely in Latin, but

president of the college debating society (an influential body at Exeter) after a faction-fight which gave him his first taste of college politics, a taste that he liked very much. He punted, he played tennis, and now and then he did some work, enough to win the Skeat Prize for English awarded by his college in the spring of 1914. He used the five pounds of prize money to buy books of medieval Welsh and several of the works of William Morris: *The Life and Death of Jason*, Morris's translation of the *Volsungasaga*, and his prose-and-verse romance *The House of the Wolfings*.

Morris had himself been an undergraduate at Exeter College, and this connection had probably stimulated Tolkien's interest in him. But until now he had apparently not become acquainted with Morris's imaginative writings. Indeed his knowledge of modern literature in general was limited, for the Oxford English School syllabus did not require that he, as a linguist, should make more than a comparatively superficial study of post-Chaucerian writers. During this time he did make a few sketchy notes on Johnson, Dryden, and Restoration drama, but there is no indication that he had more than a passing interest in them. As to contemporary fiction, he wrote to Edith: 'I so rarely read a novel, as you know.' For him English literature ended with Chaucer; or to put it another way, he received all the enjoyment and stimulus that he could possibly require from the great poems of the Old and Middle English periods, and from the early literature of Iceland.

But that was the very reason that he now found *The House of the Wolfings* so absorbing. Morris's view of literature coincided with his own. In this book Morris had tried to recreate the excitement he himself had found in the pages of early English and Icelandic narratives. *The House of the Wolfings* is set in a land which is threatened by an invading force of Romans. Written partly in prose and partly in verse, it centres on a House or family-tribe that dwells by a great river in a clearing of the forest named Mirkwood, a name taken from ancient Germanic geography and legend. Many elements in the story seem to have impressed Tolkien. Its style is highly idiosyncratic, heavily laden with archaisms and poetic inversions in an attempt to recreate the aura of ancient legend. Clearly Tolkien took note of this, and it would seem that he also appreciated another facet of the writing: Morris's aptitude, despite the vagueness of time and place in which the story is set, for describing with great precision the details of his imagined landscape. Tolkien himself was to follow Morris's example in later years.

His own eye for landscape received a powerful stimulus during the summer of 1914 when, after visiting Edith, he spent a holiday in Cornwall, staying on the Lizard peninsula with Father Vincent Reade of the Birmingham Oratory. He found Cornwall exhilarating. He and Father Vincent went for long walks every day, and he wrote to Edith describing them: 'We walked over the moor-land on top of the cliffs to Kynance Cove. Nothing I could say in a dull old letter would describe it to you. The sun beats down on you and a huge Atlantic swell smashes and spouts over the snags and reefs. The sea has carved weird wind-holes and spouts into the cliffs which blow with trumpety noises or spout foam like a whale, and everywhere you see black and red rock and white foam against violet and transparent seagreen.' He never forgot this sight of the sea and the Cornish coastline, and it became an ideal landscape in his mind.

One day he and Father Vincent explored the villages that lie a short way inland from the Lizard promontory. He recorded of this expedition: 'Our walk home after tea started through rustic "Warwickshire" scenery, dropped down to the banks of the Helford river (almost like a fjord), and then climbed through "Devonshire" lanes up to the opposite bank, and then got into more open country, where it twisted and wiggled and wobbled and upped and downed until dusk was already coming on and the red sun just dropping. Then after adventures and redirections we came out on the bleak bare "Goonhilly" downs and had a four mile straight piece with turf for our sore feet. Then we got benighted in the neighbourhood of Ruan Minor, and got into the dips and waggles again. The light got very "eerie". Sometimes we plunged into a belt of trees, and owls and bats made you creep: sometimes a horse with asthma behind a hedge or an old pig with insomnia made your heart jump: or perhaps it was nothing worse than walking into an unexpected stream. The fourteen miles eventually drew to an end - and the last two miles were enlivened by the sweeping flash of the Lizard Lights and the sounds of the sea drawing nearer.'

At the end of the long vacation he travelled to Nottinghamshire to stay for a few days on the farm that his Aunt Jane was running with the Brookes-Smiths and his brother Hilary. While at the farm he wrote a poem. It was headed with the line from Cynewulf's *Crist* that had so fascinated him: *Eala Earendel engla beorhtast!* Its title was "The Voyage of Earendel the Evening Star", and it began as follows:

Earendel sprang up from the Ocean's cup

In the gloom of the mid-world's rim; From the door of Night as a ray of light

Leapt over the twilight brim, And launching his bark like a silver spark

From the golden-fading sand Down the sunlit breath of Day's fiery death

He sped from Westerland.

The succeeding verses describe the star-ship's voyage across the firmament, a progress that continues until the morning light blots out all sight of it.

This notion of the star-mariner whose ship leaps into the sky had grown from the reference to 'Earendel' in the *Cynewulf* lines. But the poem that it produced was entirely original. It was in fact the beginning of Tolkien's own mythology.

By the time that Tolkien wrote 'The Voyage of Earendel', in the late summer of 1914, England had declared war on Germany. Already young men were enlisting in their thousands, answering Kitchener's appeal for soldiers. But Tolkien's feelings were rather different: he was concerned to stay at Oxford until he could finish his degree, being hopeful of a First Class. So, though his aunts and uncles expected him to join up (his brother Hilary had already enlisted as a bugler) he went back to the University for the Michaelmas term.

At first he reported: 'It is awful. I really don't think I shall be able to go on: work seems impossible. Not a single man I know is up except Cullis.' But he became more cheerful when he learnt of the existence of a scheme whereby he could train for the army while at the University but defer his call-up until after he had taken his degree. He signed on for it.

Once he had decided what to do, life became more pleasant. He had now moved from his college rooms to 'digs' in St John's Street which he shared with Colin Cullis, who had not joined the army because of poor health. Tolkien found digs 'a delicious joy compared with the primitive life of college'. He was also delighted to discover that his T.C.B.S. friend G. B. Smith was still up at Oxford awaiting a commission. Smith was to join the Lancashire Fusiliers, and Tolkien resolved to try for a commission in the same regiment, if possible the same battalion.

A few days after the start of term he began to drill in the University Parks with the Officers' Training Corps. This had to be combined with his normal academic work, but he found that the double life suited him. 'Drill is a godsend,' he wrote to Edith. 'I have been up a fortnight nearly, and have not yet got a touch even of the real Oxford "sleepies".' He was also trying his hand at writing. His enthusiasm for William Morris had given him the idea of adapting one of the stories from the Finnish Kalevala into a Morris-style prose-and-verse romance. He chose the story of Kullervo, a hapless young man who unknowingly commits incest and, when he discovers, throws himself on to his sword. Tolkien began work on 'The Story of Kullervo' as he called it, and though it was little more than a pastiche of Morris it was his first essay in the writing of a legend in verse and prose. He left it unfinished.

At the beginning of the Christmas vacation of 1914 he travelled to London to attend a gathering of the T.C.B.S. Christopher Wiseman's family had moved south, and at their Wandsworth house there assembled all four members of the 'club': Tolkien, Wiseman, R. Q. Gilson, and G. B. Smith. They spent the weekend chiefly in sitting around the gas fire in the little upstairs room, smoking their pipes and talking. As Wiseman said, they felt 'four times the intellectual size' when they were together.

It was curious how they had gone on meeting and writing to each other, this little group of school-friends. But they had begun to hope that together they might achieve something of value. Tolkien once compared them to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but the others scoffed at the idea. Yet they did feel that in some way they were destined to kindle a new light. Perhaps it was no more than the last spark of childhood ambition before it was snuffed out by experience of the world, but for Tolkien at least it had an important and practical result. He decided that he was a poet.

Afterwards he explained that this T.C.B.S. meeting late in 1914 had helped him to find 'a voice for all kind of pent up things', adding: 'I have always laid that to the credit of the inspiration that even a few hours with the four brought to us.'

Immediately following the weekend in London he began to write poems. They were in general not very remarkable, and certainly they were not always economical in their use of words. Here are some lines from 'Sea Chant of an Elder Day', written on 4 December 1914 and based on Tolkien's memories of his Cornish holiday a few months previously:

In a dim and perilous region, down whose great tempestuous ways I heard no sound of men's voices; in those eldest of the days, I sat on the ruined margin of the deep voiced echoing sea Whose roaring foaming music crashed in endless cadency On the land besieged for ever in an aeon of assaults And torn in towers and pinnacles and caverned in great vaults.

When Tolkien showed this and other poems to Wiseman, his friend remarked that they reminded him of Symonds's criticism of Meredith, *when he compared M. to a lady who liked to put on all her jewelry after breakfast'. And Wiseman advised: 'Don't overdo it'

Tolkien was more restrained in a poem describing his and Edith's love for each other, choosing a favourite image to express this:

Lo! young we are and yet have stood like planted hearts in the great Sun of Love so long (as two fair trees in woodland or in open dale stand utterly entwined, and breathe the airs, and suck the very light together) that we have become as one, deep-rooted in the soil of Life, and tangled in sweet growth.

Among other poems written by Tolkien at this time was "The Man in the Moon Came Down Too Soon" (which was eventually published in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*). He selected a similarly 'fairy' subject in 'Goblin Feet', a poem that he wrote to please Edith who said that she liked 'spring and flowers and trees, and little elfin people'. 'Goblin Feet' represents everything of this sort that Tolkien soon came to detest heartily, so it is scarcely fair to quote from it; yet it has an undeniable sureness of rhythm, and as it reached print in several anthologies at the time it can be said to be his first published work of any significance:

I am off down the road
Where the fairy lanterns glowed And the little pretty flittermice are flying:
A slender band of grey
It runs creepily away And the hedges and the grasses are a-sighing.

The air is full of wings
Of the blundering beetle-things That warm you with their whirring.
O! I hear the tiny horns
Of enchanted leprechauns And the padding feet of many gnomes a-coming.
O! the lights! O! the gleams: O! the little tinkly sounds:
O! the rustle of their noiseless little robes: O! the echo of their feet, of their little happy feet:
O! their swinging lamps in little star-lit globes.

G. B. Smith read all Tolkien's verses and sent him criticisms. He was encouraging, but he remarked that Tolkien might improve his verse-writing by reading more widely in English literature. Smith suggested that he should try Browne, Sidney, and Bacon; later he recommended Tolkien to look at the new poems by Rupert Brooke. But Tolkien paid little heed. He had already set his own poetic course, and he did not need anyone else to steer him.

He soon came to feel that the composition of occasional poems without a connecting theme was not what he wanted. Early in 1915 he turned back to his original Earendel verses and began to work their theme into a larger story. He had shown the original Earendel lines to G. B. Smith, who had said that he liked them but asked what they were really about. Tolkien had replied: 'I don't know. I'll try to find out.' Not try to invent: try to find out. He did not see himself as an inventor of story but as a discoverer of legend. And this was really due to his private languages.

He had been working for some time at the language that was influenced by Finnish, and by 1915 he had developed it to a degree of some complexity. He felt that it was 'a mad hobby', and he scarcely expected to find an audience for it. But he sometimes wrote poems in it, and the more he worked at it the more he felt that it needed a 'history' to support it. In other words, you cannot have a language without a race of people to speak it. He was perfecting the language; now he had to decide to whom it belonged.

When talking about it to Edith he referred to it as 'my nonsense fairy language'. Here is part of a poem written in it, and dated 'November 1915, March 1916'. No translation survives, although the words *Lasselanta* ('leaf-fall', hence 'Autumn') and *Eldamar* (the 'elvenhome' in the West) were to be used by Tolkien in many other contexts:

Ai lintulinda Lasselanta Pilingevey suyer nalla ganta Kuluvi ya karnevalinar V'ematte singi Eldamar.

During 1915 the picture became clear in Tolkien's mind. This, he decided, was the language spoken by the fairies or elves whom Earendel saw during his strange voyage. He began work on a 'Lay of Earendel' that described the mariner's journeyings across the world before his ship became a star. The Lay was to be divided into several poems, and the first of these, 'The Shores of Faery', tells of the mysterious land of Valinor, where Two Trees grow, one bearing golden sun-apples and the other silver moon-apples. To this land comes Earendel.

The poem bears comparatively little relation to Tolkien's later mythological concepts, but it includes elements that were to appear in *The Silmarillion*, and it deserves to be quoted as an indication of what was happening in his imagination at this time. It is here printed in its earliest form:

West of the Moon, East of the Sun

There stands a lonely Hill
Its feet are in the pale green Sea;
Its towers are white and still:

Beyond Taniquetil
In Valinor.
No stars come there but one alone
That hunted with the Moon,
For there the Two Trees naked grow
That bear Night's silver bloom;
That bear the globed fruit of Noon
In Valinor.

There are the shores of Faery
With their moonlit pebbled strand
Whose foam is silver music
On the opalescent floor
Beyond the great sea-shadows
On the margin of the sand
That stretches on for ever
From the golden feet of Kor -
Beyond Taniquetil
In Valinor.

O! West of the Moon, East of the Sun Lies the Haven of the Star;
The white town of the Wanderer And the rocks of Eglamar:

There Wingelot is harboured
While Earendel looks afar
On the magic and the wonder
Tween here and Eglamar –
Out, out beyond Taniquetil
In Valinor - afar.

While Tolkien's mind was occupied with the seeds of his mythology he was preparing himself for Schools, his final examination in English Language and Literature. The examination began in the second week of June 1915, and Tolkien was triumphant, achieving First Class Honours.

He could in consequence be reasonably certain of getting an academic job when the war was over; but in the meantime he had to take up his commission as a second lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers. He was posted not as he had hoped to the 19th Battalion in which G. B. Smith was serving, but to the 13th. His training began in July at Bedford, where he was billeted in a house in the town with half a dozen other officers. He learnt to drill a platoon, and attended military lectures. He bought a motor bicycle which he shared with a fellow officer, and when he could get weekend leave he rode over to Warwick to visit Edith. He grew a moustache. For most of the time he looked and behaved like any other young officer.

In August he moved to Staffordshire, and during the succeeding weeks he and his battalion were shifted about from one camp to another with the apparent lack of plan which characterises troop-movements in wartime. Conditions were uniformly uncomfortable, and in the intervals between inedible meals, trench drill, and lectures on machine-guns, there was little to do except play bridge (which he enjoyed) and listen to ragtime on the gramophone (which he did not). Nor did he care for the majority of his fellow officers. 'Gentlemen are non-existent among the superiors,' he told Edith, 'and even human beings rare indeed.' He spent some of his time reading Icelandic - he was determined to keep up with his academic work during the war - but the time passed slowly. 'These grey days,' he wrote, 'wasted in wearily going over, over and over again, the dreary topics, the dull backwaters of the art of killing, are not enjoyable.'

By the beginning of 1916 he had decided to specialise in signalling, for the prospect of dealing with words, messages, and codes was more appealing than the drudgery and responsibility of commanding a platoon. So he learnt Morse code, flag and disc signalling, the transmission of messages by heliograph and lamp, the use of signal-rockets and field-telephones, and even how to handle carrier-pigeons (which were sometimes used on the battlefield). Eventually he was appointed battalion signalling officer.

Embarkation for France was now near, and he and Edith decided to get married before he left, for the appalling death-roll among the British troops made it clear that he might never return. They had in any case waited more than long enough, for he was twenty-four and she twenty-seven. They did not have much money, but at least he was earning regular pay in the Army, and he decided to ask Father Francis Morgan to transfer all of his modest share capital to his own name. He also hoped to get some income from his poetry. His poem 'Goblin Feet' had been accepted by Blackwells for the annual volume of *Oxford Poetry*, and encouraged by this he sent a selection of his verses to the publishers Sidgwick & Jackson. To add to his capital he also sold his share in the motorbike.

He went to Birmingham to see Father Francis about the money, and to tell him that he was going to marry Edith. He managed to arrange the money matters, but when it came to the point he could not bring himself to tell his old guardian about the marriage, and he left the Oratory without mentioning it; he could not forget Father Francis's opposition to the romance six years before. It was not until a fortnight before the wedding that he finally wrote and explained. The letter that came back was kindly; indeed Father Francis wished them both 'every blessing and happiness', and declared that he would conduct the ceremony himself in the Oratory Church. Alas, it was too late. Arrangements had already been made for the marriage to take place in the Catholic church at Warwick.

Ronald Tolkien and Edith Bratt were married by Father Murphy after early mass on Wednesday 22 March 1916. They had chosen a Wednesday because that was the day of the week on which they had been reunited in 1913. There was one unfortunate incident: Edith did not realise that when she signed the register she would have to give her father's name, and she had never told Ronald about her illegitimacy. Confronted by the register she panicked and wrote the name of an uncle, Frederick Bratt; but she could think of nothing to put under the heading 'Rank or profession of father', so she left it blank. Afterwards she told Ronald the truth. 'I think I love you even more tenderly because of all that, my wife,' he wrote to her, 'but we must as far as possible forget it and entrust it to God.' After the wedding they left by train for Clevedon in Somerset where they were to stay for a week, and in the compartment they both doodled (on the back of a greetings telegram) versions of Edith's new signature-Edith Mary Tolkien ... Edith Tolkien ... Mrs Tolkien Mrs J. R. R. Tolkien. It looked splendid.

When he got back from his honeymoon, Tolkien found a letter from Sidgwick & Jackson rejecting his poems. He had half expected this, but it was a disappointment. Edith returned to Warwick, but only to wind up her affairs in that town. They had decided that for the duration of the war she would not have a permanent home, but would live in furnished rooms as near as possible to Ronald's camp. She and her cousin Jennie (who was still living with her) came to Great Haywood, a Staffordshire village near the camp where Ronald was posted. There was a Catholic church in the village with a kindly priest, and Ronald had found good lodgings. But scarcely had he seen Edith settled than he received embarkation orders, and late on ; Sunday 4 June 1916 he set off for London and thence to France. '.

Everyone in England had known for some time that 'The Big Push' was imminent. A virtual stalemate had continued throughout 1915 on the Western Front, and neither poison-gas at Ypres nor mass slaughter at Verdun had altered the line by more than a few miles. But now that the hundreds of thousands of new recruits had filtered through the training camps and had emerged as a New Army, it was clear that something spectacular was about to happen.

Tolkien arrived at Calais on Tuesday 6 June and was taken to base camp at Staples. Somehow on the journey his entire kit had been lost: camp-bed, sleeping-bag, mattress, spare boots, wash-stand, everything that he had chosen with care and bought at great expense had vanished without trace into the interstices of the army transport system, leaving him to beg, borrow, and buy replacements.

The days passed at Staples, and nothing happened. The nervous excitement of embarkation relapsed into a weary boredom made worse by a total ignorance of what was going on. Tolkien wrote a poem about England, took part in training exercises, and listened to the seagulls wheeling overhead. Along with many of his fellow officers he was transferred to the 11th Battalion, where he found little congenial company. The junior officers were all recruits like himself, some less than twenty-one years old; while the older company commanders and adjutants were in many cases professional soldiers dug out of retirement, men with narrow minds and endless stories of India or the Boer War. These old campaigners were ready to take advantage of any slip made by a recruit, and Tolkien reported that they treated him like an inferior schoolboy. He had more respect for the 'men', the N.C.O.s and privates who made up the other eight hundred or so members of the battalion. A few of them were from South Wales but most were Lancashire men. Officers could not make friends among them, for the system did not permit it; but each officer had a batman, a servant who was detailed to look after his kit and care for him much in the manner of an Oxford scout. Through this, Tolkien got to know several of the men very well. Discussing one of the principal characters in *The Lord of the Rings* he wrote many years later: 'My "Sam Gamgee" is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself.'

After three weeks at Etaples the battalion set off for the Front. The train journey was almost unbelievably slow, interrupted by innumerable halts, and it was more than twenty-four hours before the flat featureless landscape of

the Pas de Calais gave way to more hilly country where a canalised river with poplar-lined banks flowed alongside the railway. This was the Somme. And already they could hear gunfire.

Tolkien's battalion disembarked in Amiens, were given food from cooks in the main square, and then marched out of the town, heavily laden with their kit, stepping aside or halting when horses came by, pulling ammunition wagons or huge guns. Soon they were in the open Picardy countryside. By the sides of the straight road the houses gave way to fields of scarlet poppies or yellow mustard. It began to rain in torrents, and within moments the dusty surface of the road changed to a white chalky mud. The battalion marched on, dripping and cursing, to a hamlet called Rubempre, ten miles from Amiens. Here they were billeted for the night in conditions that they would soon be accustomed to: straw bunks in barns and sheds for the men, floor-space for camp beds in the farmhouses for the officers. The buildings were ancient and solid with warped beams and mud walls. Outside beyond the crossroads and the low houses, fields of rain-swept cornflowers stretched away to the horizon where war was inescapable: there were broken roofs and ruined buildings, while from the near distance came the sound that they had been approaching all day, the whine, crash, and boom of the Allied bombardment of German lines.

They stayed at Rubempre the next day, doing physical training and bayonet practice. On the Friday, 30 June, they moved to another hamlet nearer the front line. Early the next morning the attack began. They were not to be in it, for their task was to wait in reserve and go into battle several days later, by which time the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, reckoned that the German line would be smashed open and the Allied troops would be able to penetrate deep into enemy territory. But that was not what happened.

At 7.30 a.m. on Saturday 1 July the troops in the British front line went over the top. Rob Gilson of the T.C.B.S., serving in the Suffolk regiment, was among them. They scrambled up ladders from the trenches and into the open, forming up in straight lines as they had been instructed, and beginning their slow tramp forward - slow because each man was carrying at least sixty-five pounds of equipment. They had been told that the German defences were already virtually destroyed and the barbed wire cut by the Allied barrage. But they could not see that the wire was not cut, and as they approached it the German machine-guns opened fire on them.

Tolkien's battalion remained in reserve, moving to a village called Bouzincourt, where the majority bivouacked in a field while a few lucky ones (including Tolkien) slept in huts. There were clear signs that things had not gone according to plan on the battlefield: wounded men in their hundreds, many of them hideously mutilated; troops detailed for grave-digging; and a sinister smell of decay. The truth was that on the first day of battle twenty thousand Allied troops had been killed. The German defences had not been destroyed, and the barbed wire had been scarcely cut, and the enemy gunners had shot down the British and French line after line, as they advanced with slow paces, forming a perfect target.

On Thursday 6 July the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers went into action,

but only 'A' Company was sent down to the trenches and Tolkien stayed at Bouzincourt with the remainder. He reread Edith's letter from home and glanced once again at his rejection of love from the other members of the T.C.B.S. He was worried about Gilson and Smith, who had both been in the thick of the battle - and he was overwhelmingly relieved and delighted when later in the day G. B. Smith actually turned up at Bouzincourt alive and uninjured. Smith stayed for a few days' rest period before returning to the lines, and he and Tolkien met and talked as often as they could, discussing poetry, the war, and the future. Once they walked in a field where poppies still waved in the wind despite the battle that was turning the countryside into a featureless desert of mud. They waited anxiously for news of Rob Gilson. On the Sunday night 'A' Company came back from the trenches; a dozen of their number had been killed and more than a hundred wounded, and they told tales of horror. Then at last, on Friday 14 July, it was the turn of Tolkien and 'B' Company to go into action.

What Tolkien now experienced had already been endured by thousands of other soldiers: the long march at night-time from the billets down to the trenches, the stumble of a mile or more through the communication alleys that led to the front line itself, and the hours of confusion and exasperation until the hand-over from the previous company had been completed. For signallers such as Tolkien there was bitter disillusionment, as instead of the neat orderly conditions in which they had been trained they found a tangled confusion of wires, field-telephones out of order and covered with mud, and worst of all a prohibition on the use of wires for all but the least important messages (the Germans had tapped telephone lines and intercepted crucial orders preceding the attack). Even Morse code buzzers were prohibited, and instead the signallers had to rely on lights, flags, and at the last resort runners or even carrier-pigeons. Worst of all were the dead men, for corpses lay in every corner, horribly torn by the shells. Those that still had faces stared with dreadful eyes. Beyond the trenches no-man's-land was littered with bloated and decaying bodies. All around was desolation. Grass and corn had vanished into a sea of mud. Trees, stripped of leaf and branch, stood as mere mutilated and blackened trunks. Tolkien never forgot what he called the 'animal horror' of trench warfare.

His first day in action had been chosen by the Allied commanders for a major offensive, and his company was attached to the 7th Infantry Brigade for an attack on the ruined hamlet of Owillers, which was still in German hands. The attack was unsuccessful, for once again the enemy wire had not been properly cut, and many of Tolkien's battalion were killed by machine-gun fire. But he survived unhurt, and after forty-eight hours without rest he was allowed some sleep in a dug-out. After another twenty-four hours his company was relieved of duty. On his return to the huts at Bouzincourt Tolkien found a letter from G. B. Smith:

15 July 1916.

My dear John Ronald,

I saw in the paper this morning that Rob has been killed.

I am safe but what does that matter?

Do please stick to me, you and Christopher. I am very tired and most frightfully depressed at this worst of news.

Now one realises in despair what the T.C.B.S. really was.

O my dear John Ronald what ever are we going to do? Yours ever, G. B. S.

Rob Gilson had died at La Boisselle, leading his men into action on the first day of the battle, 1 July.

Tolkien wrote to Smith: 'I do not feel a member of a complete body now. I honestly feel that the T.C.B.S. has ended.' But Smith replied: 'The T.C.B.S. is not finished and never will be.'

Day now followed day in the same pattern: a rest period, back to the trenches, more attacks (usually fruitless), another rest period. Tolkien was among those who were in support at the storming of the Schwaben Redoubt, a massive fortification of German trenches. Prisoners were taken, among them men from a Saxon regiment that had fought alongside the Lancashire Fusiliers against the French at Minden in 1759. Tolkien spoke to a captured officer who had been wounded, offering him a drink of water; the officer corrected his German pronunciation. Occasionally there were brief periods of calm when the guns were silent. At one such moment (Tolkien later recalled) his hand was on the receiver of a trench telephone when a field-mouse emerged from hiding and ran across his fingers.

On Saturday 19 August Tolkien and G. B. Smith met again, at Acheux. They talked, and met again on the following days, on the last of which they had a meal together at Bouzincourt. coming under fire as they ate but surviving uninjured. Then Tolkien returned to the trenches.

Although there was no longer the same intensity of fighting as in the first days of the Battle of the Somme, British losses continued to be severe, and many of Tolkien's battalion were killed. He himself remained entirely uninjured, but the longer he stayed in the trenches the greater were his chances of being among the casualties. As to leave, it was ever imminent but never granted.

His rescuer was 'pyrexia of unknown origin', as the medical officers called it. To the soldiers it was simply 'trench fever'. Carried by lice, it caused a high temperature and other fever symptoms, and already thousands of men had reported sick with it. On Friday 27 October it struck Tolkien. He was billeted at Beauval at the time, twelve miles behind the lines. When he was taken ill they transported him to hospital a short distance away. A day later he was on a sick-train bound for the coast, and by the Sunday night a bed had been found for him in hospital at Le Touquet, where he remained for a week.

But the fever did not die down, and on 8 November he was put on board ship for England. Upon arrival he was taken by train to hospital in Birmingham. So in a matter of days he found himself transported from the horror of the trenches to white sheets and a view of the city he knew so well.

He was reunited with Edith, and by the third week in December he was well enough to leave hospital and go to Great Haywood to spend Christmas with her. There he received a letter from Christopher Wiseman, who was serving in the Navy:

H.M.S. Superb. 16 December 1916. My dear J. R.,

I have just received news from home about G. B. S., who has succumbed to injuries received from shells bursting on December 3rd. I can't say very much about it now. I humbly pray Almighty God I may be accounted worthy of him.

Chris.

Smith had been walking down the road in a village behind the lines when a shell burst near him; he was wounded in the right arm and thigh. An operation was attempted, but gas-gangrene had set in. They buried him in Warlencourt British Cemetery. Not long before, he had written to Tolkien:

My chief consolation is that if I am scuppered tonight - 1 am off on duty in a few minutes - there will still be left a member of the great T.C.B.S. to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon. For the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the T.C.B.S. Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals, but it cannot put an end to the immortal four! A discovery I am going to communicate to Rob before I go off to-night. And do you write it also to Christopher. May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot.

Yours ever, G. B. S.

Part Three

1917-1925: The making of a mythology

Lost Tales

May you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them. G. B. Smith's words were a clear call to Ronald Tolkien to begin the great work that he had been meditating for some time, a grand and astonishing project with few parallels in the history of literature. He was going to create an entire mythology.

The idea had its origins in his taste for inventing languages. He had discovered that to carry out such inventions to any degree of complexity he must create for the languages a 'history' in which they could develop. Already in the early Earendel poems he had begun to sketch something of that history; now he wanted to record it in full.

There was another force at work: his desire to express his most profound feelings in poetry, a desire that owed its origin to the inspiration of the T.C.B.S. His first verses had been unremarkable, as immature as the raw idealism of the four young men; but they were the first steps towards the great prose-poem (for though in prose it is a poetic work) that he now began to write.

And there was a third element playing a part: his desire to create a mythology for England. He had hinted at this during his undergraduate days when he wrote of the Finnish Kalevala: 'I would that we had more of it left - something of the same sort that belonged to the English.' This idea grew until it reached grand proportions. Here is how Tolkien expressed it, when recollecting it many years later: 'Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story - the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths - which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our "air" (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe; not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be "high", purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long steeped in poetry. I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.'

Absurdly grand the concept may have seemed, but on his return from France, Tolkien determined to realise it. Here now was the time and place: he was once more with Edith and at Great Haywood, in the English countryside that was so dear to him. Even Christopher Wiseman far away at sea sensed that something was about to happen. He wrote to Tolkien: 'You ought to start the epic.' And Tolkien did. On the cover of a cheap notebook he wrote in thick blue pencil the title that he had chosen for his mythological cycle: 'The Book of Lost Tales'. Inside the notebook he began to compose what eventually became known as The Silmarillion.

No account of the external events of Tolkien's life can provide more than a superficial explanation of the origins of his mythology. Certainly the device that linked the stories in the first draft of the book (it was later abandoned) owes something to William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*; for, as in that story, a sea-voyager arrives at an unknown land where he is to hear a succession of tales. Tolkien's voyager was called Eriol, a name that is explained as meaning 'One who dreams alone'. But the tales that Eriol hears, grand, tragic, and heroic, cannot be explained as the mere product of literary influences and personal experience. When Tolkien began to write he drew upon some deeper, richer seam of his imagination than he had yet explored; and it was a seam that would continue to yield for the rest of his life. The first of the 'legends' that make up *The Silmarillion* tell of the creation of the universe and the establishing of the known world, which Tolkien, recalling the Norse Midgard and the equivalent words in early English, calls 'Middle-earth'. Some readers have taken this to refer to another planet, but Tolkien had no such intention. 'Middle-earth is our world,' he wrote, adding: 'I have (of course) placed the action in a purely imaginary (though not wholly impossible) period of antiquity, in which the shape of the continental masses was different.'

Later stories in the cycle deal chiefly with the fashioning of the 'Silmarilli' (the three great jewels of the elves which give the book its title), their theft from the blessed realm of Valinor by the evil power Morgoth, and the subsequent wars in which the elves try to regain them.

Some have puzzled over the relation between Tolkien's stories and his Christianity, and have found it difficult to understand how a devout Roman Catholic could write with such conviction about a world where God is not worshipped. But there is no mystery. The Silmarillion is the work of a profoundly religious man. It does not contradict Christianity but complements it. There is in the legends no worship of God, yet God is indeed there, more explicitly in The Silmarillion than in the work that grew out of it, The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien's universe is ruled over by God, 'The One'. Beneath Him in the hierarchy are 'The Valar', the guardians of the world, who are not gods but angelic powers, themselves holy and subject to God; and at one terrible moment in the story they surrender their power into His hands.

Tolkien cast his mythology in this form because he wanted it to be remote and strange, and yet at the same time not to be a lie. He wanted the mythological and legendary stories to express his own moral view of the universe; and as a Christian he could not place this view in a cosmos without the God that he worshipped. At the same time, to set his stories 'realistically' in the known world, where religious beliefs were explicitly Christian, would deprive them of imaginative colour. So while God is present in Tolkien's universe, He remains unseen.

When he wrote The Silmarillion Tolkien believed that in one sense he was writing the truth. He did not suppose that precisely such peoples as he described, 'elves', 'dwarves', and malevolent 'orcs', had walked the earth and done the deeds that he recorded. But he did feel, or hope, that his stories were in some sense an embodiment of a profound truth. This is not to say that he was writing an allegory: far from it. Time and again he expressed his distaste for that form of literature. 'I dislike allegory wherever I smell it,' he once said, and similar phrases echo through his letters to readers of his books. So in what sense did he suppose The Silmarillion to be 'true'?

Something of the answer can be found in his essay On Fairy-Stories and in his story Leaf by Niggle, both of which suggest that a man may be given by God the gift of recording 'a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth'. Certainly while writing The Silmarillion Tolkien believed that he was doing more than inventing a story. He wrote of the tales that make up the book: They arose in my mind as "given" things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew. An absorbing, though continually interrupted labour (especially, even apart from the necessities of life, since the mind would wing to the other pole and spread itself on the linguistics): yet always I had the sense of recording what was already "there", somewhere: not of "inventing".'

The first story to be put on paper - it was written out during Tolkien's convalescence at Great Haywood early in 1917 - actually occupies a place towards the end of the cycle. This is 'The Fall of Gondolin', which tells of the assault on the last elvish stronghold by Morgoth, the prime power of evil. After a terrible battle a group of the inhabitants of Gondolin make their escape, and among them is Earendel, grandson of the king; here then is the link with the early Earendel poems, the first sketches for the mythology. The style of 'The fall of Gondolin' suggests that Tolkien was influenced by William Morris, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the great battle which forms the central part of the story may owe a little of its inspiration to Tolkien's experiences on the Somme - or rather to his reaction to those experiences, for the fighting at Gondolin has a heroic grandeur entirely lacking in modern warfare. But in any case these were only superficial 'influences': Tolkien used no models or sources for his strange and exciting tale. Indeed its two most notable characteristics are entirely his own device: the invented names, and the fact that the majority of the protagonists are elves.

Strictly speaking it could be said that the elves of The Silmarillion grew out of the 'fairy folk' of Tolkien's early poems, but really there is little connection between the two. Elves may have arisen in his mind as a result of his enthusiasm for Francis Thompson's 'Sister Songs' and Edith's fondness for 'little elfin people', but the elves of The Silmarillion have nothing whatever to do with the 'tiny leprechauns' of 'Goblin Feet'. They are to all intents and purposes men: or rather, they are Man before the Fall which deprived him of his powers of achievement. Tolkien believed devoutly that there had once been an Eden on earth, and that man's original sin and subsequent dethronement were responsible for the ills of the world; but his elves, though capable of sin and error, have not 'fallen' in the theological sense, and so are able to achieve much beyond the powers of men. They are craftsmen, poets, scribes, creators of works of beauty far surpassing human artefacts. Most important of all they are, unless slain in battle, immortal. Old age, disease, and death do not bring their work to an end while it is still unfinished or imperfect. They are therefore the ideal of every artist.

These, then, are the elves of The Silmarillion, and of The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien himself summed up their nature when he wrote of them: 'They are made by man in his own image and likeness; but freed from those limitations which he feels most to press upon him. They are immortal, and their will is directly effective for the achievement of imagination and desire.'

As to the names of persons and places in “The Fall of Gondolin” and the other stories in *The Silmarillion*, they were constructed from Tolkien’s invented languages. Since the existence of these languages was a *raison d’être* for the whole mythology, it is not surprising that he devoted a good deal of attention to the business of making up names from them. Indeed the name-making and the Linguistic work associated with it came (as he said in the passage quoted above) to occupy just as much if not more of his attention than the writing of the stories themselves. So it is worthwhile (and interesting) to get some idea of how he went about this part of the work.

Tolkien had sketched a number of invented languages when he was an adolescent, and had developed several of them to a degree of some complexity. But ultimately only one of these early experiments had pleased him, and had come to express his personal linguistic taste. This was the invented language that had been heavily influenced by Finnish. He called it ‘Quenya’, and by 1917 it was very sophisticated, possessing a vocabulary of many hundreds of words (based albeit on a fairly limited number of word-stems). Quenya was derived, as any ‘real’ language would have been, from a more primitive language supposedly spoken in an earlier age; and from this ‘Primitive Eldarin’ Tolkien created a second elvish language, contemporary with Quenya but spoken by different peoples of the elves. This language he eventually called ‘Sindarin’, and he modelled its phonology on Welsh, the language that after Finnish was closest to his personal linguistic taste.

Besides Quenya and Sindarin, Tolkien invented a number of other elvish languages. Though these existed only in outline, the complexities of their inter-relationship and the elaboration of a ‘family tree’ of languages occupied much of his mind. But the elvish names in *The Silmarillion* were constructed almost exclusively from Quenya and Sindarin.

It is impossible in a few sentences to give an adequate account of how Tolkien used his elvish languages to make names for the characters and places in his stories. But briefly, what happened was this. When working to plan he would form all these names with great care, first deciding on the meaning, and then developing its form first in one language and subsequently in the other; the form finally used was most frequently that in Sindarin. However, in practice he was often more arbitrary. It seems strange in view of his deep love of careful invention, yet often in the heat of writing he would construct a name that sounded appropriate to the character without paying more than cursory attention to its linguistic origins. Later he dismissed many of the names made in this way as ‘meaningless’, and he subjected others to a severe philological scrutiny in an attempt to discover how they could have reached their strange and apparently inexplicable form. This, too, is an aspect of his imagination that must be grasped by anyone trying to understand how he worked. As the years went by he came more and more to regard his own invented languages and stories as ‘real’ languages and historical chronicles that needed to be elucidated. In other words, when in this mood he did not say of an apparent contradiction in the narrative or an unsatisfactory name: ‘This is not as I wish it to be; I must change it.’ Instead he would approach the problem with the attitude: ‘What does this mean? I must find out.’

This was not because he had lost his wits or his sense of proportion. In part it was an intellectual game of Patience¹ (he was very fond of Patience cards), and in part it grew from his belief in the ultimate truth of his mythology. Yet at other times he would consider making drastic changes in some radical aspect of the whole structure of the story, just as any other author would do. These were of course contradictory attitudes; but here as in so many areas of his personality Tolkien was a man of antitheses.

This, then, was the remarkable work that he began while he was on sick-leave at Great Haywood early in 1917. Edith was glad to help him, and she made a fair copy of *The Fall of Gondolin*, writing it out in a large exercise-book. It was an interlude of rare contentment. In the evenings she played the piano and he recited his poetry or made sketches of her. At this time she conceived a child. But the idyll could not last; ‘trench fever’ amounted to little more than a high temperature and general discomfort, and a month in hospital at Birmingham had apparently cured Tolkien. Now his battalion wanted him back in service in France. He did not want to go, of course, and it would be tragic if his life were wiped out by a German gun just when he was beginning his great work. But what else could he do?

His health provided the answer. Towards the end of his leave at Great Haywood he was taken ill again. He got better after a few weeks and was posted temporarily to Yorkshire. Edith and her cousin Jennie packed their belongings and followed him north, moving into furnished lodgings a few miles from his camp, at Hornsea. But just after he had returned to duty he went sick once more, and was put into a Harrogate sanatorium.

He was not malingering. There is no doubt that he had real symptoms of illness. But as Edith wrote to him, ‘Every day in bed means another day in England,’ and he knew that recovery would almost inevitably lead to a return to the trenches. So, as happened with many other soldiers, his body responded and kept his temperature above normal, while the fact that he was spending day after day in bed being dosed with aspirin did nothing to improve his strength. By April he was passed fit again and was sent for further training at an army signalling school in the North-East. There was a good chance that if he passed an examination he might be appointed Signals Officer at the

Early in 1922 a new junior lecturer was appointed to the language side of the English Department at Leeds, a young man named E. V. Gordon. This small dark Canadian (who was unrelated to George Gordon) had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and Tolkien had tutored him during 1920. Now he made him very welcome in Leeds. 'Eric Valentine Gordon has come and got firmly established and is my devoted friend and pal,' he wrote in his diary.

Soon after Gordon's arrival the two men began to collaborate on a major piece of scholarship. Tolkien had been working for some time at a glossary for a book of Middle English extracts that his former tutor Kenneth Sisam had edited. This meant in effect compiling a small Middle English dictionary, a task that he undertook with infinite precision and much imagination. The glossary took a long time to complete, but it reached print early in 1922, by which time Tolkien wanted to turn his hand to something that would give greater scope to his scholarship. He and E. V. Gordon decided to compile a new edition of the Middle English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, as there was none in print that was suitable for university students. Tolkien was to be responsible for the text and glossary while Gordon would provide the greater part of the notes.

Tolkien found that his collaborator was 'an industrious little devil', and he had to work fast to keep up with him. They finished the book in time for publication by the Clarendon Press early in 1925. It was a major contribution to the study of medieval literature - though Tolkien himself would often in later years entertain his audience at lectures by making disparaging references to some point of interpretation in the edition, as if he himself had nothing to do with it: Tolkien and Gordon were quite wrong, quite wrong when they said that! Can't imagine what they were thinking of!

E. V. Gordon shared Tolkien's sense of humour. Together the two men helped to form a Viking Club among the undergraduates, which met to drink large quantities of beer, read sagas, and sing comic songs. These were mostly written by Tolkien and Gordon, who made up rude verses about the students, translated nursery rhymes into Anglo-Saxon, and sang drinking songs in Old Norse. Several of their verses were printed privately some years later as Songs for the Philologists. Not surprisingly, the Viking Club helped to make Tolkien and Gordon popular as teachers, and through this and the excellence of their teaching the language side of the English Department attracted more and more pupils. By 1925 there were twenty linguistic specialists among the undergraduates, more than a third of the total number in the department, and a far higher proportion than was usually enrolled at Oxford for the equivalent course.

Home life for the Tolkiens was generally happy. Edith found the atmosphere in the university refreshingly informal, and she made friends with other wives. Money was not plentiful and Tolkien was saving to buy a house, so family holidays were few, but in the summer of 1922 there was a visit of some weeks to Filey on the Yorkshire coast. Tolkien did not like the place; he called it 'a very nasty little suburban seaside resort', and while he was there he had to spend a good deal of time marking School Certificate examination papers, a chore that he now undertook annually to earn some extra money. But he also wrote several poems.

He had been composing a good deal of verse over the last few years. Much of it was concerned with his mythology. Some found its way into print in the Leeds university magazine The Gryphon, in a local series called Yorkshire Poetry, and in a book of verses by members of the English Department entitled Northern Venture. Now he began a series of poems that he called Tales and Songs of Bimble Bay'. One, suggested by his feelings about Filey, complains of the sordid noisy character of modern urban life. Another, 'The Dragon's Visit', describes the ravages of a dragon who arrives at Bimble Bay and encounters 'Miss Biggins'. A third, 'Clip', tells of a strange slimy creature who lives beneath the floor of a cave and his pale luminous eyes. All are glimpses of important things to come.

In May 1923 Tolkien caught a severe cold which lingered and turned into pneumonia. His grandfather John Suffield, then aged ninety, was staying with the family at the time, and Tolkien recalled a vision of him 'standing by my bedside, a tall thin black-clad figure, and looking at me and speaking to me in contempt - to the effect that I and my generation were degenerate weaklings. There was I gasping for breath, but he must now say goodbye, as he was off to catch a boat to go a trip by sea around the British Isles!' The old man lived for another seven years, spending much of his time with his youngest daughter, Tolkien's Aunt Jane. She had left Nottinghamshire and had taken a farm at Dormston in Worcestershire. It was at the end of a lane that led no further, and the local people used sometimes to refer to it as 'Bag End'.

When Tolkien had recovered from pneumonia he went with Edith and the children to stay with his brother Hilary, who after his war service had bought a small orchard and market garden near Eve-sham, ancestral town of the Suffields. The family were pressed into service to help on the land, and there were also hilarious games with giant kites, which the two brothers flew from the field opposite the house to amuse the children. Tolkien also managed to find time to do some work, and to turn again to his mythology.

has time today, and Tolkien has to do some shopping before going home for lunch. He leaves Lewis and bicycles up the High Street to the busy arcade known as the Covered Market, where he has to collect sausages from Lindsey the butcher; Edith forgot to include them in the week's order that was delivered the day before. He exchanges a joke with Mr Lindsey, and also calls in at the stationer on the corner of Market Street to buy some pen nibs. Then he bicycles home up the Banbury Road, and manages to fit in fifteen minutes at a long-overdue letter to E. V. Gordon about their plans to collaborate on an edition of Pearl. He begins to type the letter on his Hammond typewriter, a big machine with interchangeable typefaces on a revolving disc; his model has italics and the Anglo-Saxon letters þ, ð, and æ. Edith rings the handbell for lunch before he can finish.

Lunch, at which all the family is present, is chiefly taken up with a discussion about Michael's dislike of swimming lessons at school, and whether or not a septic toe should be allowed to prevent the boy from bathing. After the meal, Tolkien goes into the garden to see how the broad beans are coming along. Edith brings Priscilla out to play on the lawn, and discusses with him whether they should dig up the remainder of the old tennis court, to increase the size of the vegetable plot. Then, leaving Edith to feed the canaries and budgerigars in her aviary at the side of the house, he gets on his bicycle once more and pedals down to the town, this time for a meeting of the English Faculty.

The meeting is in Merton College, for the Faculty has no premises of its own other than a cramped library in the attic of the Examination Schools, and Merton is the college most closely associated with it Tolkien himself is a Fellow of Pembroke, but he is not much involved with his college, and like all professors his first responsibility is towards his Faculty. The meeting begins at half past two. Besides the other professors - Wyld, who holds the chair of English Language and Literature, and Nichol Smith, the professor of English Literature - there are about a dozen dons present, several of them women. Sometimes these meetings can be acrimonious, and Tolkien himself has attended many when, while trying to initiate reforms of the syllabus, he has been the target for bitter attacks from the 'literature' camp. But those days are passed, and his reforms have been accepted and put into practice. Today's meeting is mostly concerned with routine business such as the dates of examinations, minor details of the syllabus, and the question of funds for the Faculty library. It all takes time, and the meeting does not break up until nearly four, which just gives Tolkien a few minutes to call in at the Bodleian Library and look up something in a book that he ordered from the stack the previous day. Then he rides home again in time for the children's tea at half past four.

After tea he manages to put in an hour and a half at his desk, finishing the letter to E. V. Gordon and beginning to arrange his lecture notes for the next day. When life goes according to plan he manages to prepare an entire course of lectures before the beginning of term, but too often pressure of time forces him to leave the work until the last minute. Even now he does not get very much done, for Michael wants help with his Latin prose homework, and this occupies twenty minutes. All too soon it is half past six and he must change into a dinner-jacket. He does not dine out more than once or twice a week, but tonight there is a guest night at his college, Pembroke, and he has promised to be there to meet a friend's guest. He ties his black tie hastily and again mounts his bicycle, leaving Edith to an early supper at home.

He reaches college in time for sherry in the Senior Common Room. His position at Pembroke is somewhat anomalous, thanks to the confused and confusing administrative practices of Oxford. It could almost be said that the colleges are the University, for the majority of the teaching staff hold college fellowships, and their primary responsibility is to instruct undergraduates in their own college. But professors are in a different position. They are primarily outside the collegiate system, for they teach on a faculty basis, irrespective of what college their pupils may belong to. However, so that a professor shall not be deprived of the social facilities and other conveniences of college life, he is allocated to a college and given a fellowship in it *ex officio*. This sometimes leads to bad feeling, for in all other circumstances colleges elect their own fellows, whereas 'Professorial Fellows' such as Tolkien are to some extent wished upon them. Tolkien thinks that Pembroke resents him a little; certainly the atmosphere in the common room is unfriendly and austere. Fortunately there is a junior fellow, R. B. McCallum, a lively man several years younger than Tolkien, who is an ally; and he is waiting now to introduce his guest. Dinner proves to be enjoyable - and edible, since the food is plain without any suggestion of that tiresome French cooking which (Tolkien reflects with disgust) is beginning to invade the high tables of several colleges.

After dinner he makes his excuses and leaves early, crossing the town to Balliol College where there is to be a meeting of the Coal-biters in John Bryson's rooms. The Kolbitar, to give it the Icelandic title (meaning those who lounge so close to the fire in winter that they 'bite the coal'), is an informal reading club founded by Tolkien somewhat on the model of the Viking Club in Leeds, except that its members are all dons. They meet for an evening several times each term to read Icelandic sagas. Tonight there is a good turn-out: George Gordon, now the President of Magdalen, Nevill Coghill of Exeter, C. T. Onions from the Dictionary, Dawkins the Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek, Bryson himself, and - Tolkien is glad to note - C. S. Lewis, who chides him noisily for being late. They are currently reading the Grettis Saga, and Tolkien himself begins, which is customary as he is

easily the best Norse scholar of anyone in the club. He resumes at the point where they left off last time, improvising a fluent translation from the text that is spread open on his knees.

After he has done a couple of pages Dawkins takes over. He too is fluent, though not quite as fluent as Tolkien, but when the others take their turn they proceed much more slowly, each of them translating no more than half a page, for none of them professes to be more than a beginner at the language. This however is the whole purpose of the Coalbiters, for Tolkien started the club to persuade his friends that Icelandic literature is worth reading in the original language; and he encourages their somewhat halting steps and applauds their efforts.

After an hour or so they reach a good stopping-place, and the whisky bottle is opened while they discuss the saga. Then they listen to a scurrilous and very funny poem that Tolkien has just written about another member of the English Faculty. It is after eleven when they break up. Tolkien walks with Lewis to the end of Broad Street, and then they go their separate ways, Lewis down Holywell Street towards Magdalen (for he is a bachelor and usually sleeps in college in term-time) and Tolkien on his bicycle back to Northmoor Road.

Edith has gone to bed and the house is in darkness when he gets home. He builds up the fire in the study stove and fills his pipe. He ought, he knows, to do some more work on his lecture notes for the next morning, but he cannot resist taking from a drawer the half-finished manuscript of a story that he is writing to amuse himself and his children. It is probably, he suspects, a waste of time; certainly if he is going to devote any attention to this sort of thing it ought to be to *The Silmarillion*. But something draws him back night after night to this amusing little tale - at least it seems to amuse the boys. He sits down at the desk, fits a new relief nib to his dip pen (which he prefers to a fountain pen), unscrews the ink bottle, takes a sheet of old examination paper (which still has a candidate's essay on the Battle of Maldon on the back of it), and begins to write: 'When Bilbo opened his eyes, he wondered if he had; for it was just as dark as with them shut. No one was anywhere near him. Just imagine his fright! ...'

We will leave him now. He will be at his desk until hah* past one, or two o'clock, or perhaps even later, with only the scratching of his pen to disturb the silence, while around him Northmoor Road sleeps.

These, then, were some of the externals of his life: domestic routine, teaching, preparation for teaching, correspondence, an occasional evening with friends - and it would in truth be a rare evening that included both a dinner in college and a meeting of the Coalbiters; these and other irregular events such as the Faculty meeting are here put under the umbrella of the same imaginary day simply as an indication of the range of his activities. A truly average day would be more dull.

Or perhaps to the reader the events here described are all dull, unredeemed by a flicker of excitement: the trivial activities of a man enclosed in a narrow way of life that holds no interest for anyone outside it. All this, says the reader, this account of lighting the stove and bicycling to lectures and feeling unwelcome in a college common room, all this says nothing about the man who wrote *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, does nothing to explain the nature of his mind and the way in which his imagination responded to his surroundings. Certainly Tolkien himself would have agreed with this. It was one of his strongest-held opinions that the investigation of an author's life reveals very little of the workings of his mind. Maybe; but before we abandon our task as utterly hopeless, we could perhaps move in a little closer than the viewpoint we adopted for the imaginary day, move in and observe, or at least hazard a few guesses about some of the more obvious aspects of his personality. And if after this we may not have any better idea why he wrote his books, then at least we should know a little more about the man who did write them.

Perhaps we could start with photographs. There are plenty of them, for the Tolkiens took and kept endless snapshots. At first we get nowhere. Photographs of Tolkien in middle age reveal virtually nothing. Facing the camera is an ordinary middle-class Englishman of light build and moderate height. He is mildly handsome, with a long face; and that is about all that can be said. Admittedly there is a keenness in the eyes which suggests a lively mind, but nothing else reveals itself - nothing except his clothes, which are exceptionally ordinary.

His manner of dressing was of course partly the result of circumstances, the necessity of bringing up a large family on a relatively small income that left nothing over for personal extravagances. Later, when he became a wealthy man, he did indulge in coloured waistcoats. But his choice of clothes in middle age was also the sign of a dislike of dandyism. This he shared with C. S. Lewis. Neither could abide any manner of affectation in dress, which seemed to them to smack of the unmasculine and hence of the objectionable. Lewis took this to extremes, not only buying indifferent clothes but wearing them indifferently; Tolkien, always the more fastidious, at least kept his trousers pressed. But fundamentally both men had the same attitude to their appearance, an attitude that was shared by many of their contemporaries. This preference for plain masculine clothing was in part perhaps a reaction to the excessive dandyism and implied homosexuality of the 'aesthetes', who had first made their mark on Oxford in the age of Wilde and whose successors lingered on in the nineteen-twenties and early thirties, affecting delicate shades of garment and ambiguous nuances of manner. Theirs was a way of life of which Tolkien and the majority

that unparalleled richness and concreteness which later distinguished him from all other philologists. He had been inside language.'

'Distinguished him from all other philologists' sounds like a sweeping statement, but it is entirely true. Comparative philology grew up in nineteenth-century Germany, and although its practitioners were painstaking in their accuracy their writing was almost unredeemed in its dullness. Tolkien's own mentor Joseph Wright had been trained in Germany, and while his books are invaluable for their contribution to the science of language they reflect almost nothing of Wright's vigorous personality. Much as he loved his old teacher, Tolkien was perhaps thinking partly of Wright when he wrote of 'the bespectacled philologist, English but trained in Germany, where he lost his literary soul'.

Tolkien never lost his literary soul. His philological writings invariably reflect the richness of his mind. He brought to even the most intricate aspects of his subject a grace of expression and a sense of the larger significance of the matter. Nowhere is this demonstrated to better advantage than in his article (published in 1929) on the *Ancrene Wisse*, a medieval book of instruction for a group of anchorites, which probably originated in the West Midlands. By a remarkable and subtle piece of scholarship, Tolkien showed that the language of two important manuscripts of the text (one in a Cambridge college, the other in the Bodleian Library at Oxford) was no mere unpolished dialect, but a literary language, with an unbroken literary tradition going back to before the Conquest. He expressed this conclusion in vivid terms - and it should be appreciated that he is here really talking about his beloved West Midland dialect as a whole:

'It is not a language long relegated to the "uplands" struggling once more for expression in apologetic emulation of its betters or out of compassion for the lewd, but rather one that has never fallen back into "lewdness", and has contrived in troublous times to maintain the air of a gentleman, if a country gentleman. It has traditions and some acquaintance with books and the pen, but it is also in close touch with a good living speech - a soil somewhere in England.'

This kind of writing, forceful in its imagery, characterised all his articles and lectures, however abstruse or unpromising the subject might seem. In this respect he almost founded a new school of philology; certainly there had been no one before him who brought such humanity, one might say such emotion, to the subject; and it was an approach which influenced many of his most able pupils who themselves became philologists of distinction.

It ought also to be said that he was immensely painstaking. Broad and powerful statements such as that quoted above may have characterised his work, yet they were no mere assertions, but the product of countless hours of research into the minutiae of the subject. Even by the usual scrupulous standards of comparative philology, Tolkien was extraordinary in this respect. His concern for accuracy cannot be overemphasised, and it was doubly valuable because it was coupled with a flair for detecting patterns and relations. 'Detecting' is a good word, for it is not too great a flight of fancy to picture him as a linguistic Sherlock Holmes, presenting himself with an apparently disconnected series of facts and deducing from them the truth about some major matter. He also demonstrated his ability to 'detect' on a simpler level, for when discussing a word or phrase with a pupil he would cite a wide range of comparable forms and expressions in other languages. Similarly in casual conversation he delighted in producing unexpected remarks about names, such as his observation that the name 'Waugh' is historically the singular of 'Wales'.

But probably all this sounds like the scholar in his ivory tower. What did he do! What, in practical terms, did it mean to be the Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford? The simplest answer is that it meant a good deal of hard work. The statutes called upon Tolkien to give a minimum of thirty-six lectures or classes a year, but he did not consider this to be sufficient to cover the subject, and in the second year after being elected Professor he gave one hundred and thirty-six lectures and classes. This was partly because there were comparatively few other people to lecture on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. Later he managed to get another philologist, an excellent if intimidating teacher named Charles Wrenn, appointed to assist him, and then he was able to set himself a slightly less strenuous programme. But throughout the nineteen-thirties he continued to give at least twice the statutory number of lectures and classes each year, considerably more than most of his colleagues undertook.

So lectures, and the preparation for them, took up a very large proportion of his time. In fact this heavy teaching load was sometimes more than he could manage efficiently, and occasionally he would abandon a course of lectures because of insufficient time to prepare it. Oxford seized gleefully on this sin and bestowed upon him the reputation of not preparing his lectures properly, whereas the truth was that he prepared them too thoroughly. His deep commitment to the subject prevented him from tackling it in anything less than an exhaustive manner, with the result that he often sidetracked himself into the consideration of subsidiary details, and never managed to finish the treatment of the main topic.

His job also required him to supervise post-graduate students, and to examine within the University. In addition he undertook a good deal of 'freelance' work as an external examiner to other universities, for with four children to bring up he needed to augment his income. During the nineteen-twenties and thirties he made frequent visits to many of the British universities as an examiner, and spent countless hours marking papers. After the Second World War he restricted this activity to examining regularly for various colleges in Ireland, touring Eire and making many friends there in the process. This was much to his taste. Less attractive, indeed an unredeemed chore, was the marking of School Certificate (the examination then set for British secondary schools) which he undertook annually in the prewar years to earn extra money. His time would have been better devoted to research or writing, but his concern for the family income made him spend many hours in the summer at this irritating task.

A good deal of his attention was also taken up by administration. It should be understood that an Oxford professor, unlike those in many other universities, is not by virtue of his office necessarily in a position of power in his faculty. He has no authority over the college tutors who in all probability make up the majority of the faculty staff, for they are appointed by their colleges and are not answerable to him. So if he wishes to initiate some major change of policy he must adopt persuasive rather than authoritarian tactics. And, on his return to Oxford in 1925, Tolkien did wish to make a major change: he wanted to reform certain aspects of the Final Honour School of English Language and Literature.

The years since the First World War had widened the old rift between Language and Literature, and each faction in the English School - and they really were factions, with personal as well as academic animosities - delighted to interfere with the syllabus of the other. The 'Lang.' side made sure that the 'Lit.' students had to spend a good deal of their time studying the obscurer branches of English philology, while the 'Lit.' camp insisted that the 'Lang.' undergraduates must set aside many hours from their specialisation (Anglo-Saxon and Middle English) to study the works of Milton and Shakespeare. Tolkien believed that this should be remedied. What was even more regrettable to him was that the linguistic courses laid considerable emphasis on the study of theoretical philology without suggesting that undergraduates should read widely in early and medieval literature. His own love of philology had always been based firmly on a knowledge of literature, and he determined that this state of affairs should be changed. He also proposed that Icelandic should be given more prominence in the syllabus; this latter hope was one reason for the formation of the Coalbiters.

His proposals required the consent of the whole faculty, and at first he met with a good deal of opposition. Even C. S. Lewis, not yet a personal friend, was among those who originally voted against him. But as the terms passed, Lewis and many others came over to Tolkien's side and gave him their active support. By 1931 he had managed ('beyond my wildest hopes', he wrote in his diary) to obtain general approval for the majority of his proposals. The revised syllabus was put into operation, and for the first time in the history of the Oxford English School something like a real rapprochement was achieved between 'Lang.' and 'Lit.'

Besides being responsible for teaching and administration, professors at Oxford as elsewhere are expected to devote much of their time to original research. Tolkien's contemporaries had high hopes of him in this respect, for his glossary to Sisam's book, his edition with E. V. Gordon of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and his article on the Ancrene Wisse manuscripts demonstrated that he had an unrivalled mastery of the early Middle English of the West Midlands; and it was expected that he would continue to contribute important work in this field. He himself had every intention of doing so: he promised an edition of the Cambridge manuscript of the Ancrene Wisse to the Early English Text Society, and he did a great deal of research into this branch of early medieval English, this language 'with the air of a gentleman, if a country gentleman' which he loved so much. But the edition was not completed for many years, while the greater part of his research work never reached print.

Lack of time was one cause. He had chosen to devote the major part of his working life at Oxford to teaching, and this in itself limited what he could do in the matter of original research. The marking of examination papers in order to provide necessary money also ate into his time. But besides this there was the matter of his perfectionism.

Tolkien had a passion for perfection in written work of any kind, whether it be philology or stories. This grew from his emotional commitment to his work, which did not permit him to treat it in any manner other than the deeply serious. Nothing was allowed to reach the printer until it had been revised, reconsidered, and polished - in which respect he was the opposite of C. S. Lewis, who sent manuscripts off for publication with scarcely a second glance at them. Lewis, well aware of this difference between them, wrote of Tolkien: 'His standard of self-criticism was high and the mere suggestion of publication usually set him upon a revision, in the course of which so many new ideas occurred to him that where his friends had hoped for the final text of an old work they actually got the first draft of a new one.'

This is the main reason why Tolkien only allowed a small proportion of his work to reach the printed page. But what he did publish during the nineteen-thirties was a major contribution to scholarship. His paper on the dialects of Chaucer's Reeve's Tale is required reading for anyone who wishes to understand the regional variations of

fourteenth-century English. (It was read to the Philological Society in 1931 but not published until 1934, and then with a typical Tolkien apology for the lack of what the author considered to be a necessary amount of revision and improvement.) And his lecture *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*, delivered to the British Academy on 25 November 1936 and published in the following year, is a landmark in the history of criticism of this great Western Anglo-Saxon poem.

Beowulf, said Tolkien in the lecture, is a poem and not (as other commentators had often suggested) merely a jumble of confused literary traditions, or a text for scholarly examination. And he described, in characteristically imaginative terms, the way that earlier critics had treated the Beowulf poet's work: 'A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): "What a muddle it is in!" And even the man's descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: "He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion." But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.'

In his lecture Tolkien pleaded for the rebuilding of that tower. He declared that although Beowulf is about monsters and a dragon, that does not make it negligible as heroic poetry. 'A dragon is no idle fancy,' he told his audience. 'Even today (despite the critics) you may find men not ignorant of tragic legend and history, who have heard of heroes and indeed seen them, who have yet been caught by the fascination of the worm.'

This was Tolkien talking not primarily as a philologist or even a literary critic, but as a storyteller. Just as Lewis said of his philology, 'He had been inside language', so it might be remarked that when he talked of the Beowulf dragon he was speaking as the author of *The Silmarillion* and - by this time - of *The Hobbit*. He had been into the dragon's lair.

Since the lecture was first published, many readers of Beowulf have dissented from Tolkien's view of the poem's structure. But even one of the severest critics of his interpretation, his old tutor Kenneth Sisam, admitted that the lecture has a 'fineness of perception and elegance of expression' which distinguish it from so much else in this field.

The Beowulf lecture and the paper on the Reeve's Tale were the only major pieces of philological work published by Tolkien in the nineteen-thirties. He planned to do much more: besides his work on the *Ancrene Wisse* he intended to produce an edition of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus*, and indeed he nearly completed this task, but it was never finished to his satisfaction. He also planned further joint editions with E. V. Gordon, in particular of *Pearl* (a natural companion-piece to their *Gawain*) and of the Anglo-Saxon elegies *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. But Gordon and Tolkien were now geographically far apart. In 1931 Gordon, who had been appointed Tolkien's successor as professor at Leeds, moved from there to take up a chair at Manchester University, and though the two men met and corresponded frequently, collaboration proved technically less easy than when they had been in the same place. Gordon did a great deal of work on all three projects, using Tolkien as a consultant rather than as a full collaborator, but nothing had reached print by 1938.

In the summer of that year, Gordon went into hospital for an operation for gall-stones. It seemed to be successful, but his condition suddenly deteriorated, and he died from a previously unsuspected kidney disorder, at the age of forty-two.

Gordon's death robbed Tolkien not only of a close friend but also of the ideal professional collaborator; and by now it was clear that he needed a collaborator, if only to make him surrender any material to the printer.¹ As it happened, he had made the acquaintance of another philologist who proved to be a good working partner. This was Simone d'Ardenne, a Belgian graduate who studied Middle English with him for an Oxford B.Litt. early in the nineteen-thirties. Tolkien contributed much to her edition of *The Life and Passion of St Juliene*, a medieval religious work written in the *Ancrene Wisse* dialect. Indeed the *d'Ardenne Juliene* paradoxically contains more of his views on early Middle English than anything he ever published under his own name. Mile d'Ardenne became a professor at Liege, and she and Tolkien planned to collaborate on an edition of *Katerine*, another Western Middle English text of the same group. But the war intervened and made communication between them impossible for many years, and after 1945 nothing was achieved by them beyond a couple of short articles on topics concerned with the manuscript of the text. Although Tolkien was able to work with Mile d'Ardenne when he was in Belgium to attend a philological

congress in 1951, she realised sadly that collaboration with him was now impossible, for his mind was entirely on his stories.

But even if one is to regard his failure to publish more in his professional field as a matter for regret, one should not fail to take account of his wide influence, for his theories and deductions have been quoted (with or without due acknowledgement) wherever English philology is studied.

Nor should one forget the translations he made of Pearl, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Sir Orfeo. The Pearl translation was begun at Leeds in the nineteen-twenties; Tolkien was attracted to the task by the challenge of the poem's complex metrical and verbal structure. He had finished it by 1926, but he did nothing about publishing it until Basil Blackwell offered to put it into print in the

1 Tolkien intended to complete the Pearl edition, but he found himself unable to do so (by this time he was absorbed in writing *The Lord of the Rings*). It was eventually revised and completed for publication by Ida Gordon, the widow of E. V. Gordon, and herself a professional philologist nineteen-forties, in return for a sum to be credited to Tolkien's heavily overdue account at Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford. The translation was set into type, but Blackwell waited in vain for Tolkien to write the introduction to the volume, and eventually the project was abandoned. The translation of Gawain, probably begun during the nineteen-thirties or forties, was finished in time for it to be broadcast in dramatised form by the BBC in 1953, Tolkien himself recording a short introduction and a longer concluding talk. Following the success of *The Lord of the Rings* his publishers Alien & Unwin determined to issue the Gawain and Pearl translations in one volume. With this in view, Tolkien made extensive revisions of both translations, but once again an introduction was required, and he found it extremely difficult to write one, being uncertain as to what ought to be explained to the non-scholarly reader for whom the book was intended. Again the project lapsed, and it was not until after his death that the two translations were published, together with a modern English rendering of a third poem of the same period, Sir Orfeo, which Tolkien had originally translated for a wartime cadets' course at Oxford. The introduction to the volume was assembled by Christopher Tolkien out of such materials as could be found among his father's papers.

These translations were in effect Tolkien's last published philological work, for although they are accompanied by no notes or commentary they are the result of sixty years' minute study of the poems, and in many places they provide an informed and illuminating interpretation of hard and ambiguous passages in the originals. Most important of all, they bring these poems to an audience that could not have read them in Middle English. For this reason they are a fitting conclusion to the work of a man who believed that the prime function of a linguist is to interpret literature, and that the prime function of literature is to be enjoyed.

When Tolkien returned to Oxford in 1925 there was an element missing from his life. It had disappeared with the breaking of the T.C.B.S. in the Battle of the Somme, for not since those days had he enjoyed friendship to the same degree of emotional and intellectual commitment. He had continued to see something of the other surviving T.C.B.S. member, Christopher Wiseman, but Wiseman was now heavily involved with his duties as the headmaster of a Methodist public school,¹ and when the two men did meet they now found very little in common.

On 11 May 1926 Tolkien attended a meeting of the English Faculty at Merton College. Among the familiar faces a new arrival stood out, a heavily-built man of twenty-seven in baggy clothes who had recently been elected Fellow and Tutor in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College. This was Clive Staples Lewis, known to his friends as 'Jack'.

At first the two men circled warily around one another. Tolkien knew that Lewis, though a medievalist, was in the 'Lit.' camp and thus a potential adversary, while Lewis wrote in his diary that Tolkien was 'a smooth, pale, fluent little chap', adding 'No harm in him: only needs a smack or so.' But soon Lewis came to have a firm affection for this long-faced keen-eyed man who liked good talk and laughter and beer, while Tolkien warmed to Lewis's quick mind and the generous spirit that was as huge as Lewis's shapeless flannel trousers. By May 1927 Tolkien had enrolled Lewis into the Coal-biters to join in the reading of Icelandic sagas, and a long and complex friendship had begun.

Anyone who wants to know something of what Tolkien and Lewis contributed to each other's lives should read Lewis's essay on Friendship in his book *The Four Loves*. Here it all is, the account of how

Queen's College Taunton, which Tolkien's grandfather John Suffield had attended as one of its earliest pupils. The two companions become friends when they discover a shared insight, how their friendship is not jealous but seeks out the company of others, how such friendships are almost of necessity between men, how the greatest pleasure of all is for a group of friends to come to an inn after a hard day's walking: 'Those are the golden sessions,' writes Lewis, 'when our slippers are on, our feet spread out towards the blaze and our drinks at our elbows; when the whole world, and something beyond the world, opens itself to our minds as we talk; and no one has any claim or

paid frequent visits to Oxford. He was a Christian, and a man of feline wit. After dinner, Lewis, Tolkien, and Dyson went out for air. It was a blustery night, but they strolled along Addison's Walk discussing the purpose of myth. Lewis, though now a believer in God, could not yet understand the function of Christ in Christianity, could not perceive the meaning of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. He declared that he had to understand the purpose of these events - as he later expressed it in a letter to a friend, 'how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) two thousand years ago could help us here and now - except in so far as his example could help us'.

As the night wore on, Tolkien and Dyson showed him that he was here making a totally unnecessary demand. When he encountered the idea of sacrifice in the mythology of a pagan religion he admired it and was moved by it; indeed the idea of the dying and reviving deity had always touched his imagination since he had read the story of the Norse god Balder. But from the Gospels (they said) he was requiring something more, a clear meaning beyond the myth. Could he not transfer his comparatively unquestioning appreciation of sacrifice from the myth to the true story?

But, said Lewis, myths are lies, even though lies breathed through silver. No, said Tolkien, they are not. And, indicating the great trees of Magdalen Grove as their branches bent in the wind, he struck out a different line of argument.

You call a tree a tree, he said, and you think nothing more of the word. But it was not a 'tree' until someone gave it that name. You call a star a star, and say it is just a ball of matter moving on a mathematical course. But that is merely how you see it. By so naming things and describing them you are only inventing your own terms about them. And just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth.

We have come from God (continued Tolkien), and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed only by myth-making, only by becoming a 'sub-creator' and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall. Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour, while materialistic 'progress' leads only to a yawning abyss and the Iron Crown of the power of evil.

In expounding this belief in the inherent truth of mythology, Tolkien had laid bare the centre of his philosophy as a writer, the creed that is at the heart of *The Silmarillion*.

Lewis listened as Dyson affirmed in his own way what Tolkien had said. You mean, asked Lewis, that the story of Christ is simply a true myth, a myth that works on us in the same way as the others, but a myth that really happened! In that case, he said, I begin to understand.

At last the wind drove them inside, and they talked in Lewis's rooms until three a.m., when Tolkien went home. After seeing him out into the High Street, Lewis and Dyson walked up and down the cloister of New Buildings, still talking, until the sky grew light.

Twelve days later Lewis wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves: 'I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ - in Christianity. I will try to explain this another time. My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a great deal to do with it.'

Meanwhile Tolkien, invigilating in the Examination Schools, was composing a long poem recording what he had said to Lewis. He called it 'Mythopoeia', the making of myths. And he wrote in his diary: 'Friendship with Lewis compensates for much, and besides giving constant pleasure and comfort has done me much good from the contact with a man at once honest, brave, intellectual - a scholar, a poet, and a philosopher - and a lover, at least after a long pilgrimage, of Our Lord.'

Lewis and Tolkien continued to see much of each other. Tolkien read aloud to Lewis from *The Silmarillion*, and Lewis urged him to press on and finish writing it. Tolkien later said of this: 'The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not "influence" as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my "stuff" could be more than a private hobby.'

Lewis's conversion to Christianity marked the beginning of a new stage in his friendship with Tolkien. From the early nineteen-thirties onwards the two men depended less exclusively on each other's company and more on that of other men. In *The Four Loves* Lewis states that 'two, far from being the necessary number for Friendship, is not even the best', and he suggests that each friend added to a group brings out some special characteristic in the others. Tolkien had experienced this in the T.C.B.S.; and the knot of friends which now began to come together was the ultimate expression of the T.C.B.S. principle, the 'clubbable' urge which Tolkien had felt since those adolescent days. This group was known as The Inklings.

It began to form itself at about the tune (in the early nineteen-thirties) when the Coalbiters ceased to meet, having fulfilled their aim of reading all the principal Icelandic sagas and finally the *Elder Edda*. 'The Inklings' was originally

the name of a literary society founded in about 1931 by a University College undergraduate named Tangye Lean. Lewis and Tolkien both attended its meetings, at which unpublished compositions were read and criticised. After Lean left Oxford the club lived on; or rather its name was transferred half jestingly to the circle of friends who gathered at regular intervals around Lewis.

The Inklings have now entered literary history, and a good deal has been written about them, much of it over-solemn. They were no more (and no less) than a number of friends, all of whom were male and Christian, and most of whom were interested in literature. Numbers of people have been stated to have been 'members' at this or that period, whereas in truth there was no system of membership. Some men attended more or less regularly at various periods, while others were only occasional visitors. Lewis was the invariable nucleus, without whom any gathering would have been inconceivable. A list of other names gives little idea of what the Inklings really were; but if names matter, besides Lewis and Tolkien (who was almost invariably present) among those who attended in the years before and during the war were Major Warren Lewis (C. S. Lewis's brother, known as 'Warnie'), R. E. Havard (an Oxford doctor who attended the Lewis and Tolkien households), Lewis's long-standing friend Owen Barfield (although, being a London solicitor, Barfield rarely came to meetings), and Hugo Dyson.

It was a thoroughly casual business. One should not imagine that the same people turned up week after week, or sent apologies if they were to be absent. Nevertheless there were certain invariable elements. The group, or various members of it, would meet on a weekday morning in a pub, generally on Tuesdays in the Eagle and Child (known familiarly as 'The Bird and Baby'); though during the war when beer was short and pubs crowded with servicemen their habits were more flexible. On Thursday nights they would meet in Lewis's big Magdalen sitting-room, congregating some time after nine o'clock. Tea would be made and pipes lit, and then Lewis would boom out: 'Well, has nobody got anything to read us?' Someone would produce a manuscript and begin to read it aloud - it might be a poem, or a story, or a chapter. Then would come criticism: sometimes praise, sometimes censure, for it was no mutual admiration society. There might be more reading, but soon the proceedings would spill over into talk of all kinds, sometimes heated debate, and would terminate at a late hour.

By the late nineteen-thirties the Inklings were an important part of Tolkien's life, and among his own contributions to gatherings were readings from the still-unpublished manuscript of *The Hobbit*. When war broke out in 1939 another man was recruited to the group of friends. This was Charles Williams, who worked for the Oxford University Press at their London office and who with the rest of their staff was now transferred to Oxford. Williams was in his fifties; his thought and writings - he was a novelist, poet, theologian, and critic - were already known and respected, albeit by a small circle of readers. In particular his 'spiritual thrillers' (as they have been called), novels which deal with supernatural and mystical events in a mundane setting, had found a small but enthusiastic public. Lewis had known and admired Williams for some time, but Tolkien had only met him once or twice. Now he came to develop a complex attitude to him.

Williams, with his curious face (half angel, half monkey, Lewis called it), his very un-Oxford-like blue suit, the cigarette dangling from his mouth, and a bundle of proofs wrapped in Time & Tide tucked under his arm, was a person of great natural charm. Tolkien recalled twenty years later: 'We liked one another and enjoyed talking (mostly in jest).' But he added: 'We had nothing to say to one another at deeper (or higher) levels.' This was partly because, while Williams enjoyed the chapters from *The Lord of the Rings* that were then being read to the group, Tolkien did not like Williams's books, or those which he had read. He declared that he found them 'wholly alien, and sometimes very distasteful, occasionally ridiculous'. And perhaps his reservations about Williams, or Williams's place in the Inklings, were not entirely intellectual. Lewis believed, and declared in *The Four Loves*, that true friends cannot be jealous when another comes to join them. But here Lewis was talking about Lewis, not about Tolkien. Clearly there was a little jealousy or resentment on Tolkien's part, and not without cause, for now the limelight of Lewis's enthusiasm shifted almost imperceptibly from himself to Williams. 'Lewis was a very impressionable man,' Tolkien wrote long afterwards, and elsewhere he talked of the 'dominant influence' that he believed Williams had come to exercise over Lewis, especially over his third novel, *That Hideous Strength*.

So Williams's arrival in Oxford marked the beginning of a third phase in Tolkien's friendship with Lewis, a faint cooling on Tolkien's part which even Lewis probably hardly noticed as yet. Something else made him cooler, something even more subtle: the matter of Lewis's growing reputation as a Christian apologist. As Tolkien had played such an important part in his friend's return to Christianity he had always regretted that Lewis had not become a Catholic like himself, but had begun to attend his local Anglican church, resuming the religious practices of his childhood. Tolkien had a deep resentment of the Church of England which he sometimes extended to its buildings, declaring that his appreciation of their beauty was marred by his sadness that they had been (he considered) perverted from their rightful Catholicism. When Lewis published a prose allegory telling the story of his conversion under the title *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Tolkien thought the title ironical. 'Lewis would regress,' he said. 'He would not re-enter Christianity by a new door, but by the old one: at least in the sense that in taking it up again

he would also take up again, or reawaken, the prejudices so sedulously planted in childhood and boyhood. He would become again a Northern Ireland protestant.'

By the mid nineteen-forties Lewis was receiving a good deal of publicity ('too much,' said Tolkien, 'for his or any of our tastes') in connection with his Christian writings, *The Problem of Pain* and *The Screwtape Letters*. Tolkien perhaps felt, as he observed his friend's increasing fame in this respect, rather as if a pupil had speedily overtaken his master to achieve almost unjustified fame. He once referred to Lewis, not altogether flatteringly, as 'Everyman's Theologian'.

But if these thoughts were at all in Tolkien's mind in the early nineteen-forties they were well below the surface. He still had an almost unbounded affection for Lewis - indeed perhaps still cherished the occasional hope that his friend might one day become a Catholic. And the Inklings continued to provide much delight and encouragement to him. 'Hwaet! we Inklings,' he wrote in parody of the opening lines of *Beowulf*, 'on aerdagum searopancolra snyttru gehierdon.' 'Lo! We have heard in old days of the wisdom of the cunning-minded Inklings; how those wise ones sat together in their deliberations, skillfully reciting learning and song-craft, earnestly meditating. That was true joy!'

'What were the women doing meanwhile? How should I know? I am a man and never spied on the mysteries of the *Bona Dea*.' So writes C. S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* while speculating on the history of male friendship. This is the inevitable corollary of a life that centres on the company of men, and on groups such as the Inklings: women get left out of it.

Edith Tolkien had only been given a limited education at a girls' boarding-school which, while good in music, was indifferent in other subjects. She had spent a few years in a Birmingham lodging-house, then a period at Cheltenham in a markedly non-intellectual middle-class household, and then a long time living with her poorly educated middle-aged cousin Jennie. There had been no chance either to continue her education or to improve her mind. More than this, she had lost a good deal of her independence. She had been set for a career as a piano teacher and just possibly as a soloist, but this prospect had simply faded away, first of all because there had been no immediate need for her to earn a living, and then because she had married Ronald Tolkien. In those days there was in normal circumstances no question of a middle-class wife continuing to earn her living after marriage, for to do so would have been an indication that the husband could not earn enough by himself. So piano playing was reduced to a mere hobby, although she continued to play regularly until old age, and her music delighted Ronald. He did not encourage her to pursue any intellectual activity, partly because he did not consider it to be a necessary part of her role as wife and mother, and partly because his attitude to her in courtship (exemplified by his favourite term for her, 'little one') was not associated with his own intellectual life; to her he showed a side of his personality quite different from that perceived by his male friends. Just as he liked to be a man's man among his cronies, so at home he expected to live in what was primarily a woman's world.

Despite this, Edith might have been able to make a positive contribution to his life in the University. A number of Oxford dons' wives managed to do this. A few lucky ones such as Joseph Wright's wife Lizzie were themselves expert in their husband's subjects, and could assist in their work. But a number of other wives who, like Edith, did not have university degrees could by their expert management of the household make their home into something of a social centre for their husbands' friends, and so participate in much of their lives.

Unfortunately everything worked out rather differently for Edith. She was inclined to be shy, for she had led a very limited social life in childhood and adolescence, and when she came to live in Oxford in 1918 she was unnerved by what she found. She and Ronald and the baby (and her cousin Jennie, who was still with them, remaining until they moved to Leeds) lived in modest rooms in a side-street in the town; and, from her viewpoint as someone who did not know Oxford, the University seemed an almost impenetrable fortress, a phalanx of imposing buildings where important-looking men passed to and fro in gowns, and where Ronald disappeared to work each day. When the University deigned to cross her threshold it was in the person of polite but awkward young men, friends of Ronald's who did not know how to talk to women, and to whom she could think of nothing to say, for their worlds simply did not overlap. Worse still, the visitors might be dons' wives, such as the terrifying Mrs Farnell, wife of the Rector of Exeter, whose presence even frightened Ronald. These women only confirmed Edith in her belief that the University was unapproachable in its eminence. They came from their awesome college lodgings or their turreted mansions in North Oxford to coo condescendingly at baby John in his cot, and when they departed they would leave their calling-cards on the hall tray (one card bearing their own name, two cards bearing their husband's) to indicate that Mrs Tolkien was of course expected to return the call after a short interval. But Edith's nerve failed her. What could she say to these people if she went to their imposing houses? What possible conversation could she have with these stately women, whose talk was of people of whom she had never heard, of professors' daughters and tided cousins and other Oxford hostesses? Ronald was worried, for he knew what a solecism would be committed if his wife did not follow the strict Oxford etiquette. He persuaded her to return one call, to Lizzie Wright, who although very learned was not at all like most dons' wives, having a great deal of her husband's openness and

common sense; but even then Ronald had to take her to the Wrights' front door himself and ring the bell before hurrying away round the corner. All the other calling-cards gathered dust, the calls were left unreturned, and it became known that Mr Tolkien's wife did not call and must therefore be quietly excluded from the round of dinner parties and At Homes.

Then the Tolkiens moved to Leeds, and Edith found that things were different there. People occupied ordinary modest houses, and there was no nonsense about calling-cards. Another university wife lived a few doors down in St Mark's Terrace and often called for a chat. Edith also began to see a good deal of Ronald's pupils who came in for tutorials or tea, and she liked many of them very much. Many of these pupils became family friends who kept in touch with her in later years and often came to visit. There were informal university dances which she enjoyed. Even the children (there were now John, Michael, and, at the end of their time in Leeds, Christopher) were not forgotten, for the university organised splendid Christmas parties at which the Vice-Chancellor used to dress up as Father Christmas. Later, Ronald managed to afford to buy a larger house in Darnley Road, away from the smoke and dirt of the city. They employed a maid and a nurse for the children. On the whole Edith was happy.

But then suddenly they were back in Oxford. The first house in Northmoor Road was bought by Ronald while Edith was still in Leeds, without her ever having seen it, and she thought it was too small. The older boys had caught ringworm from a public comb at a photographer's studio in Leeds, and they had to be given lengthy and expensive treatment. When they were sufficiently recovered to go to the Dragon School they were at first unhappy there among the rough-and-tumble of other boys. Then Edith became pregnant again. Not until after the birth of Priscilla in 1929 and the move to the larger house next door in 1930 could she feel settled.

Even then, family life never entirely regained the equilibrium it had achieved in Leeds. Edith began to feel that she was being ignored by Ronald. In terms of actual hours he was certainly in the house a great deal: much of his teaching was done there, and he was not often out for more than one or two evenings a week. But it was really a matter of his affections. He was very loving and considerate to her, greatly concerned about her health (as she was about his) and solicitous about domestic matters. But she could see that one side of him only came alive when he was in the company of men of his own kind. More specifically she noticed and resented his devotion to Jack Lewis.

On the occasions when Lewis came to Northmoor Road, the children liked him because he did not talk condescendingly to them; and he gave them books by E. Nesbit, which they enjoyed. But with Edith he was shy and ungainly. Consequently she could not understand the delight that Ronald took in his company, and she became a little jealous. There were other difficulties. She had only known a home life of the most limited sort in her own childhood, and she therefore had no example on which to base the running of her household. Not surprisingly she cloaked this uncertainty in authoritarianism, demanding that meals be precisely on time, that the children eat up every scrap, and that servants should perform their work impeccably. Underneath all this she was often very lonely, frequently being without company other than the servants and the children during that part of the day when Ronald was out or in his study. During these years Oxford society was gradually becoming less rigid; but she did not trust it, and she made few friends among other dons' families, with the exception of Charles Wrenn's wife, Agnes. She also suffered from severe headaches which could prostrate her for a day or more.

It quickly became clear to Ronald that Edith was unhappy with Oxford, and especially that she was resentful of his men friends. Indeed he perceived that his need of male friendship was not entirely compatible with married life. But he believed that this was one of the sad facts of a fallen world; and on the whole he thought that a man had a right to male pleasures, and should if necessary insist on them. To a son contemplating marriage he wrote: 'There are many things that a man feels are legitimate even though they cause a fuss. Let him not lie about them to his wife or lover! Cut them out - or if worth a fight: just insist. Such matters may arise frequently - the glass of beer, the pipe, the non writing of letters, the other friend, etc., etc. If the other side's claims really are unreasonable (as they are at times between the dearest lovers and most loving married folk) they are much better met by above board refusal and "fuss" than subterfuge.'

There was also the problem of Edith's attitude to Catholicism. Before they were married, Ronald had persuaded her to leave the Church of England and to become a Catholic, and she had resented this a little at the time. During the subsequent years she had almost given up going to mass. In the second decade of marriage her anti-Catholic feelings hardened, and by the time the family returned to Oxford in 1925 she was showing resentment of Ronald taking the children to church. In part these feelings were due to Ronald's rigid, almost medieval, insistence upon frequent confession; and Edith had always hated confessing her sins to a priest. Nor could he discuss her feelings with her in a rational manner, certainly not with the lucidity he demonstrated in his theological arguments with Lewis: to Edith he presented only his emotional attachment to religion, of which she had little understanding. Occasionally her smouldering anger about church-going burst into fury; but at last after one such outburst in 1940

girls, who told folk-tales about trolls. Visits to the theatre, which their father always seemed to enjoy, although he declared he did not approve of Drama. Bicycling to early mass at St Aloysius', or at St Gregory's up the Woodstock Road, or at the Carmelite convent nearby. The barrel of beer in the coal-hole behind the kitchen which dripped regularly and (said their mother) made the house smell like a brewery. July and August afternoons boating on the river Cherwell (which was only just down the road), floating in the family punt hired for the season down past the Parks to Magdalen Bridge, or better still poling up-river towards Water Eaton and Islip, where a picnic tea could be spread on the bank. Walks across the fields to Wood Eaton to look for butterflies, and then back along by the river where Michael would hide in the crack of an old willow, walks when their father seemed to have a boundless store of knowledge about trees and plants. Seaside summer holidays at Lyme Regis when old Father Francis Morgan came down from Birmingham to join them, embarrassing the children with his loud and boisterous ways just as he had embarrassed Ronald and Hilary at Lyme twenty-five years before. The family holiday at Lamorna Cove in Cornwall in 1932 with Charles Wrenn and his wife and daughter, when Wrenn and Tolkien held a swimming race wearing panama hats and smoking pipes while they swam. This was the holiday about which Tolkien later wrote: "There was a curious local character, an old man who used to go about swapping gossip and weather-wisdom and such like. To amuse my boys I named him Gaffer Gamgee, and the name became part of family lore to fix on old chaps of the kind. The choice of Gamgee was primarily directed by alliteration; but I did not invent it. It was in fact the name when I was small (in Birmingham) for "cotton-wool".' Then there were the later holidays at Sidmouth, where there were hill walks and marvellous rock-pools by the sea, and where their father was already beginning to write *The Lord of the Rings*; the drives on autumn afternoons to the villages east of Oxford, to Worminghall or Brill or Charlton-on-Otmoor, or west into Berkshire and up White Horse Hill to see the ancient long-barrow known as Wayland's Smithy; the memories of Oxford, of the countryside, and of the stories that their father told them.

These stories had begun during the Leeds years. John, the eldest son, often found difficulty in getting to sleep. When he was lying awake his father would come and sit on his bed and tell him a tale of 'Carrots', a boy with red hair who climbed into a cuckoo clock and went off on a series of strange adventures.

In this fashion Tolkien discovered that he could use the imagination which was creating the complexities of *The Silmarillion* to invent simpler stories. He had an amiably childlike sense of humour, and as his sons grew older this manifested itself in the noisy games he played with them - and in the stories he told Michael when the younger boy was troubled with nightmares. These tales, invented in the early days at Northmoor Road, were about the irrepressible villain 'Bill Stickers', a huge hulk of a man who always got away with everything. His name was taken from a notice on an Oxford gate that said BILL STICKERS WILL BE PROSECUTED, and a similar source provided the name of the righteous person who was always in pursuit of Stickers, 'Major Road Ahead'.

The 'Bill Stickers' stories were never written down, but others were. When he was on holiday with the family at Filey in the summer of 1925, Tolkien composed a full-length tale for John and Michael. The younger boy lost a toy dog on the beach, and to console him his father began to invent and narrate the adventures of Rover, a small dog who annoys a wizard, is turned into a toy, and is then lost on the beach by a small boy. But this is only the beginning, for Rover is found by the sand-sorcerer Psamathos Psamathides who gives him the power to move again, and sends him on a visit to the Moon, where he has many strange adventures, most notably an encounter with the White Dragon. Tolkien wrote down this story under the title 'Roverandom'. Many years later he offered it to his publishers, very tentatively, as one of a number of possible successors to *The Hobbit*, but it was not thought suitable on that occasion, and Tolkien never offered it again.

The children's enthusiasm for 'Roverandom' encouraged him to write more stories to amuse them. Many of these got off to a good start but were never finished. Indeed some of them never progressed beyond the first few sentences, like the tale of Timothy Titus, a very small man who is called 'Tim Tit' by his friends. Among other stories begun but soon abandoned was the tale of Tom Bombadil, which is set in 'the days of King Bonhedig' and describes a character who is clearly to be the hero of the tale: 'Tom Bombadil was the name of one of the oldest inhabitants of the kingdom; but he was a hale and hearty fellow. Four foot high in his boots he was, and three feet broad. He wore a tall hat with a blue feather, his jacket was blue, and his boots were yellow.'

That was as far as the story ever reached on paper, but Tom Bombadil was a well-known figure in the Tolkien family, for the character was based on a Dutch doll that belonged to Michael. The doll looked very splendid with the feather in its hat, but John did not like it and one day stuffed it down the lavatory. Tom was rescued, and survived to become the hero of a poem by the children's father, "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil", which was published in the Oxford Magazine in 1934. It tells of Tom's encounters with 'Gold-berry, the River-woman's daughter', with the 'Old Man Willow' which shuts him up in a crack of its bole (an idea, Tolkien once said, that probably came in part from Arthur Rackham's tree-drawings), with a family of badgers, and with a 'Barrow-wight', a ghost from a prehistoric grave of the type found on the Berkshire Downs not far from Oxford. By itself, the poem seems like a sketch for something longer, and when possible successors to *The Hobbit* were being discussed in 1937 Tolkien suggested to his publishers that he might expand it into a more substantial tale, explaining that Tom Bombadil was intended to

represent 'the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside'. This idea was not taken up by the publishers, but Tom and his adventures subsequently found their way into *The Lord of the Rings*.

The purchase of a car in 1932 and Tolkien's subsequent mishaps while driving it led him to write another children's story, 'Mr Bliss'. This is the tale of a tall thin man who lives in a tall thin house, and who purchases a bright yellow automobile for five shillings, with remarkable consequences (and a number of collisions). The story was lavishly illustrated by Tolkien in ink and coloured pencils, and the text was written out by him in a fair hand, the whole being bound in a small volume. 'Mr Bliss' owes a little to Beatrix Potter in its ironical humour and to Edward Lear in the style of its drawings, though Tolkien's approach is less grotesque and more delicate than Lear's. Like 'Roverandom' and the *Bombadil* poem it was shown to Tolkien's publishers in 1937, and it was received with much enthusiasm. Preliminary arrangements were made to publish it, not so much as a successor to *The Hobbit* but as an entertaining stop-gap until the true sequel was ready. However its multi-coloured pictures meant that printing would be very expensive, and the publishers asked Tolkien if he would re-draw them in a simpler style. He agreed, but he could not find the time to undertake the work, and the manuscript of 'Mr Bliss' was consigned to a drawer, where it remained until many years later it was sold to Marquette University in America, along with the manuscripts of Tolkien's published stories.¹

The fact that 'Mr Bliss' was so lavishly illustrated - was constructed indeed around the pictures - is an indication of how seriously Tolkien was taking the business of drawing and painting. He had never entirely abandoned this childhood hobby, and during his undergraduate days he illustrated several of his own poems, using watercolours, coloured inks or pencils, and beginning to develop a style that was suggestive of his affection for Japanese prints and yet had an individual approach to line and colour. The war and his work interrupted him, but in about 1925 he began to draw again regularly, one of the first results being a series of illustrations for 'Roverandom'. Later, during holidays at Lyme Regis in 1927 and 1928, he drew pictures of scenes from *The Silmarillion*. These show how clearly he visualised the landscapes in which his legends were set, for in several of the drawings the scenery of Lyme itself is absorbed into the stories and invested with mystery.

He was by now a very talented artist, although he had not the same skill at drawing figures as he had with landscapes. He was at his best when picturing his beloved trees, and like Arthur Rackham

¹ 'Mr Bliss' was not the only composition by Tolkien owing its inspiration to motor transport. 'The Bovadium Fragments' (perhaps composed early in the nineteen-sixties) is a parable of the destruction of Oxford (Bovadium) by the motores manufactured by the Daemon of Vaccipratum (a reference to Lord Nuffield and his motor-works at Cowley) which block the streets, asphyxiate the inhabitants, and finally explode. (whose work he admired) he could give to twisted root and branch a sinister mobility that was at the same time entirely true to nature.

Tolkien's talents as a storyteller and an illustrator were combined each December, when a letter would arrive for the children from Father Christmas. In 1920 when John was three years old and the family was about to move to Leeds, Tolkien had written a note to his son in shaky handwriting signed 'Yr loving Fr. Chr.'. From then onwards he produced a similar letter every Christmas. From simple beginnings the 'Father Christmas Letters' expanded to include many additional characters such as the Polar Bear who shares Father Christmas's house, the Snow Man who is Father Christmas's gardener, an elf named Ilbereth who is his secretary, snow-elves, gnomes, and in the caves beneath Father Christmas's house a host of troublesome goblins. Every Christmas, often at the last minute, Tolkien would write out an account of recent events at the North Pole in the shaky handwriting of Father Christmas, the rune-like capitals used by the Polar Bear, or the flowing script of Ilbereth. Then he would add drawings, write the address on the envelope (labelling it with such superscriptions as 'By gnome-carrier. Immediate haste!') and paint and cut out a highly realistic North Polar postage stamp. Finally he would deliver the letter. This was done in a variety of ways. The simplest was to leave it in the fireplace as if it had been brought down the chimney, and to cause strange noises to be heard in the early morning, which together with a snowy footprint on the carpet indicated that Father Christmas himself had called. Later the local postman became an accomplice and used to deliver the letters himself, so how could the children not believe in them? Indeed they went on believing until each in turn reached adolescence and discovered by accident or deduction that their father was the true author of the letters. Even then, nothing was said to destroy the illusion for the younger children.

Besides being entertained by their father's own stories, the Tolkien children were always provided with full nursery bookshelves. Much of their reading-matter consisted of Tolkien's own childhood favourites, such as George MacDonald's 'Curdie' stories and Andrew Lang's fairy-tale collections; but the nursery also housed more recent additions to children's literature, among them E. A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, which was published in 1927. Tolkien noted that his sons were highly amused by the Snergs, 'a race of people only slightly taller than the average table but broad in the shoulders and of great strength'.

Tolkien himself only found the time or the inclination to read a limited amount of fiction. In general he preferred the lighter contemporary novels. He liked the stories of John Buchan, and he also read some of Sinclair Lewis's work;

but fortune followed him in few desires;
oft wrong and awry what he wrought turned;
what he loved he lost, what he longed for he won not;
and full friendship he found not easily,

nor was lightly loved for his looks were sad.

He was gloomy-hearted, and glad seldom
for the sundering sorrow that seared his youth.

On manhood's threshold he was mighty hoi den
in the wielding of weapons; and in weaving song ?

he had a minstrel's mastery; but mirth was not in it. *

In adapting and modernising this ancient poetic style for his own \ purposes Tolkien was achieving something quite unusual and remarkably powerful. It is a pity that he wrote - or at least published -so little alliterative verse, for it suited his imagination far more than did modern rhyme-schemes.

He wrote other poems of some length during the nineteen-thirties. by no means all of them directly connected with his own mythology. One, inspired by the Celtic legends of Brittany, was 'Aotrou and Itroun' (Breton for 'Lord and Lady'), of which the earliest manuscript is dated September 1930. The poem tells the story of a childless lord who obtains a potion from an enchantress or 'Corrigan' (the generic Breton term for a person of fairy race). As a result of the philtre, twins are born to the lord's wife, but the Corrigan demands in payment that the lord should wed her, and his refusal has tragic consequences. 'Aotrou and Itroun' was published some years later by Tolkien's friend and fellow philologist Gwyn Jones, in the Welsh Review. It is in alliterative verse, and also incorporates a rhyme-scheme.

Another major poem from this period has alliteration but no rhyme. This is 'The Fall of Arthur', Tolkien's only imaginative incursion into the Arthurian cycle, whose legends had pleased him since childhood, but which he found too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive'. Arthurian stories were also unsatisfactory to him as myth in that they explicitly contained the Christian religion. In his own Arthurian poem he did not touch on the Grail but began an individual rendering of the Morte d'Arthur, in which the king and Gawain go to war in 'Saxon lands' but are summoned home by news of Mordred's treachery. The poem was never finished, but it was read and approved by E. V. Gordon, and by R. W. Chambers, Professor of English at London University, who considered it to be 'great stuff - really heroic, quite apart from its value as showing how the Beowulf metre can be used in modern English'. It is also interesting in that it is one of the few pieces of writing in which Tolkien deals explicitly with sexual passion, describing Mordred's unsated lust for Guinever (which is how Tolkien chooses to spell her name):

His bed was barren; there black phantoms

of desire unsated and savage fury

in his brain had brooded till bleak morning.

But Tolkien's Guinever is not the tragic heroine beloved by most Arthurian writers; instead she is described as lady ruthless, fair as fay-woman and fell-minded, in the world walking for the woe of men.

Although 'The Fall of Arthur' was abandoned in the mid nineteen-thirties, Tolkien wrote as late as 1955 that he still hoped to complete it; but in the event it remained unfinished.

Once or twice he decided to move away from the mythical, legendary, and fantastic, and wrote a conventional short story for adults, in a modern setting. The results were unremarkable, showing that his imagination needed myth and legend in order to realise its full potential. And indeed the greater part of his attention was still occupied by The Silmarillion. He made numerous revisions and recastings of

the principal stories in the cycle, deciding to abandon the original sea-voyager 'Eriol' to whom the stories were told, and instead renaming him 'AElfwine' or 'elf-friend'. He also spent much time (probably more than he devoted to the actual stories) to working on the elvish languages and alphabets; he had now invented a new alphabet which he first called 'Quenyatic' and then 'Feanorian', and after 1926 he wrote his diary in it. He also frequently turned his attention to geography and other subsidiary topics within the cycle of legends.

The boy earned a shilling for the report, and the book was accepted for publication. Despite what Rayner Unwin had written, it was decided that *The Hobbit* did need illustrations. Tolkien was modest about his talents as an artist, and when at the publishers' suggestion he submitted a number of drawings which he had made for the story he commented: 'The pictures seem to me mostly only to prove that the author cannot draw.' But Alien & Unwin did not agree, and they gladly accepted eight of his black and white illustrations.

Although Tolkien had some idea of the processes involved in the production of books, he was surprised by the number of difficulties and disappointments during the following months; indeed the machinations and occasionally the downright incompetence of publishers and printers continued to amaze him until the end of his life. The *Hobbit* maps had to be redrawn by him because his originals had incorporated too many colours, and even then his scheme of having the general map as an endpaper and *Thror's* map placed within the text of Chapter One was not followed. The publishers had decided that both maps should be used as endpapers, and in consequence his plan for 'invisible lettering', which would appear when *Thror's* map was held up to the light, had to be abandoned. He also had to spend a good deal of time on the proofs - though this was entirely his fault. When the page-proofs arrived at Northmoor Road in February 1937 he decided that he ought to make substantial revisions to several parts of the book, for he had let the manuscript go without checking it with his usual thoroughness, and he was now unhappy about a number of passages in the story; in particular he did not like many of the patronising 'asides' to juvenile readers, and he also saw that there were many inconsistencies in the description of the topography, details which only the most acute and painstaking reader would notice, but which he himself with his passion for perfection could not allow to pass. In a few days he had covered the proofs with a host of alterations. With typical consideration for the printers he ensured that his revisions occupied an identical area of type to the original wording - though here he was wasting his time, for the printers decided to reset the entire sections that he had revised.

The Hobbit was published on 21 September 1937. Tolkien was a little nervous of Oxford reaction, especially as he was currently holding a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, and he remarked: 'I shall now find it very hard to make people believe that this is not the major fruits of "research" 1936-7.' He need not have worried: at first Oxford paid almost no attention.

A few days after publication the book received an accolade in the columns of *The Times*. 'All who love that kind of children's book which can be read and re-read by adults', wrote the reviewer, 'should take note that a new star has appeared in this constellation. To the trained eye some characters will seem almost mythopoeic.' The eye in question was that of C. S. Lewis, at that time a regular reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement*, who had managed to get this notice of his friend's book into the parent journal. Naturally, he also reviewed the book in glowing terms in the *Supplement* itself. There was an equally enthusiastic reaction from many other critics, although some took a delight in pointing out the ineptness of the publisher's 'blurb' that compared the book to *Alice in Wonderland* simply because both were the work of Oxford dons; and there were a few dissenting voices, among them that of the reviewer who wrote (somewhat puzzlingly) in *Junior Bookshelf*: 'The courageous freedom of real adventure doesn't appear.'

The first edition of *The Hobbit* had sold out by Christmas. A reprint was hurried through, and four of the five coloured illustrations that Tolkien had drawn for the book were now included in it; he had apparently never offered them to Alien & Unwin, and it was not until they passed through the publisher's office on the way to Houghton Mifflin, who were to publish the book in America, that their existence was discovered. When the American edition was issued a few months later it too received approbation from most critics, and it was awarded the *New York Herald Tribune* prize for the best juvenile book of the season. Stanley Unwin realised that he had a children's best-seller in his list. He wrote to Tolkien: 'A large public will be clamouring next year to hear more from you about *Hobbits!*'

A few weeks after *The Hobbit* had been published Tolkien went to London and had lunch with Stanley Unwin to discuss a possible successor to the book. He found that the publisher, small, bright-eyed, and bearded, looked 'exactly like one of my dwarves, only I don't think he smokes'. Unwin certainly did not smoke, nor did he drink alcohol (he came from a strict Nonconformist family), and each man found the other rather strange. Unwin learnt that Tolkien had a large mythological work called *The Silmarillion* that he now wanted to publish, though Tolkien admitted that it was not very suitable as a successor to the adventures of Bilbo Baggins; he also said that he had several short stories for children, 'Mr Bliss', 'Farmer Giles of Ham', and 'Roverandom'; and there was an unfinished novel called 'The Lost Road'. Unwin asked Tolkien to send all of these manuscripts to his office in Museum Street.

They were sent, and they were read. The children's stories were all enjoyed, but none of them was about hobbits, and Stanley Unwin was certain that this was what the people who had enjoyed the first book wanted. As for 'The Lost Road', it was obviously unsuitable for a juvenile audience. But *The Silmarillion* presented a more complex problem.

Several critics carped at Tolkien's prose style, among them Peter Green in the Daily Telegraph who wrote that it 'Veers from pre-Raphaelite to Boy's Own Paper', while J. W. Lambert in the Sunday Times declared that the story has two odd characteristics: 'no religious spirit of any kind, and to all intents and purposes no women' (neither statement was entirely fair, but both were reflected in later writings by other critics). Yet for all these harsh judgements there were many who were enthusiastic, and even among the mockers there were some who were drawn to commendation. Green in the Telegraph had to admit that the book 'has an undeniable fascination', while Lambert in the Sunday Times wrote: 'Whimsical drivel with a message? No; it sweeps along with a narrative and pictorial force which lifts it above that level.' Perhaps the wisest remark came from the Oxford Times reviewer who declared: 'The severely practical will have no time for it. Those who have imagination to kindle will find themselves completely carried along, becoming part of the eventful quest and regretting that there are only two more books to come.'

The reviews were good enough to promote sales, and it soon became clear that the three and a half thousand copies that had been printed of the first volume would be insufficient to meet the demand. Six weeks after publication, a reprint was ordered. Tolkien himself wrote: 'As for the reviews, they were a good deal better than I feared.' In July he had visited Dublin to receive an honorary Doctorate of Letters from the National University of Ireland. He went overseas again in October to be given another honorary degree, at Liege, and these and other calls on his time delayed his work on the appendices for *The Lord of the Rings*. The printers had already set up the type for the text of the third volume, from which Tolkien had now decided to omit the somewhat sentimental epilogue that dealt with Sam and his family. But the third volume could not be printed until the appendices arrived, as well as the enlarged map of Gondor and Mordor that Tolkien now felt to be required, and the index of names that he had promised in the preface to the first volume.

The second volume, *The Two Towers*, was published in mid-November. Reviews were similar in tone to those of the first volume. The third volume was now eagerly awaited by the supporting faction, for the story had broken off with Frodo imprisoned in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and as the reviewer in the *Illustrated London News* declared, 'The suspense is cruel.' Meanwhile the deadline that Alien & Unwin had set for the delivery of the appendices passed without any manuscript arriving at their office. 'I am dreadfully sorry,' Tolkien wrote. 'I have been trying hard.' And he did manage to send some of the material to the publishers shortly afterwards; some, but not all.

In America, Houghton Mifflin had published *The Fellowship of the Ring* in October; *The Two Towers* followed shortly after. American reviews of the first two volumes were on the whole cautious. But enthusiastic articles by W. H. Auden in the *New York Times* - 'No fiction I have read in the last five years has given me more joy,' wrote Auden - helped to boost sales, and during the following year a large number of copies were bought by American readers.

By January 1955, two months after the publication of the second volume, Tolkien had still not completed the appendices that were required so urgently. He had abandoned any hope of making an index of names, having found that the job would take too long. Freed of this burden, he completed more material during January and February, but he found the task maddeningly difficult. He had at one time planned to fill an entire 'specialist volume' with details of the history and linguistics of his mythological peoples, and he had amassed a great deal of notes on these topics. But now he had to compress everything, for the publishers could only give him a short space at the end of the book. However, he pressed on, spurred by the letters he was already receiving from readers who took the book almost as history, and demanded more information on many topics. This attitude to his story flattered him, for it was the type of response that he had hoped to arouse, yet he remarked: 'I am not at all sure that the tendency to treat this whole thing as a kind of vast game is really good - certainly not for me, who find that kind of thing only too fatally attractive.' Nevertheless it was encouraging to know that the material he was so laboriously preparing on the *Shire Calendars*, the *Rulers of Gondor*, and the *Tengwar of Feanor* would be read voraciously by a large number of people.

The appendices were still unfinished by March, and strongly-worded letters began to arrive at the offices of Alien & Unwin, complaining about the non-appearance of the third volume. It was clear to the publishers that the book was arousing more than the usual interest for fiction. Rayner Unwin pleaded with Tolkien to get the work done, but it was not until 20 May that the final copy for the appendices reached the printers. The last map, prepared by Christopher who had worked for twenty-four hours non-stop to finish it, had been sent some weeks before; so now there should be no more delays. I hit there were. First the chart of runes was printed wrongly, and Tolkien had to make corrections. Then other queries were raised by the printers and forwarded to Tolkien to be answered; but by this time he had gone on holiday to Italy.

He made the journey by boat and train with Priscilla, while Edith went on a Mediterranean cruise with three friends. He kept a diary, it ml recorded his feeling of having 'come to the heart of Christendom: mi exile from the borders and far provinces returning home, or at least to the home of his fathers'. In Venice among the canals he found himself 'almost free of the cursed disease of the internal combustion engine of which all the world is dying'; and he

The publishers were Ace Books, who (when challenged) alleged there was nothing illegal in their paperback, even though it was printed entirely without the permission of Tolkien or his authorised publishers, and even though no royalty payment had been offered to the author. Indeed the Ace edition had also been manufactured with some care, so that it was quite a bargain at seventy-five cents for each volume. There were a number of errors in the typesetting, but on the whole the printers had reproduced Tolkien's text accurately; ludicrously so, since they had included both the promise in the foreword of the index of names and the note at the end apologising for its absence. Ace were already well known as publishers of science fiction, and clearly a lot of people were going to buy their edition until an authorised paperback could be issued. An urgent request was sent to Tolkien to complete the revisions (which it was assumed he had been working on assiduously for the last six months) as soon as possible.

So Tolkien began, though he turned not to *The Lord of the Rings* for which revision was urgent, but to *The Hobbit* for which it was not. He spent many hours searching for some revision notes that he had already made, but he could not find them. Instead he found a typescript of 'The New Shadow', a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* which he had begun a long time ago but had abandoned after a few pages. It was about the return of evil to Middle-earth. He sat up till four a.m. reading it and thinking about it. When the next day he did get down to *The Hobbit* he found a good deal of it 'very poor' and had to restrain himself from rewriting the entire book. The business of making revisions took some time, and when he turned at last to *The Lord of the Rings* the summer was well advanced. He decided on a number of changes that would correct remaining inaccuracies, and checked through the index which had now been prepared for him, but it was not until August that he was able to send the revised text to America.

Meanwhile the authorised paperback publishers, Ballantine Books, had decided that they could not wait any longer. In order to get at least one Tolkien book into the shops they published *The Hobbit* in the original text without waiting for Tolkien's revisions, which they planned to include in a later edition. They sent him a copy, and he was astonished by the picture on the cover. Ace Books for all their moral 'piracy' had employed a cover artist who knew something about the story, but Ballantine's cover picture seemed to have no relevance whatever to *The Hobbit*, for it showed a hill, two emus, and a curious tree bearing bulbous fruit. Tolkien exploded: 'What has it got to do with the story? Where is this place? Why emus? And what is the thing in the foreground with pink bulbs?' When the reply came that the artist hadn't time to read the book, and that the object with pink bulbs was 'meant to suggest a Christmas tree', Tolkien could only answer: 'I begin to feel that I am shut up in a madhouse.'

Late in 1965 the 'authorised' paperback of *The Lord of the Rings* was published in America in three volumes, with Tolkien's revisions incorporated, and with the emus and the Christmas tree on the cover of the first volume, though this picture was later removed and one of Tolkien's own drawings was substituted; two more of his pictures were used for the second and third volumes. Each copy carried a message from Tolkien: 'This paperback edition and no other has been published with my consent and co-operation. Those who approve of courtesy (at least) to living authors will purchase it and no other.'

But this did not immediately produce the desired result. The Ballantine edition (because it paid a royalty) cost twenty cents per volume more than the Ace edition, and the American student buyers did not at first show a preference for it. Clearly something more would have to be done. Curiously Tolkien himself played a prominent and efficient part in the campaign that now began; curiously, because he was no businessman, and ironically, because the unbusinesslike habits of his recent years were now turned to good advantage. He had been accustomed to 'waste' many hours that ought to have been spent on completing work for publication by writing innumerable replies to fan-letters, but this did mean that he had already built up an affectionate following of many dozens of enthusiastic correspondents, especially in America, and they were now only too glad to spring to his defence. On his own initiative he began to include a note in all his replies to American readers, informing them that the Ace edition was unauthorised, and asking them to tell their friends. This soon had a remarkable effect. American readers not only began to refuse to buy the Ace edition but demanded, often in forcible terms, that booksellers remove it from their shelves. A fan-club, 'The Tolkien Society of America', which had recently been formed, now joined in the battle. By the end of the year the sales of Ace copies began to fall sharply; and when the cause was taken up by the Science Fiction Writers of America, an influential body that now applied considerable pressure to Ace, the result was that Ace wrote to Tolkien offering to pay him a royalty for every copy they had sold, and stating that they would not reprint after their present stocks had been exhausted. So a treaty was signed, and 'The War over Middle-earth', as one journalist had dubbed it, came to an end.

But the most important consequence was yet to come. The dispute had attracted considerable publicity, and as a result Tolkien's name and the titles of his books were now very widely known in America. Approximately one hundred thousand copies of the Ace edition of *The Lord of the Rings* had been sold during 1965, but this figure was soon passed by the 'authorised' paperback, which quickly reached the one million mark. Ace had unwittingly done a service to Tolkien, for they had helped to lift his book from the 'respectable' hard-cover status in which it had

public cemetery, we are reminded of the antithesis between the ordinary life he led and the extra-ordinary imagination that created his mythology.

Where did it come from, this imagination that peopled Middle-Earth with elves, orcs, and hobbits? What was the source of the literary vision that changed the life of this obscure scholar? And why did that vision so strike the minds and harmonise with the aspirations of numberless readers around the world?

Tolkien would have thought that these were unanswerable questions, certainly unanswerable in a book of this sort. He disapproved of biography as an aid to literary appreciation; and perhaps he was right. His real biography is *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*; for the truth about him lies within their pages.

But at least he might allow an epitaph.

His requiem mass was held in Oxford four days after his death, in the plain modern church in Headington which he had attended so often. The prayers and readings were specially chosen by his son John, who said the mass with the assistance of Tolkien's old friend Mr Robert Murray and his parish priest Mr Doran. There was no sermon or quotation from his writings. However, when a few weeks later a memorial service was held in California by some of his American admirers, his short story *Leaf by Niggle* was read to the congregation. He would perhaps have considered it not inappropriate :

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt and guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide.

'It's a gift!' he said.

THE END