ALSO BY LESLIE ELLEN JONES

*Druid Shaman Priest: Metaphors of Celtic Paganism*

*Happy Is the Bride the Sun Shines On: Wedding Beliefs, Traditions, and Customs*

Myth & Middle-earth

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1. J.R.R. Tolkien

THE MAN WHO MADE THE MYTH

The man who made the myth—John Ronald Reuel Tolkien—was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and died in Bournemouth, England, at age eighty-one. Over the course of those eight decades, the world changed in almost unimaginable ways. Tolkien was almost twelve years old when the Wright Brothers flew the first heavier-than-air craft in 1903; four years before he died, men had walked on the Moon. He was born in the waning years of the Victorian age and died along with the hippie era. Not only did he fight in the War to End All Wars, he lived through the one after that as well, witnessing the transition from cavalry to atomic bombs. He was born into a world without movies, radio, or television. He saw empires crumble: not only the slow dissolution of the British Empire but the dissection of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires and the overthrow of Czarist Russia; he also witnessed the rise of communism in Eastern Europe and of fascism in Italy and Germany between the wars.

Yet while the world hurtled forward into the future, embracing modernism and sweeping away the debris of the ancien régime, Tolkien stood with his eyes firmly fixed on the past. Not just the recent past, not the world of the Industrial Revolution or even the Age of Enlightenment: Tolkien looked to the Middle Ages, to the era when Northern Europe had only recently turned Christian and people still told stories whose roots reached down to pagan times. Beowulf’s battle with Grendel was more interesting to him than the squabbles between the American Eagle and the Russian Bear, even if the latter might end the world with nuclear warfare instead of merely putting a stop to the cannibalization of a minor king’s army.

Tolkien spent three-quarters of his life as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, a life that most people idealize as an “ivory tower,” removed from the hustle and bustle of the “real world” of politics, sex, manual labor, housekeeping, and balancing the checkbook. All of these things occur in academia, except perhaps the manual labor (although someone who has just lugged twenty-five overdue books from the parking lot on one side of campus to the university library on the other might challenge that). Nonetheless, while the bulk of Tolkien’s life was a life of the mind, his early years were challenging and verged on the tragic.

Tolkien was born in South Africa because his father, unable to make enough money in England, had taken a job in the Lloyd’s Bank branch in Bloemfontein in order to be able to marry. Arthur Tolkien had loved life in the frontier-town environment of South Africa, but Mabel Suffield, his bride, was less than thrilled with the heat, dust, and petty gossip of colonial life. Furthermore, Arthur showed every sign of having been what in today’s world would be called a workaholic; his intentions were good, but every time it seemed he might be able to take a little time off for family affairs, some job-related emergency intervened. For a man of middle-class background and no social connections, he had to prove himself by being the man on the spot at all times.

By the time Ronald (as he was known in the family) was three and his younger brother Hilary was one, Mabel realized that if the Tolkien and Suffields backs in Birmingham, England, were ever going
to see the newest additions to the family, she would have to take the boys back for a visit herself. Mabel and the boys sailed in late 1895, with Arthur promising to follow as soon as the latest crisis had been resolved. However, a hemorrhage resulting from an acute bout of rheumatic fever carried him off suddenly in February, 1896.

Mabel was left a widow with only a small pension to support herself and her sons. Both her family and Arthur’s had been bankrupted in the boom-and-bust economy of late nineteenth century Britain, and she could not rely on them for anything more than sporadic assistance. More to the point, Mabel was a very independent woman. Before her marriage, Mabel had worked as a governess, she and her sisters had undertaken missionary work in the harem of the Sultan of Zanzibar, and she had sailed to South Africa to marry Arthur completely on her own. She had the emotional resources to be a single mother; money was the problem.

She began by moving out of the city of Birmingham to a village on its outskirts called Sarehole Mill, where she rented a small cottage. The two boys played in the surrounding fields, bothered the miller by horsing around on dangerous equipment, and stole mushrooms from an enraged farmer. Yet, as middle-class urbanites, the Tolkien family never really fitted into local society in an agricultural world of laborers, artisans, and gentry. As the boys grew older, they received their first school lessons from their mother. She taught them to read and do simple arithmetic and introduced them to Latin and French, the standard foreign languages that anyone who hoped to be educated had to know in the nineteenth century.

Ronald was fascinated with languages. Not only did learning to read open up the world of books to him, but he also loved the very structure of language, the differences in pronunciation and vocabulary between his urban relatives and the Warwickshire natives around him, the way adjectives go before the noun in English and after the noun in French, the concepts of declensions and conjugations. What most spoke to him — literally — was the sound of language, its musicality. He also liked the stories you could tell with language. He devoured cowboy-and-Indian adventures of the American West, the folk tales collected in Andrew Lang’s Color Fairy anthologies, and the literary fairy tales of George MacDonald and other late Victorian writers. What he especially liked were stories about dragons.

Tolkien always remembered Sarehole Mill as the most idyllic era of his childhood and frankly stated that the Shire and its hobbit inhabitants were based on these golden memories. In 1900, however, things began to change. First of all, he was enrolled in King Edward’s School in Birmingham, which his father had attended. Second, his mother converted to Catholicism. In turn-of-the-century England, this was a decision that had enormous social consequences. Catholicism was the religion of the Enemy (an ill-defined Other, French or Spanish or just disturbingly “Continental,” an attitude dating back to the religious turmoil of the Tudor era three centuries previously) and of the servant class (many of whom were Irish in those days). It was not the religion of nice, middle-class widows. Respectable people tended to convert in the other direction, toward the more independent-minded Protestant sects of Baptists, Methodists, and Unitarians. Catholicism was viewed with suspicion because its adherents were perceived as giving up their freedom of thought and faith to the dictates of the Pope. The English way of religion was to emphasize the personal, private relationship between the individual and God, not to interpose the mediation of priests and of public ritual.

Whatever financial assistance Mabel had been receiving from her family stopped. Her parents and most of her relatives ceased to speak to her. Mabel decided that it would be best to move back into Birmingham, to be closer to both her new church and Ronald’s school. Their first house, however, turned out to be condemned property and they had to move yet again; hardly a propitious return to urban living after the peace and charm of Sarehole. Then Mabel
discovered the Birmingham Oratory, a Catholic church founded by John, Cardinal Newman, one of the prime movers in the resurgence of Catholicism in mid-Victorian England; one of the priests attached to the oratory, Father Francis Morgan, became a close family friend.

Father Morgan was part Welsh and part Spanish — his family had made a fortune importing sherry — and he helped Mabel to rent a house owned by the oratory and enroll her sons in the oratory school. Unfortunately, while the house was a great improvement, the school was not, at least for Ronald, who was already showing enormous promise as a scholar. (Hilary was never much of an academic, and after finishing school and serving in World War I, he wound up as the happy owner of a small fruit farm.) Ronald managed to win a scholarship to go back to the academically superior King Edward’s School, and after several years of unsettled home, school, and religion, it seemed that the Tolkien family had found their equilibrium.

Stress was taking its toll on Mabel, however. After months of weakness and faintness, she was diagnosed with diabetes. At this time, treatment options for diabetes were almost nonexistent; insulin had not yet been discovered. Within a year, she was dead. For the rest of his life, Tolkien blamed his mother’s death on the financial and emotional stress she suffered as a result of her conversion to Catholicism and her consequent rejection by her family. As a result, he regarded his Catholic faith as being as much a sign of loyalty to her as a matter of personal belief. Tolkien may have intuitively hit on the right track: Recent medical research indicates that psychological stress has an enormously deleterious effect on blood sugar levels and can trigger the onset of diabetes in people who already have a genetic predisposition for it.

Ronald and Hilary were thus left orphans at the ages of twelve and ten. Suspicious of her family’s intentions regarding her sons’ religious affiliation, Mabel had named Father Morgan as their guardian rather than any of their relatives. In many ways, this was a very wise move, as Father Morgan had a substantial fortune of his own and was willing to supplement the boys’ meager inheritance in order to give them a decent standard of living. On the other hand, he lived at the Birmingham Oratory and therefore was not able to actually make a home for the boys. It was necessary to find a place for them to board. At first they went to live with an aunt who had recently been widowed and who had no interest in where the Tolkiens went to church. Unfortunately, she turned out not have much interest in anything; she was, if anything, more numbed by grief than Ronald and Hilary. After nearly three years, Father Morgan finally realized that the boys were not unhappy simply because their mother had died, they were just plain unhappy living with their Aunt Beatrice. He found them rooms in another house, conveniently located near the oratory, run by a Mrs. Faulkner. There was another lodger in the house as well, a young woman two years older than Ronald named Edith Bratt.

Ronald’s schooling was going well — after his return to King Edward’s, he settled in to become one of the star pupils and he made friends with a cadre of like-minded boys, young men with literary aspirations who were destined to attend university (hardly a sure thing in those days) and who aspired to make names for themselves as poets. Along with three other boys, Tolkien formed the core of a group that called itself the Tea Club, Barrovian Society or T.C.B.S. The name derived from the fact that the group began as a club of senior boys who had responsibility for running the school library and who took advantage of the fact to brew unauthorized tea and nibble on forbidden biscuits. Eventually, the theater of operations was expanded to include the tea room at Barrow’s Stores, a department store in the center of Birmingham. Although membership in this informal group fluctuated, the core members of Christopher Wiseman, R. Q. Gilson (the son of King Edward’s headmaster), G. B. Smith, and Tolkien himself stuck together even after they finished school, drawn together by their literary and academic ambitions. Tolkien regarded
the T.C.B.S. as their own version of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the group of artists and poets that included Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris. The T.C.B.S., like King Edward’s school, was an by default an all-male group.

Public school education in Britain (what would be called private school in the United States) in the early twentieth century was rooted in a tradition of classical education that emphasized the learning of Latin and Greek and all the things written in those languages: classical literature and philosophy, the history and geography of the ancient world. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the curriculum widened to include more modern history, especially in its political and military aspects (many of the boys in public schools would be going on to become officers in the armed forces), some basic science, useful modern languages such as French, and the important literature of the English language, which at this time was considered to be pretty much limited to Shakespeare and poetry. It was an education aimed at creating gentry: men who could run the government, manage large estates, rule the empire, and chat among themselves.

Tolkien’s teachers soon noticed that he had a particular facility for languages. Not only could he learn them relatively easily, he was interested in learning about the history of language, a field of study known as philology. One of his teachers loaned him a grammar of Old English, the language spoken in England from about 600-1100 A.D., and another encouraged him to study general linguistics. A friend who had somehow picked up a copy of a grammar of Gothic, the language of the barbarians who had caused the fall of Rome, sold the book to Tolkien, and thus he began investigating the earliest attested Germanic language. He read translations of epics like the Old English poem Beowulf and the Middle English Arthurian romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

In contrast to his impeccable public life at school, Ronald Tolkien’s private life was, by the standards of the time, bordering on scandalous.

In addition to his tea parties with the boys of the T.C.B.S., he was also frequenting the teashops of Birmingham with Edith Brett. The friendship between the two began in simple propinquity; Edith and the Tolkien boys conspired to wheedle extra food from the Faulkner’s cook, which they hauled up to their rooms through the windows in a basket.

But Ronald and Edith had unhappy childhoods in common as well. Edith was the illegitimate daughter of an upper-middle-class woman who had raised her daughter on her own and encouraged her musical talents, but died before Edith had finished school. In a way, Ronald and Edith’s mothers had been similar in their independence and determination to raise their children without masculine assistance. Edith had hoped to become a professional pianist, either playing concerts or giving lessons. However, by the time she met the Tolkiens, her professional chances were fading, and Mrs. Faulkner, who had a reputation for being “musical,” turned out to have little patience for listening to her boarder practice scales. Edith must have felt that she was at a loose end, merely marking time while waiting for an uncertain future to materialize. Edith and Ronald apparently spent much of their time over tea sharing their most emotional wounds, and falling in love.

The fact that the two were living under the same roof was the source of possible scandal which caused Father Morgan to separate Ronald from Edith. When rumors of the love affair reached him, he removed the Tolkien boys to another boarding house and forbade Ronald to see Edith. However, since that boarding house was still in the same neighborhood, the two lovers could not help but run into each other occasionally. Ultimately, Edith decided to move to Cheltenham, where she had friends who had offered to take her in, and Father Morgan forbade Ronald to have any contact with her until he had turned twenty-one and was no longer under his guardianship. In the meantime, Ronald had gone to take the entrance exam for
Oxford University and in the *Sturm und Drang* of his emotional life, failed to obtain a scholarship; in his reduced circumstances, he could not afford to attend without this financial aid. All the same, failing the exam on the first sitting was not uncommon, and he could try again the next year.

The second time was the charm, and Tolkien won an exhibition — financial aid worth slightly less than a full scholarship — to Exeter College at Oxford University. He began majoring (or as the British call it, “reading”) the classics course, called “Greats.” However, after taking his first set of exams, it was clear that his classics, while good, were not outstanding, but his grasp of philology, which he had taken as an elective, was “pure alpha,” the best grade possible. His advisors suggested that he switch from classics to English, which was the department that taught philology and all the other ancient languages that so intrigued him, and Tolkien’s academic career was set. In addition to the Germanic languages of Old English and Middle English, Gothic, and Old Norse, he also studied Welsh (a language that had intrigued him since before his mother had died) and Finnish (a non-Indo-European language). The latter two languages entranced him with their musicality and became the basis for his two Elvish languages of Sindarin and Quenya. In the process of studying the linguistics of all these languages, Tolkien also read much of their mythology, since often some of the earliest narrative written down in a language is myth.

At 12:01 a.m. on the night of January 3, 1913 — the instant he turned twenty-one — Tolkien wrote to Edith Bratt asking her to marry him. He was shocked to receive a letter in return confessing that she had become engaged to someone else, but the tone of the letter suggested that she had done so because she had given up hope of Tolkien continuing to care for her after so long a separation. He took practically the next train to Cheltenham and convinced her otherwise, and the two became engaged. However, there was now the somewhat contentious matter of religion to consider. Tolkien was adamant that Edith convert to Catholicism, the religion he clung to as much in memory of his mother as out of religious conviction. (In later life Tolkien’s Catholicism evolved into much more of an intellectual and spiritual adherence, but at this time of his life it seems to have been primarily an emotional commitment for him.) Edith was not attracted to Catholicism and was apprehensive about the negative consequences of converting; Tolkien, who considered that his mother had been martyred for her faith, was not particularly sympathetic. After a great deal of negotiating and a few major fights, Edith finally converted. And then World War I began.

Tolkien was months from graduating, and while most of his classmates were enlisting with enthusiasm, without regard for the consequences, Tolkien was not so anxious to abandon his potential career and his fiancée. He enrolled in a program that allowed him to finish his degree and train as an officer in the Lancashire Fusiliers at the same time. In March, 1916, Tolkien and Edith were married, and in June, he shipped to France.

Almost immediately his battalion became embroiled in the Battle of the Somme. Gilson and Smith, two of his friends from the T.C.B.S., died in the battle, which stretched from July to November with little military advantage to show for it. Tolkien became inured to the routine of mud, filth, and boredom, interspersed with moments of mud, filth, and terror. The Somme was one of the battles that gave World War I its reputation for criminal mismanagement. Soldiers were sent into battle weighed down with packs overladen with gear that slowed them down and made them targets for snipers. They were assured that the barbed wire that crisscrossed the battlefield had been cut when, in fact, it had been pounded by mortar barrage into an impenetrable hedge that trapped them, to be mowed down by both the enemy and their own short-falling shells. For decades after the war was over, skeletal remains were still turning up in the yearly plowing
of farmland that had served as battlefield. The one certain outcome of the war was that it turned much of France and Belgium into a wasteland corrupt with the decay of human flesh.

Tolkien somehow managed to survive the actual engagements that his battalion was sent into, but he fell victim to the other scourge of the war, trench fever. This was an illness transmitted by parasites such as rats and fleas—both endemic in the trenches—which caused bone-rattling fever and tremors, followed by a debilitating lassitude. Those who came down with severe cases could barely summon the energy to move. Tolkien was sent back to England to recuperate in November, 1916, and spent the rest of the war in and out of the hospital. Edith, while glad that her husband had returned in one piece—a rarity in that war, as many survivors still managed to lose a body part or two along the way—eventually became exasperated with following him from one hospital to another, up and down the country. She had also become pregnant with the couple’s first child, who was born at the end of 1917.

While recuperating in the hospital, Tolkien began to amuse and distract himself from the horrors he had been through by constructing an imaginary world that he called Middle-earth. In part he was inspired by the artistic aspirations he had shared with his T.C.B.S. friends, feeling compelled by Gilson and Smith’s deaths to carry on his art in their memory much as he had felt compelled by his mother’s death to carry on in his religion. But he had also just finished four intensive years of studying the languages and mythologies of medieval Northern Europe, and he was now in a position to play with this learning. He had already started developing the languages that became Elvish, a game of constructing secret languages that he had played since his early childhood, and now he took the process one step further to construct a world for those languages to inhabit and a mythology for them to tell.

After the war finally ended and Tolkien was discharged from the army, he and his new family returned to Oxford. He was able to get a job working on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which at that point was up to “W.” He was set the task of not only defining his words but also researching their etymology. In addition, he began picking up work as a tutor for the students who were slowly returning to the university (nearly one third of the students who had been enrolled at the university during the war had been killed). He began to realize that not only was he trained to be a teacher, but he also really liked it and was good at it. When a job in the relatively new English department at the University of Leeds, in Northern England, came up in 1920, he applied. Somewhat to his surprise— for he was still a very young scholar with little reputation—he got the job.

Leeds was good to the Tolkiens. Edith was not particularly happy in Oxford, where she felt out of her intellectual depth. Two more children were born while the family lived in Leeds. Furthermore, after a year or so another member of the English department was hired, E. V. Gordon, whom Tolkien had tutored at Oxford. The two became close friends and collaborated on an edition of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which quickly became a standard text for university students studying the language. Tolkien was also given a great deal of latitude by the head of his department, George Gordon (no relation of E. V.), to develop his own curriculum for teaching the “language” side of the department. Tolkien developed a series of courses that emphasized not only the linguistics of the languages, but also reading and appreciating these texts as literature, as stories that had meaning for their audiences and not just as dry treasure-chests of archaic verb forms and references to lost pagan practices, which was the standard approach at the time. In 1924, Tolkien was made a full professor of English Language, one of the youngest professors in Britain. It seemed that Tolkien was set to spend a long and prosperous academic career at Leeds.
Tolkien and Lewis became the focal point of an informal group of friends that called themselves the Inklings, meeting once or twice a week in Lewis’s rooms or in a local pub called the Eagle and Child (or more informally, the Bird and Baby) to read aloud works in progress and receive critique from the group. Although the membership varied greatly over time, it was always exclusively male (like the T.C.B.S., which it somewhat resembled); members included Owen Barfield, a London lawyer who wrote several books on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner; Hugo Dyson, who taught English at Reading University and had been instrumental, along with Tolkien, in convincing Lewis of the truth of Christianity; R. E. Hayard, the medical doctor for both the Tolkienians and the Lewises; Warren Lewis, Jack’s brother; Charles Williams, who worked at the Oxford University Press and wrote strange, mystical thrillers; and, toward the end, Tolkien’s third son, Christopher.

One of the pieces that Tolkien brought to the group was a story he had written down after telling it to his children, which he called The Hobbit. The Inklings, especially Lewis, were charmed by it, but Tolkien might never have gotten around to doing anything more with the story had not a friend of a former student, a woman who now worked for the publishing firm of Allen and Unwin, heard about it and asked to see the manuscript. Seeing its potential, she passed it on to her boss, Stanley Unwin, who asked his ten-year-old son Rayner to read it and give his opinion. Rayner Unwin was unequivocally enthusiastic (and in his written report to his father showed an early grasp of the realities of the publishing business, giving not only his professional opinion as a child but also identifying the age group to whom it should be marketed), and the firm approached Tolkien about publication.

The Hobbit was published in September, 1937, and was quickly heralded as a new children’s classic. Allen and Unwin were eager to follow up the success with a sequel and asked Tolkien for a “new
Hobbit. Tolkien showed them a number of other children's stories that he had written and illustrated for his family, but none were about hobbits. Then he sent along the massive and disorganized accumulation of pieces about the earlier ages of Middle-earth (material that after Tolkien's death became The Silmarillion); Allen and Unwin had no idea what to do with it. It was left that Tolkien would think about a new story — which must contain hobbits! — and get back to them.

He began working, off and on amidst all his other academic commitments, on another story that started and stopped, went in one direction and then screeched to a halt, took up again after a number of months, or years, but slowly congealed as a decidedly darker tale than the lighthearted Hobbit. Although he was often concerned that what he was writing was not what Allen and Unwin had in mind, by the beginning of World War II, Tolkien was convinced that what he was writing was what he needed to be writing for his own artistic succor if nothing else. He struggled throughout the war to conclude the tale that grew longer and longer, taking on a life of its own as characters and subplots sprang out of the underbrush of his mind. Finally, in 1949, the manuscript was finished.

Due to a series of misunderstandings, miscommunications, and hurt feelings, it was another five years before The Lord of the Rings was finally published. Part of the problem was the sheer size of the work, which Tolkien insisted could not be cut. He made an attempt to get out of his commitment to Allen and Unwin and publish the book with Collins, but then became disillusioned with Collins's plans for the book and had to re-ingratiate himself with Allen and Unwin. The size of the manuscript was a problem, as it was extremely expensive to produce. Finally Allen and Unwin came to an agreement with Tolkien that, rather than establishing a schedule of author's royalties (a percentage of the retail price of each book sold), the publisher and the author would split the profits 50-50; this way Allen and Unwin had a better chance of recouping their production expenses, although, if

the books sold very well, they would not make as much profit as they might have under a conventional contract. The first two volumes, The Fellowship of the Ring and The Two Towers, were published in 1954, but the third volume, The Return of the King, was delayed for a year while Tolkien worked on, but failed to produce, appendices with further background on Middle-earth and its languages.

The Lord of the Rings got generally good reviews and seemed set to become a cult favorite. Tolkien, meanwhile, continued his life of teaching and research and often made a desultory start toward compiling and organizing his Silmarillion material. He had become the Merton Professor of Language and Literature in 1945, where he remained until his retirement in 1959. He enjoyed corresponding with his fans, taking great care to explain the personal philosophy underlying his work and its relationship to the mythologies of Europe. By the end of his academic career, his colleagues often suspected that his work on this odd project of his had distracted him from the kind of brilliant publication record usually expected of professors in his position, but he had still produced enough ground-breaking work (particularly his essay on Beowulf: "The Monsters and the Critics") to justify himself, and his reputation as a teacher was outstanding. Furthermore, his influence on the revised English curriculum, which had been adopted in the early 1930's, was a testament to his teaching philosophy that outlived the teacher himself.

In 1965, this quiet life took an unexpected turn. It began because of a loophole in the contract between Tolkien's English and American publishers which allowed a pirated paperback edition of The Lord of the Rings to be published in the United States without Tolkien's consent (and without him earning any money from the sales). The American publishers, Houghton Mifflin, did their best to get an authorized paperback version into stores, but because they had to include Tolkien's cut in the retail price, it was more expensive than the pirated Ace Books edition. Tolkien took advantage of the good will he
had built up over years of corresponding with his fans to spread the word of his predicament, and a backlash against the Ace edition built up and, more importantly, became news. This inadvertent publicity helped to fuel a tidal wave of interest in the books, and *The Lord of the Rings* became not just a cult classic but a worldwide publishing phenomenon.

Ace may have been somewhat dishonest in bringing out their edition, but their choice of book to pirate was astute, if only in seeing that the time was ripe for Tolkien’s kind of fantasy. Middle-earth struck a chord with young baby boomers disenchanted with the Establishment; Sauron and Mordor and the War of the Ring seemed like an appropriate metaphor for the war in Vietnam, and Tolkien’s theme of the power of the little guy to effect the downfall of an evil empire echoed the “Power to the People” mentality of the times. Suddenly, Tolkien’s unusual revenue-sharing arrangement with Allen and Unwin became the source of unexpected wealth and ease after a lifetime of economic hardship. However, his multitudes of fans also became intrusive in his retiring way of life: He no longer could answer every letter, and phone calls in the middle of the night from fans who did not take time zones into account made his life miserable until he got an unlisted number.

In 1967, the Tolkiens moved to Bournemouth, a seaside resort that Edith loved. She had never been very happy in Oxford, and this move was Tolkien’s concession to her now that they had the money to indulge themselves. He continued to putter away at *The Silmarillion*, but the stories had become so dear to his heart that he seems to have succumbed to the common authorial failing of being unwilling to finish a manuscript because he was reluctant to give up the story; the Silmarillion cycle of myth had given his life its purpose since the days of World War I. Edith died in 1971, and Tolkien moved back to rooms at Merton College in Oxford, where he died in 1973. He named his son Christopher his literary executor, and under the younger Tolkien’s editorial guidance the mass of manuscripts that his father had left behind were slowly organized and published, offering an increasingly deep background to the four volumes on Middle-earth that Tolkien published during his life.

Although his colleagues may have been nonplussed by Tolkien’s literary career – Oxford professors were supposed to write mysteries if they wandered into the realms of genre fiction – his bent for fantasy was not so odd as it may have appeared. Tolkien had become a scholar almost by default. He was good at and interested in languages; he attended a public school that expected its best students to attend university; he did not have any particular talent or passion for commerce or any other type of profession. However, during his school days, his ambitions were all literary. He and his friends envisioned themselves as poets and writers, men with an artistic vision and the passion and commitment to communicate it. Even though Tolkien discovered his talents as a teacher fairly early in his career, when it came to writing, his default setting was always for poetry and fiction.

While as an English professor he claimed to disdain the type of literary criticism that relied on knowledge of an author’s life to explain his work (which is a reasonable stance to take when your area of expertise is a corpus of works nearly all written by Anonymous), there are several obvious correlations between Tolkien’s life experiences and themes that recur in his work. For instance, both Tolkien’s parents and he and Edith were separated in mid-courtship by the intervention of parents or guardians and had to struggle to be reunited, a theme that is echoed in Tolkien’s tales of Beren and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion* and Aragorn and Arwen in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is impossible to overlook the similarities between the wastelands that surround Mordor, where Sam Gamgee finds himself enmeshed in the skeletons of long-dead soldiers from the last war, and the desolate battlefields of both world wars.
Likewise, one of Tolkien's aims was to create a mythology for England, a thing he found lacking. The mythologies of Great Britain were segregated by age and ethnicity into the Celtic myths of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland; the echoes of Germanic mythology in poems such as *Beowulf*, which is written in Old English in a single English manuscript but takes place on the Continent; and the Arthurian mythology of the Middle Ages, which spans the Celtic and English-speaking regions of Britain but is also seminal to French and German medieval literature and thus cannot be regarded as purely English.

Creating Middle-earth and its languages was to some extent play for Tolkien, but he also used the understanding of mythology that he gained through his scholarship as the seed and structure for his new mythology. Middle-earth was his academic life's work; instead of using his research simply to analyze what had already been written, he used it to write new myths altogether.

Tolkien proudly called himself a philologist. It is a field of which most people are ignorant today and which was regarded with a certain amount of disdain in his own day, but it had been both popular and fashionable in the nineteenth century. Literally, philology means "love of knowledge." More specifically, the knowledge that it loved was the history and etymology of words.

The discipline can be said to have started at the very end of the eighteenth century, when Sir William Jones, in an address to the Bengal Society of Calcutta in 1786, suggested that Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit all evolved from the same root language, and that the Germanic and Celtic languages probably belonged to this "family" as well. Thus was born the notion of an "Indo-European" family of languages, usually illustrated in genealogical format in the end-papers of dictionaries. More importantly, the comparative study of the Indo-European languages led to the discovery that there were systematic changes that occurred both within a language as it evolved and between languages; the degree of difference between two languages was an indication of how closely or distantly they were related.

This discovery opened up the possibilities for the accurate translation of ancient languages to an unbelievable degree. The problem