



BOOK REVIEW:

*“Something Has Gone Crack”:
New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great
War*

James Hamby

Croft, Janet Brennan, and Annika Röttinger, editors. *“Something Has Gone Crack”:
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So much scholarship has already been dedicated to the topic of how World War I influenced Tolkien’s *Legendarium* that new avenues of exploration are hard to find. However, *New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War* accomplishes just that with sixteen wide-ranging essays on a variety of ways that Tolkien’s experiences in WWI shaped the characters, landscapes, and actions of his secondary world. Each of the essays acknowledges and responds to the scholarship that has been written previously on this subject, particularly John Garth’s seminal *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (2003). Yet each chapter makes its own contribution to the corpus of Tolkien Studies, exploring new influences and scrutinising older points of view. As the title suggests, this volume focuses on the sense of trauma that Tolkien experienced during the Great War and its aftermath, including how he transmuted those feelings into his creation of Middle-earth and its long story cycles of destruction and regeneration. Tolkien’s ideas about loss, comradeship, healing, and eucatastrophe, all important parts of the Middle-earth mythos, are rooted firmly in his WWI experiences.

Brennan and Röttinger divide this collection into four sections:

1. “The Conduct of War: Reading the Great War in Middle-earth’s Wars”;
2. “Biography: The Personal Becomes Art”;
3. “Roots of Major Themes of the *Legendarium* in the Great War”; and
4. “Alterity: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in War”.

The first section is broad in scope and explores how WWI, with its new concepts of mechanised and total warfare, shaped the wars of Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. The next section narrows its focus to look at how Tolkien’s personal relationships, his convalescence away from the front, and his skepticism of finding glory in war all find expression in his writings about Middle-earth. The third section focuses on the themes in the *Legendarium* that Tolkien, or any soldier of WWI, would have experienced during combat. The volume unfortunately concludes with a section on alterity that feels tacked on, as though the essays could not fit into the other divisions of the book. Although these last essays themselves are quality scholarship, they would be more effective if integrated into the rest of the book, thus making “alterity” a central issue rather than an afterthought. While class and gender are discussed competently, the discussions of sexuality and especially race feel forced. If WWI did not particularly influence Tolkien’s thinking on race in ways to be found in his fiction, then it seems unnecessary to include it in this volume. Nevertheless, when taken as a whole, all four sections reflect the multifaceted way WWI influenced all aspects of Tolkien’s creation of a secondary world.

The first chapter by Tom Shippey and John Bourne, “A Steep Learning Curve: Tolkien and the British Army on the Somme”, does an excellent job of contextualising the Battle of the Somme for all the discussions in the following essays. The “steep learning curve” refers to the British Army’s eventual understanding, after the Somme’s massive casualties, of the realities of modernised, total warfare. The result of this for Tolkien, argue Shippey and Bourne, is the creation of hobbits and their “new-style image of heroism for an uncertain and dispirited age” (23). In the following chapter, Glenn E. Peterson explores the ways that various battles from WWI influenced specific battles in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. Though Peterson’s chapter does contain valuable insight into Tolkien’s thought processes while writing about battles in Middle-earth, it is difficult to accept that there was such a one-on-one correspondence as he suggests. Indeed, readers familiar with Tolkien’s disdain for allegory may scoff at such an idea, and the same charge may be levelled against virtually every other chapter in this book. However, as Röttinger astutely points out in her chapter immediately after this, examining Tolkien’s biography in conjunction with his ideas of “applicability” does not detract from *The Lord of the Rings* but rather “directs a more sensitive focus to it and enables a multilayered exploration” (46). Despite Tolkien’s dislike for allegory and his annoyance over readers searching for simplistic symbolism in his works, these chapters do establish ways in which Tolkien’s lived experiences during the Great War found expression, whether consciously or unconsciously, in his writing.

The second section presents the strongest example of this expression. John Rosegrant and William Kuehs each offer excellent essays, respectively, on a psychoanalytic reading of Tolkien and a semiotic comparison with Ernst Jünger, but the most outstanding chapter of this section is Michael Flowers’s

“Tolkien in East Yorkshire, 1917–18: A Hemlock Glade, Two Towers, The Houses of Healing and a Beacon”. Flowers engages in excellent academic research to build upon John Garth’s and Humphrey Carpenter’s previous works about Tolkien’s convalescence in Holderness, a peninsula in East Yorkshire. Flowers retraces Tolkien’s many moves throughout the peninsula during the months of his recovery, uncovers the places where he and Edith took up their separate residences, and analyses how local geography and landmarks found their way into Middle-earth. Flowers’s speculations on the location and time of year with what flowers must have been in bloom at the time of Edith’s memorable dance for Tolkien highlight what an emotionally charged time this must have been for the young writer as he was healing physically, mentally, and emotionally after leaving the front. Flowers concludes that though Tolkien was only in East Yorkshire for a year and a half, this time proved “crucial in the development of his emerging mythology” (144). Undoubtedly, this time of peaceful healing (though punctuated with sickness and anxiety as it was) served as a counterweight to the violence and upheaval of combat. Both of these experiences would provide important frameworks for Tolkien’s stories of Middle-earth.

The third section of the volume is similarly enlightening on how Tolkien’s war experiences influenced his work. Łukasz Neubauer’s chapter on the uncanniness of silence during trench warfare and Victoria Holtz Wodzak’s essay on dugouts and tunnels in WWI look at very specific phenomena not always covered in studies about Tolkien in WWI, while Molly Volanth Hall writes about Tolkien’s sense of the loss of ecology in *The Lord of the Rings* – which is certainly not a new topic but one that she ably explores nonetheless. Anna Smol contributes a chapter connecting Tolkien’s experiences with the unburied bodies he encountered during the Somme to *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm’s Son* and competing ideas of heroism. Yet of all the works in this section, John Garth’s “Revenants and Angels: Tolkien, Machen, and Mons” stands out for its revealing look into the collective psychological need for mysticism and supernatural protection during such an uncertain time. Garth recounts how Arthur Machen wrote a fictionalised short story for a London newspaper. In this tale, the British Army retreats from Mons, Belgium and is miraculously saved by St. George and the ghosts of English longbowmen from the Battle of Agincourt. The story gained popularity and was repeated through word of mouth by people who had taken it to be real, and a large number of the British public came to believe that there were many eyewitnesses in the British Army who claim that they had been saved by angels. It is not known whether or not Tolkien read the original story, but, Garth argues, the value in examining this story in conjunction with Tolkien’s created mythology is that both share common archetypes, namely “revenants and angels who appear in time of war and intervene to aid the weak against the strong, the defender against the invader, good against evil, and the medieval against the quasi-modern”, and they are thus “vivified by similar contemporary imaginative needs” (178). It is likely, Garth argues, that in creating a new mythology for the English people, Tolkien and his audience would have found solace in eucatastrophe engendered by an unseen, benevolent force (199–200).

As mentioned above, the final section contains both some good scholarship and some structural flaws. Alicia Fox-Lenz’s “Contemporary Reflections of War: Soldier-Servant Relationships in *The Lord of The Rings* and

Downton Abbey” is the chapter that most successfully explores issues of alterity through her discussion of class differences between officers and their batmen in WWI. A “batman” was an officer’s servant and they often formed close bonds of friendship despite their class differences. Fox-Lenz argues that the relationship between Sam and Frodo is based on these relationships, and that in Sam’s character Tolkien represents the “loosening of the class structure of post-war Britain” (355). Equally intriguing in her discussion of both class and gender is Lynn Schlesinger’s chapter on nurses in WWI and how they informed Tolkien’s conception of gender roles. Not only is her research into the lives of WWI nurses fascinating, but she takes a more nuanced view in how Tolkien represents women, specifically Éowyn. Tolkien is often criticized for making his female characters too passive, as Felicity Gilbert suggests in the very next chapter (332), but Schlesinger argues that Éowyn’s decision to become a healer makes her “more, not less powerful and effective” (307), as healing was seen as such a powerful force for good, as demonstrated in both Aragorn’s and Faramir’s skills at healing. As mentioned above, the issues of sexuality and race in this section seem forced and are not argued convincingly, and all issues of alterity would have been better dealt with throughout the courses of the other sections of the book.

This volume, however, is another wonderful addition to both the Cormarë series and to the corpus of scholarship focusing on Tolkien and WWI. These essays would be useful in both graduate and undergraduate courses on Tolkien, and they should be enjoyed both by Tolkien experts and any reader with an interest in learning about how WWI influenced Middle-earth. The disillusionment with modernity espoused by Tolkien’s writing is more than just that of a nostalgic writer; rather, it is a quality that places Tolkien amongst the greatest of the writers of the Lost Generation. Like so many other WWI writers, Tolkien yearned to recover the certainties that the war stripped away. But, just as Frodo realised he could not remain in the Shire, Tolkien realised that the world he and his generation had known would never return. These essays, taken together, reveal more than just Tolkien’s experiences with warfare: they represent the horrors and uncertainty of the modern world – that something has “gone crack”.

Biography: James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University where he also teaches courses in composition and literature, including *Victorian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale*. His dissertation, *David Copperfield: Victorian Hero* examines archetypal structures in Dickens’s most autobiographical novel. He is also the Book Reviews Associate Editor for *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.