

Farewell, Christopher Tolkien. Middle-Earth Is Indebted to You

Last week in France, and at the age of 95, Christopher John Reuel Tolkien quietly passed away. The headlines of many obituaries and tributes refer to him as the son of J.R.R. Tolkien, which indeed he was. Born in England on November 21, 1924, he was the third of four children of J.R.R and Edith Tolkien, and the youngest boy. This association would have been true, however, even if Christopher had had nothing to do with his father's literary works.

Christopher was also his father's "chief critic and collaborator," as Tolkien himself once put it. Most will remember him as the editor of *The Silmarillion* – that posthumously published book of ancient lore whose difficulty and aloofness have denied it the affection given to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Impenetrable to most, and unreadable to many, the tales of *The Silmarillion* were nonetheless facilitated as much as Christopher could make them – stitched together, "contrived," as he himself put it, "to produce narrative coherence." Less known is that Christopher typed out his father's manuscripts when they could not afford a typist, and even drew the iconic final map for *The Lord of the Rings*.

Although Christopher lived a long and productive life, and increasingly enjoyed the remunerative benefits of being one of Tolkien's heirs, it is crucial to recall how his tenure began – as a child huddling for warmth in a study, before the *Hobbit* was even an intention much less a bestseller, listening to his father recount tales of an invented ancient history

about the elvish wars against the black power, and of how Beren and Lúthien made their perilous journey to the very heart of Morgoth's iron stronghold. These were not mere stories: they were legends that came alive as his father spoke, vivid accounts of a grim world where foul orcs and a sinister Necromancer guarded the way, and a dreadful red-eyed wolf tore the elvish companions of Beren to pieces one by one; but a world also where the three great elvish jewels, the Silmarilli, shone with a strange and powerful light, a world where against all odds the quest could be victorious.

– Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien – A Biography*

Christopher was born into Arda. He spent more of his life there than his father did; his very sense of belief cut its teeth on Tolkien's tales. "Strange as it may seem," Christopher told *Le Monde* in 2012, "I grew up in the world he had created. For me, the cities of *Silmarillion* have more reality than Babylon." The footstool on which young Christopher had perched as he listened to these stories remained in his own home for the rest of his life, preserved on a shelf not far from the wooden armchair Tolkien had sat in as he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*.

An RAF pilot toward the end of the Second World War, Christopher went on to Oxford and, like Tolkien, became an English lecturer and philologist. In vocation as well as temperament, father and son were remarkably alike. Tolkien describes him as "a nervy, irritable, cross-grained, self-tormenting, cheeky person. Yet there is something intensely lovable about him, to me at any rate, from the very similarity between us." Christopher was even an Inklings himself, reading aloud passages of J.R.R. Tolkien's work at the group's get-togethers because, as the story goes, C.S. Lewis and the others preferred his delivery to his father's.

It is difficult to convey, or even to comprehend, the

importance of Christopher Tolkien's role in his father's legacy. He has been called a *curator* and a *literary executor*, but these are bloodless names, smelling of dust and formaldehyde. They do nothing to clarify the vividness and resilience of his contribution, nor the Sisyphean difficulty of the task he undertook.

For twenty years after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, fans had clamored for the backstory that would illuminate all. The book's allusions and appendices had made it clear that much of the source material remained unpublished, and the demand grew for that enigmatic masterwork to shed light into Middle-earth's time-abyss – to stabilize the dizzying sense that the story was merely the crust atop a vast chasm of history. The examples are many: when Gandalf declares himself “a servant of the Secret Fire”; when Shelob is called “the last child of Ungoliant”; and when Frodo refers to “the dark ravines of Beleriand” where Sting was forged; all conjured mysteries that went unanswered even in the book's appendices.

What J.R.R. Tolkien left behind when he died, however, was not a single, grand narrative, but a perplexing weave of variants and revisions. Their author had been consumed by them, for he was a scholar and perfectionist as well as a teller of tales. Not all who wander are lost, and roving through the hinterlands of language and story, stumbling over rubble and becoming transfixed by their riddles, was both a pleasure and an obsession for him. Tolkien was also working against his own professional understanding of ancient history as a patchwork of tales, in places frayed and incomplete, and not some documentary based on footage straight from God's closed-circuit camera system. Discrepancies and gaps are essential parts of history, irreconcilable as that proves to the structures of fiction. They're the mist of the portrait, which would be vandalism to rub away.

It is sometimes said that Christopher Tolkien 'finished' his

father's work with the publication of *The Silmarillion*, when what he really did was to extract and assemble a text in demand. Christopher was also a medieval literary scholar, so he would have seen the mismanagement of original material not just as irresponsible, but irreverent. The culling of the many source-texts – as arduous and as conflicting as it must have proved to J.R.R.'s son – led to the publication of over a dozen subsequent volumes over the next twenty-five years, including the 12-volume *History of Middle-earth* series. These, along with the final three 'Great Tales' Christopher edited and published between 2007 and 2018, were meant not only to continue promoting Tolkien's original works, but also to render transparent the sources and editorial decisions that led to *The Silmarillion* as it stands.

This purist mentality is responsible for another of Christopher Tolkien's contributions to his father's legacy – namely, his assessment of the film adaptations. In terms of money, relations between filmmakers and the Tolkien Estate have never been rosy. Altogether, the movies have grossed around \$6 billion, but the £100,000 that J.R.R. made selling the film rights in 1968, even when adjusted for inflation, would have paid for little more than Elijah Wood's salary for his two-minute appearance in the first *Hobbit* film. As for the tone and quality of the films themselves, Christopher Tolkien believed the studios "eviscerated the book by making it an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25." He went on to add that

Tolkien has become a monster, devoured by his popularity and absorbed by the absurdity of the times. The gap that has widened between the beauty, the seriousness of the work, and what it has become – all of this is beyond me. Such a degree of commercialization reduces the aesthetic and philosophical scope of this creation to nothing. I only have one solution left: turn my head.

Looking away did not preclude the Tolkien Estate from holding out its hand, with Amazon Studios paying a reported \$250 million for the television rights in 2017. It remains unclear how much of a role Christopher played in those negotiations, however, having resigned as director of the Estate that same year. He would nonetheless publish his edition of *The Fall of Gondolin* in 2018, the same year he turned 94.

It seems tragic that those who fell in love with *The Lord of the Rings* through the films should remember its first fan and scholar as an enemy, especially when audiovisual adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's work will continue to dominate the popularity of his world. Friction between books and film adaptations is traditional, but it reaches atomic temperatures with a franchise as lucrative as that of Tolkien's legendarium. Defenders of the texts have reason to be wary, given the extreme incongruity between what makes Tolkien special and the fickle values of modern pop culture.

J.R.R. himself was no fan of the dramatic arts, calling them "a visible and audible presentation of imaginary men in a story [...] an attempt to counterfeit the magician's wand." Tolkien's wand was his pen, and *The Lord of the Rings* is obsessively and consistently written, with days, precise distances, and even the direction of the wind documented daily. While it was this meticulous inner reality that brought the book to the fore, the binge-watching juggernaut now fed by Tolkien's creations would likely have cast the author himself aside as a pedantic curmudgeon. As Vince Vaughan told Peter Jackson in a sketch that aired at the 2004 MTV Movie Awards, "with all due respect *mate*, I don't think anyone outside of the D&D club has ever even read the books."

But our world, like Tolkien's Arda, is ever-changing. As a nonagenarian and a westerner, Christopher stood witness to more social and technological revolutions than any generation before him. His father's brilliant legacy, indeed the role of

books in general, has been swept up in the profitability of entertainment in society along with everything else. Christopher, like J.R.R., has been called a titan of fantasy literature; if so, Christopher was Atlas, with the weight of a cosmology on his back. That responsibility is no longer his.

And so, appealing as it is to bid Christopher *namárië* – which is ‘farewell’ in Quenya – I’ll go with Gandalf the White, who spoke the following words at the quays of the Grey Havens:

Well, here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.

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