



Book Review:
Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth

Andoni Cossío

McIlwaine, Catherine, editor. *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth*. Bodleian Library, U of Oxford, 2018. ISBN 978-1851244850.

Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth is the offspring of the exhibition under the same name displayed in the Weston Library, Oxford (1 June 2018–28 Oct. 2018). This expanded catalogue, including six introductory essays to J.R.R. Tolkien, provides elaborate commentaries on the items as well as a bibliography and an index, forming a cohesive introduction readily touching all aspects of Tolkien's life, fiction, and art. After seventeen years working at the Tolkien archive of the Bodleian Library, Catherine McIlwaine is an authoritative editor who has managed to compile an excellent textual and visual compendium.

The contributors selected for the opening essays, covering a wide range of topics, comprise some of the best scholars in Tolkien studies. The reproductions interspersed with the running text in most cases either support the argument, as in the pieces by John Garth (pp. 20–33), Verlyn Flieger (pp. 34–45), Carl F. Hostetter (pp. 46–57), and Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (pp. 70–81), or illustrate the topic of choice as in Tom Shippey's contribution (pp. 58–69). Unfortunately, in a few minor others, the connections are frail, such as the art in McIlwaine's essay (pp. 10–20) and fig. 18 *Copy of 'Mirkwood'* (p. 39) in Flieger's. This format imperative inconveniently forces the reader to go back when the analysis on these items commences in the catalogue.

McIlwaine's "J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biographical Sketch" manages to provide a clear, concise, and original introduction to Tolkien's well-known life. McIlwaine's achievement of incorporating some less well-known facts together with the highlights of Tolkien's life and background is laudatory. It serves well its purpose of introducing subsequent essays and materials.

Garth's "Tolkien and the Inklings" deals with the emergence, constituency, and development of the group, and the influence it had on Tolkien as a writer and creator. It also accurately conveys, contrary to common belief, that the Inklings was a mutable group that changed over the years, free from any set structure or norms. Garth also unravels the more personal aspects of Tolkien's relationship with different members, going beyond the factual into the sentimental, offering a glimpse into Tolkien's personality and social behaviour.

In a very ambitious essay entitled "Faërie: Tolkien's Perilous Land", Flieger explains what the concept "Faërie" and "Faërian Drama" meant for Tolkien, and its application to his writings. With this purpose in mind, she reviews Tolkien's early drawings from 1911-1913, "On Fairy-Stories" (1947), and *Smith of Wootton Major* (1967) together with the posthumously published "*Smith of Wootton Major Essay*" (2005) and *The Notion Club Papers* (published in *Sauron Defeated* in 1992), tracing the evolution of "Faërie" in his mind and fiction. Of particular relevance is how Flieger explains that initiating his employment of "Faërie" in Mirkwood in *The Hobbit* (1937), Tolkien set off to develop it further in *The Lord of The Rings* (1954–1955) with the Old Forest, culminating with the fully fledged example of Lothlórien, to finally round it off in *Smith of Wootton Major*.

"Inventing Elvish" by Hostetter explains how "Tolkien is the first glossopoeist (or inventor of languages) known to have created his languages on historical and comparative principles" (47). The essay shows the manner in which Tolkien crafted a series of Elvish languages with detailed historical grammatical and phonological transformations, a by-product of his professional activity. In spite of the essay being slightly technical for those without some previous knowledge of linguistics, it succeeds in scientifically providing an insight into the arduous and extremely scrupulous undertaking Tolkien carried out, which sets his languages apart from other tailored systems of communication.

"Tolkien and 'That Noble Northern Spirit'" by Shippey expands on the long-studied influence of Norse literature in Tolkien from a new angle. The courage without hope for victory which runs through *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is identified to be part of the Northern spirit Tolkien absorbed from Northern literature. However, Shippey also remarks on how Tolkien censored heathen practices, erasing or condemning traces of slavery and human or animal sacrifices. Shippey further analyses how particular passages of *Beowulf* and "The Lay of Fafnir" in the *Poetic Edda* shaped parts of *The Hobbit* in great measure. The great achievement of the essay is not the simple identification of sources and elements borrowed but in how, considering Tolkien's faith, philological knowledge, and taste, he reworked those materials to present a new outlook of the past, sometimes in a more sophisticated manner or adapting them to suit his own will.

As the experts most knowledgeable about Tolkien's artwork, Hammond and Scull provide an indispensable essay. In "Tolkien's Visual Art" they offer a chronological narrative of Tolkien's artwork, conveniently jumping back and forth, in relation to different highlights of his life, and especially those bound to his fiction. They succeed at pinpointing how Tolkien was as meticulous and dedicated in his artistic endeavours as in the process of writing.

Once the essays have set the context, the catalogue begins with colour reproductions of letters of various kinds. A few iconic epistles written by Tolkien are selected from the Tolkien Estate archive, from which Humphrey Carpenter was also drawing for *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981). Afterwards, McIlwaine arranges

material in a more or less chronological order with Tolkien's childhood, student days, artistic range, *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien's handling of time and distractions, *The Hobbit*, and finishing with *The Lord of the Rings* and its maps. The format will please many, with – in most cases – a double-page layout devoted to each reprint, including the commentary and bibliography, sparing the trouble of checking back and forth. The choice of pictures and text is excellent, always relating to his fiction and other artworks when pertinent, clarifying common and not-so-common concerns. In addition, the volume also illustrates how Tolkien experimented with very different artistic styles (184), covering them all and distinguishing between them.

With regard to the content, some of the details are well-known, whereas others are surprisingly fresh, especially regarding specific dates and aspects concerning Tolkien's parents, childhood, Edith, friendships, adult life, Exeter College, family, war, and the University of Oxford. Rather than just re-presenting the highlights of Tolkien's life covered in Carpenter's biography or Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (2003), McIlwaine sets a path of her own. The biographical sketch at the beginning (pp. 10–20) now allows the author to focus on given episodes without having to re-explain facts, allowing greater depth.

Most of the photographs, maps, manuscripts and art have previously been published in several different places: *J.R.R. Tolkien: The Father Christmas Letters* (1976), *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* (1979), *Mr Bliss* (1982), *J.R.R. Tolkien Life and Legend: An Exhibition to Commemorate the Centenary of the Birth of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973)* (1992), *The Tolkien Family Album* (1992), *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator* (1995), *The Annotated Hobbit* (2002), *The Invented Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien: Drawings and Original Manuscripts from the Marquette University Collection* (2004), *The Art of The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien* (2011), and *The Art of The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien* (2015). Nonetheless, although there are several new items never previously seen, and plenty of quotes from the coveted Tolkien Family Papers, it must be said that the most interesting materials have already been reproduced elsewhere. This is perhaps unavoidable, especially considering many of Tolkien's drawings served to illustrate his stories, either as pictures, maps, or dust jackets. Yet it must be highlighted that the quality of the reproductions of this volume exceeds those prior to 2011. In total, there are 67 new art items; the complete list can be found in the Tolkien Art Index (TAI) ranging from the item TAI#483 to TAI#551, excluding TAI#498 and TAI#544 (Mueller-Harder). For a quick reference, already published materials included in this volume can also be found in TAI. In any case, the new Númenórean art, heraldic devices, patterns, designs, and doodles do not add much to those previously printed, the *Second Silmarillion Map* fig. 75 being the only valuable piece (227).

On the downside, some may find the reiterative pattern of the book slightly slow-paced as the reader is exposed to some information twice, first in the essays and later in the catalogue. While the commentaries on the various drafts and evolution of certain artworks have also been largely covered in the past by Hammond and Scull, some of them provide new and enlightening perspectives. For the sake of convenience, it would have been helpful to include a list of all previously unpublished material; however, the manuscript numbers have been usefully placed under each item, facilitating the labour of those interested in requesting their access.

Among the strongest features of *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth* is how McIlwaine reviews different artistic output and correlates it to various life moments

and fictional projects such as *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. McIlwaine also shows the reader how much can be learnt and understood about Tolkien from his art, especially the less well-known early productions labelled as “The Book of Ishness”, *Roverandom* (1998), calligraphy, or newspaper doodles, among others. In most cases she guides and explains rather than imposes an interpretation, letting the reader speculate. The index is very detailed and extensive, practical for quick references, differentiating between illustrations and the running text. A large bibliography is enclosed for those adventurous enough to continue learning, with a helpful list of previous Tolkien exhibitions since 1967.

Scholars familiar with Tolkien may find unnecessary some of the detailed accounts, such as summaries of the well-known works, but I believe they will welcome the essays, the quotes from the Tolkien Family Papers, and the new reproductions. Although the majority of the items can be found in the aforementioned volumes, this is the first time they have been conveniently bound together into a single book at an affordable price. Readers of Tolkien’s works unfamiliar with Tolkien studies will appreciate the great effort made to constantly contextualise, resulting in an unprecedentedly accessible introduction to Tolkien scholarship and art.

Biography: Andoni Cossío (UPV/EHU) is working on a PhD dissertation on the role of trees and forests in Tolkien’s works. He is sponsored by the Pre-doctoral Funding awarded by the Basque Government, and by the research group REWEST, funded by the Basque Government (IT-1026-16) and the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). His publications focus on nature in Tolkien’s works, and he has organised five international conferences on the Inklings.

Works Cited

Mueller-Harder, Erik. “Tolkien Art Index.” *Vermont Softworks*. Vermont Softworks, LLC, 2019, tai.vermontsoftworks.com. Accessed 30 July 2019.