Tolkien™ in / Tolkien™ and Academia

David L. Dettman

*T*olkien Studies Journal number 4 appears this year. This is a relatively new journal, from the West Virginia University Press, that produces one hardcover volume each year. The quality of papers continues to be high, although I could do without some of the more jargon-y ones (and maybe fewer by the journal editors). This journal is a significant milestone in the academic study of Tolkien's writing, showing that a University press is willing to invest in the publication, that there is sufficient academic interest in the subject, and that subscriptions are sufficient to maintain the journal's finances. The journal hosts papers that discuss both Tolkien's fantasy writing and his academic work, although the emphasis is on the former.

Volume 4 is notable in that it has a reprint of one of Tolkien's academic articles, "The Name Nodens" from an appendix to the volume, *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman, and Post-Roman Sites in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire.* This is a short paper in Volume 9 of the Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, published by Oxford University Press in 1932. I assume it has been difficult to find and this is why it has been reprinted. The two authors who have discussed this article[1] have called it "remarkable" and I completely agree. It is worth spending some time with, even if (like me) you can't follow the details very well. In it Tolkien practices in his professional writing what he did so well in his private work, exploring the mythic depth and background of a name. Here he looks at a single name used four times in three inscriptions, with three variant spellings, analyzing the name as referring to a Celtic god with Latin case endings. This linguistic analysis

---

[1] T. S. Shippey in *Road to Middle Earth* and M. D. C. Drout's paper in this volume.

becomes a springboard for a broad discussion of Gloucestershire inscriptions with a Gaelic god, the comparative Celtic and Anglo-Saxon etymologies which point to a hunter or trapper god (preserved primarily in the early Gothic meanings), and the Irish leader of the Túatha dé Danann, Nuadu of the silver hand as the original referent.   This mythological discussion is based entirely in comparative etymology and historical linguistics. This is impressive in its linguistic virtuosity, but I wonder if it is true. One gets the feeling that one can't argue with data arranged so carefully and expertly, but any historical science[2] is subject to the same problem – one can construct an elegant explanation for a series of observations, but this doesn't mean that that is what really happened. I think I share some of the unease of modern scholars at this kind of analysis. Nonetheless it is a piece one should read to get a feel for the way Tolkien thought.

Michael Drout gives us a long article surveying Tolkien's academic publications, "J.R.R. Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and its Significance." This is extremely useful for anyone interested in Tolkien because it is a crash course in Tolkien's academic thought and achievements – useful for those of us who don't have the background in Old or Middle English to work through the originals (yet).   The article summarizes each of Tolkien's published papers and also puts it in its academic context, describing other people's opinions and any active debate in the literature when each paper was published. Drout avoids jargon and writes a very easy-to-read overview of Tolkien's contribution to the study of Medieval English literature. He does this well, partly because he is an academic himself, teaching Old English at Wheaton College, and has had to deal with the history of thought on this body of literature in his own publishing.

Drout also tries to assess Tolkien's contribution to English literature by evaluating the significance of Tolkien's work. He uses two criteria to make this evaluation, how much discussion did his publications generate and was the main point of each paper "correct." This is another way in which the paper is very worth reading, in that it talks about what happened after Tolkien put his thoughts out there. How did people respond to the papers, did they pick up on the ideas presented, and in the end did they agree with him? Although I am a little uncomfortable with the idea of "significance" being "did he get it right," this component of the paper makes for very interesting reading, since it follows the academic dialogue that Tolkien engaged in beyond Tolkien's papers and up to the present day.

The overview shows that Tolkien's academic writings were both wide

---

[2] Such as the one I practice, Geology.

ranging and narrow. They are often about small details, but the details have significant implications for a wide range of topics, historical linguistics, mythology, literature, and culture in Medieval England and Northern Europe. The papers fall into five groups, single word studies, dialect studies, editions and translations, literary criticism, and reviews. Single word studies include articles on single words, such as the paper on "nodens" reprinted in this volume or the two articles on "Sigelwara Land." It also includes major contributions such as his Middle English vocabulary of 1922, in which more than 4700 words are briefly defined, etymologies given and variants are listed. One gets the feeling that Tolkien was most at home with these detailed, single-word type of studies. Here he was free to pursue the etymology as far as he could and think about the implications of the relationships that he discovered. It is a type of creativity only little different from his legendarium. Dialect studies are one area in which he should have published more. Drout lists two papers, his work on the dialect of the Ancrene Wisse manuscript and a discussion of Chaucer's use of dialect. Most of the editions and translations are known to readers, although this paper will help those wanting to get hold of some of the more obscure works, or those that appeared under other people's names (in these Tolkien had significant input – such as The Seafarers, Saint Catherine, or the Old English Exodus). The literary criticism section is surprisingly small, given that this is Tolkien's best known academic work – three papers: "Beowulf the Monsters and the Critics", his essay and dialogic poem on the Battle of Maldon, and a lecture on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Finally there are a number of reviews in which Tolkien had the opportunity to criticize other academics and discuss the current state of research on medieval English literature.

Another very interesting and useful article is Carl Hostetter's "Tolkienian Linguistics: The First Fifty Years." It is an informative survey of the large efforts expended in understanding and documenting Tolkien's various invented languages. Hostetter gives us a detailed history of the groups working on Tolkien's languages and their various achievements. He traces the different attitudes toward variants in the corpus of the elvish languages – one group tried to unify all the available examples of Quenya or Sindarin, while others allowed that Tolkien's conception of the languages may have evolved and changed, leading to inconsistencies in the published examples. Although the latter seems clearly to be what happened in the composition of Tolkien's legendarium, the former is what we would wish for if these were really ancient languages. But Tolkien did develop these languages throughout his life, playing with concepts and trying things out. Sometimes he was able to maintain a certain consistency, even when he had changed a

grammatical or phonological rule, by explaining the change as a regional variant or historical change in the language, but he wasn't always able to do this. Hostetter looks at the publications, old and new, that have provided a wealth of new material to work with; a surprising amount of Tolkien's notes on languages have been published in fan journals in the last twenty years. He also discusses the recent efforts to construct spoken elvish languages, something which is really not feasible without massive new invention on the part of speakers. He finishes with a description of the first in a series of conferences devoted to Tolkien's invented languages that took place in 2005 and with some thoughts on the next 50 years.

*T*here are a number of other good papers in this volume (and a few I didn't bother to finish). Among the most interesting are: a description of the development of *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* based on the series of ten manuscript drafts in the Bodleian library (The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth: Philology and the Literary Muse by Thomas Honegger); a reassessment of Tolkien's use and attitude toward Celtic legends (Tolkien's "'Celtic' type of legends": Merging Traditions by Dimitra Fimi); Tolkien's influence on modern science – primarily on nomenclature (SAURON, Mount Doom, and Elvish Moths: The Influence of Tolkien on Modern Science by Kristine Larsen); a note on the feminine gender of the sun and the use of pronouns in the Germanic languages and English ("Elves (and Hobbits) always refer to the Sun as She": Some Notes on a Note in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* by Yvette L. Kisor); a biography of W. E. Haigh an amateur dialectologist and acquaintance of Tolkien (Walter E. Haigh, Author of *A New Glossary of the Huddersfield Dialect* by Janet Brennan Croft); and a short look at the influence of John Buchan's novel *Huntingtower* on *The Hobbit* (Tracking the Elusive Hobbit (In Its Pre-Shire Den) by Marjorie Burns). There is also the usual bibliography of papers on Tolkien published in 2005. David Bratman also contributes "The year's work in Tolkien Studies 2004" in which he describes most of the scholarly output of 2004.

This journal remains the new center of Tolkien scholarship. Your library may be able to get single articles in PDF form through Inter Library Loan. The journal is carried by Project Muse, Online Scholarly Journals.