Tolkien™ in / Tolkien™ and Academia

David L. Dettman

So we aren't doing academic journals this time. I said we would look at one of the journals that would interest Tolkien in this column, but in the end I took it easy in my reading for the last two months and had some fun – reading mysteries. I will proceed here on the rather lame excuse that the mystery series that I will discuss today is one that I think Tolkien would have enjoyed. I don't think Tolkien was a fan of modern mysteries – he didn't have anything good to say about Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Whimsey series (see Carpenter's Biography). Yet he had an interest in writing that re-imagined the ancient and medieval. This is exactly what Ellis Peters (real name Edith Pargeter) does in the 21 mystery novels that are the Brother Cadfael series. She does a magnificent job incorporating solid historical scholarship and re-imagined personalities of Norman England into what are very traditional mystery novels. Although not as interested in the Twelfth Century as in his beloved Anglo-Saxon world, Tolkien used and wrote about medieval literature and folklore through the time of Chaucer.

In the 1980's and 1990's I read a handful of these books, in no particular order, and never realized how carefully constructed the series is. I've worked my way through the first 13 volumes in the last few months and looked at some of

Peters' sources. It has been great fun. The series follows the detective activities of a 60 year old Benedictine monk of the Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul in Shrewsbury, England, near the Welsh border. The first story takes place in conjunction with the historical translation of St. Winifred's relics to the abbey church in 1137. The books cover the events of the next eight years at the pace of two or three volumes per year. Peters carefully incorporates as much historical material as possible while following the everyday lives of characters on the fringes of history. The political history of this decade is hazardous, King Steven and Empress Matilda are battling over the throne of England. Loyalties are sworn and repudiated and rebellion (in the eyes of either party) can be severely punished. The shifting winds of this political storm are carefully played out in chronological order: a battle in Shrewsbury and massacre in retribution, regional rulers hoping to set themselves up as small independent kingdoms, Empress Matilda's bullying of church officials into endorsing her claim, the capture and imprisonment of King Steven, his rescue and escape, Steven's severe illness in early 1442. We are given a view of the political maneuverings of regional lords and of the relatively weak political power of the royal court in many parts of England. Shrewsbury, on the borderlands near Wales, also feels the impact of the independent and sometimes belligerent kingdom of Wales.

Before she turned to mysteries and achieved wide popularity with the Brother Cadfael series, Peters was best known for a series of medieval historical novels set in western England and Wales. Medieval-era historical novels seem to have declined in popularity in the last few decades (partly due to the rise of fantasy?), and it seems that Peters' work has largely been forgotten. These were mostly done in the 1960's and 1970's and include a number of finely imagined and detailed portrayals of medieval life in the southern British Isles. ***The Brothers of Gwynedd Quartet*** is a set of four novels tracing the second Llewelyn, prince of Wales, in the Thirteenth Century and his endeavor to unite Wales against the English. ***A Bloody Field by Shrewsbury*** traces early Fifteenth Century events in the rise of Henry IV. If you are interested in tracking some of these down, they were published under the

name of Edith Pargeter. Her favorite of her own historical novels was the ***Heaven Tree Trilogy***, set in Thirteenth Century Shrewsbury. Research for these books gave her the historical events that set up the murder mysteries and the requisite detective to solve them, Brother Cadfael.

Cadfael came late to the cloister, after a long career as a seaman and crusader. He took refuge from the chaos of the world and sought a peaceful old age in the Benedictine Order. The books following his career are very traditional mysteries. There is none of the modern detective of the last 15 years, with his alcoholism, divorces, abuse, and anxiety. Cadfael is old-school – he is in control, even when he is temporarily stumped by a case. He has the full support of the authorities, being close personal friends with the sheriff of Shropshire. The books, to a great extent, follow the standard formula of a mystery. So much so that after 13 volumes I had to take a break and read some other things (but I will come back to them soon). They are also very romantic – with young (often falsely accused) couples finding true love in the last few pages of some novels. Yet I am not complaining.[1] These are fun books with clever puzzles and appealing characters, but, most importantly, the books are full of historical detail.

Peters has a large amount of historical information to convey in her work. She does this in a number of ways. The plots often incorporate features of everyday life in a monastery or for townspeople that gives Peters a chance to fill in a large quantity of historically accurate detail. Various volumes deal with the issues of the translation of relics, the autonomous nature of church institutions with respect to state government, the crusades, the maintenance of chartered rights, manuscript copying, monastic care of the old (and wealthy), and much more. Peters also treats the reader as an intelligent adult. Throughout her books she will freely use medieval terminology without providing glosses for many of the terms. This is a nice stylistic touch that makes you feel like you are familiar

1. Except for some uncomfortably modern forensic techniques – such as thread analysis or at one point Cadfael uses candle wax to make a mold of a footprint.

with some of the obscure terminology of this medieval world. You can infer the general meaning from context, but you will benefit greatly if you take the time to look up these terms – I learned a lot. One gains a particular understanding of life in a Benedictine monastery – the loss of individual freedom and personal property, the role of the Benedictines in the wider community, novices (those in a one year period of probation after which they may take vows), and the unending round of worship services (up to nine per day). In one case I was surprised by the historical accuracy – in ***The Devil's Novice*** the abbot worries about accepting a child into monastic life, voicing the opinion that individuals should be free to choose their life's vocation from an adult perspective with full knowledge of the consequences of this choice. This felt too much like modern, Twentieth Century sensibilities talking, but as I looked into the Benedictine order of the Twelfth Century I found that this was indeed a time of intense discussion of the practice of committing young children to the cloister; by the end of the Twelfth Century the Benedictines would abandon the practice. Peters has a story to tell through these books beyond the episodic and formulaic mysteries. She is telling the story of the time and her characters – so much so that in some of the books the murder and arrival of the mystery is postponed until page 75 or so.

I would recommend another work as a companion piece to read alongside the Brother Cadfael series: Marjorie Chibnall's ***The World of Orderic Vitalis: Norman Monks and Norman Knights*** (1984). This is a study of daily life in the monasteries and noble families in Normandy and England in the early Twelfth Century. It is based on the voluminous historical chronicle written by Orderic Vitalis, who was born in Shrewsbury and sent to the Norman abbey of Saint-Evroult as a child oblate. Chibnall has published a translation and commentary on Orderic's writing elsewhere, and it is clear that Peters used the chronicle and this book (which appeared after the first half of the Cadfael books were written) for historical source material. Chibnall paints an excellent picture of the general insecurity of these times, when the local rulers were thugs and strongmen and security was only found in strong walls and rather distasteful alliances. We see that the allegiance of the main characters in Peters'

books to King Steven in the successional dispute with Matilda is very similar to the attitude that Orderic has – Steven was crowned king and therefore is owed personal allegiance. The political events described vividly by Orderic become important points in Peters' books: hostage taking of both high ranking nobles and every day soldiers or the self-interested revolt of Ranulf, Earl of Chester and his capture of Lincoln. Political events within the Benedictines have also shaped the Cadfael books – we read about two different Roberts who were rather politically inept and failed at leading abbeys for various reasons. This seems to be a model for Peters' too proud and overbearing Prior Robert of the Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul. Here we also get more detail on the child oblate controversy and how those who were cloistered young were not given positions of power within the monastery and were carefully insulated from interaction with the outside world. One of the strongest features of this work is the picture of monastic life and the inner spirituality of Orderic. Brother Cadfael has much in common with Orderic's spiritual life: something very rare in detective literature, I suspect. Peters gives us a character in Cadfael who, after a very worldly life, has chosen to give up worldly things and spend his hours in worship and service to others.