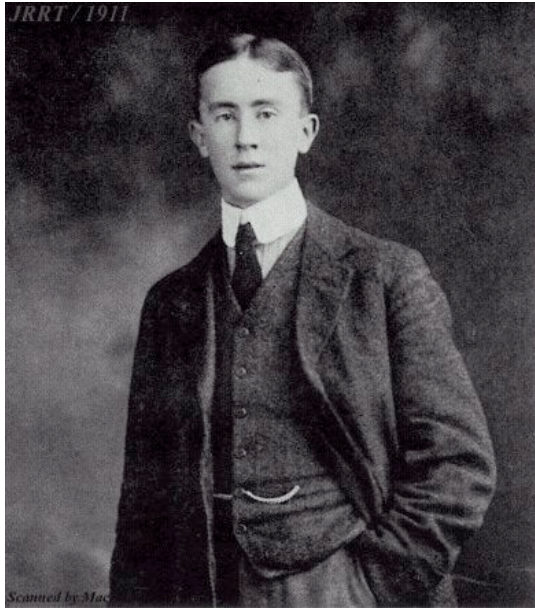


Introducing J. R. R. Tolkien



*John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) was a major scholar of the English language, specialising in Old and Middle English. Twice Professor of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) at the University of Oxford, he also wrote a number of stories, including most famously *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), which are set in a pre-historic era in an invented version of the world which he called by the Middle English name of Middle-earth.*

His Life

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, as he was christened, was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 1892. His early and barely memorable years were spent divided between the city and a country farm. His father, an English banker, was making efforts to establish a branch in that country. Many of Tolkien's early memories of South Africa and are reported to have influenced his later works.

He left South Africa to return to England with his mother and his brother, Hilary. His father, Arthur, was supposed also to return to England within the next few months. However, Arthur Tolkien died of rheumatic fever while still in South Africa. This left the grieving family in relatively dire straits and on a very limited income. They soon moved to Birmingham, England, so that young Tolkien could attend King Edward VI school.

His mother, Mabel, converted to Catholicism and the religion would have a long lasting effect on young Tolkien. The family was befriended by the Parish Priest, Father Francis Morgan, who would see the Tolkiens through some troubled times.

An avid reader, Tolkien was influenced by some of the great writers of his day including G.K. Chesterton and H.G. Wells. It was during this period of financial hardship, but intellectual stimulation that Tolkien suffered the loss of his devoted mother. She succumbed to diabetes in 1904 when Tolkien was only 12 years of age. Father Morgan took over as his guardian, placing him first with an aunt and then at a boarding house for orphans. It was at this boarding house, at the age of 16 that he would meet and fall in love with Edith Bratt. Naturally, their relationship was frowned upon. Tolkien and Edith were caught in affectionate circumstances - they bicycled together out to the countryside surrounding the city and had a picnic.

Throughout his life, Tolkien had cultivated a love of language, especially ancient languages. At Oxford he would major in philology, which is the study of words and language. He would be much influenced by Icelandic, Norse and Gothic mythology. Even some of the characters and place names he would later develop would be drawn from the names from ancient sagas. The forest of Mirkwood, which played a prominent roll in both *The Hobbit* and in "*The Lord of the Rings*" was borrowed from Icelandic mythology. The names of many of the dwarves in *The Hobbit* were actual placenames in the myths.

While still attending college, he looked up his lost love, Edith Bratt, and proposed marriage. She had accepted a proposal from another, but in the end was persuaded to return to Tolkien. They would marry in 1916.

World War I, the war to end all wars, came in 1914. It would forever mark the end of many of the Empires of Europe and would unleash death across the European Continent. Tolkien lost many of his friends in the war, and he himself would serve as an officer on the front lines at the Battle of the Somme. He caught trench fever in 1917 and was sent

back to England to recuperate. He would not see front line service again.

Throughout his schooldays he had been a determined poet and scholar. His interest in language was such that he had even developed his own languages based loosely on Finnish and Welsh. It was while recuperating in Birmingham, with his wife at his side, that he began to create a mythology behind his languages. This work would one day result in his famous novels.

It was about this time that Tolkien was blessed with the first of his four children. After the war he was offered a professorship at the University of Leeds. Besides lecturing, he continued work on his mythology. He felt that he, in a sense, was creating England's mythology. In 1925 Tolkien with a colleague published a translation and analysis of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." It was a turning point in his career. It brought him notice at Oxford where he was offered the professorship of Anglo-Saxon.

The Hobbit, the work that would make him famous, came out in 1936. He began it one evening while grading exam papers. Seated at his desk, he opened up an exam novellet to find the first page blank. He was surprised and pleased that the student had somehow entirely skipped the page. It seemed an invitation to write, and in that space he began his work on The Hobbit.

The finished manuscript of The Hobbit fell into the hands of George Allen and Unwin, Publishers. Unwin paid his own ten year old son a shilling to read the story and report on its publishability. The young man lavished praise on the novel, and Unwin decided to take a risk on it.

The Hobbit soon became a best seller and made Professor Tolkien famous. He was already well-known as a scholar for his work in Philology, and he was also part of a group of friends who called themselves the Inklings. The centre of this group was C.S. Lewis who would long be one of Tolkien's best friends and admirers.

In the late 1930's Tolkien began writing the "Lord of the Rings". Work on the story would go on for ten and a half years. He gave first chance at publication to Allen & Unwin, the publishers of The Hobbit. But it was rejected by a staff editor when Unwin was away on business in France. The younger "Unwin" was now in the family publishing business. He found out about the rejected manuscript, wrote to his father in France, requesting permission to take on the project. Recalling the success of The Hobbit, but sceptical about a "hobbit novel" written for adults, he acquiesced to his son's request reluctantly.

"The Lord of the Rings" was published in three parts and would become a huge publishing success.

Fame and fortune were both a blessing and a bane for Tolkien. He enjoyed the popularity of his work. Yet, he was burdened with work responding to his adoring public. After his retirement at Oxford, he and his wife Edith moved to Bournemouth in 1966. Edith died in 1971. The loss of his life's companion did not sit well with Tolkien; yet he struggled on for some two years till his death of Pneumonia on 2 September 1973.



Introducing the novel *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*

The Hobbit, or There and Back Again, the prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*, was originally published by Allen & Unwin on September 21, 1937. According to Tolkien scholar Douglas A. Anderson, its first printing was small—only 1,500 copies. Published in hardback with 10 black-and-white illustrations and two maps furnished by the author himself, *The Hobbit* garnered positive reviews and, as its publisher, Stanley Unwin, predicted, led to a public demand for more stories about hobbits.

And so began the novel that brought an Oxford professor from the relative obscurity of academe to a larger world. Early reviews were positive, heralding great expectations from a new storyteller who showed great promise.

From *The New Statesman & Nation*: “*His wholly original story of adventure among goblins, elves and dragons...gives...the impression of a well-informed glimpse into the life of a wide other-world; a world wholly real, and with a quite matter-of-fact, supernatural natural history of its own.*”

Echoing *The New Statesman*, *The Observer* commented: “*Professor Tolkien’s finely written saga of dwarves and elves, fearsome goblins and trolls, in a spacious country of far-off and long ago...a full-length tale of traditional magic being...an exciting epic of travel, magical adventure... working up to a devastating climax.*”

The Times (of London) called it “*a solidly delightful novel*” and “*a fascinating excursion into the early English scene.*”

The best, and most accurate, assessment of *The Hobbit* came from Tolkien’s friend C.S. Lewis, who rightly concluded, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Oct. 2, 1937), that “*Its place is with Alice, Flatland, Phantastes, The Wind in the Willows.... [The] prediction is dangerous: but The Hobbit may well prove a classic.*” C.S. Lewis was right. *The Hobbit* not only proved to be a classic, a novel beloved by generations of readers, but a bestseller as well—a novel that continues to sell at a brisk pace, in more than 40 languages worldwide. As Douglas A. Anderson affirmed in his introduction to *The Annotated Hobbit*, “*There is no doubt that The Hobbit is a worldwide classic, for all ages, and all times.*”

As a novel, *The Hobbit* holds its own as an engaging story well worth reading, but when read before tackling *The Lord of the Rings*,

The Hobbit establishes a framework for the larger work to follow and whets the appetite for more information about hobbits, Middle-earth, and those who dwell therein: wizards, elves, dwarves, trolls, and the minions of evil.

Though *The Hobbit* is an entertaining story - a well-told tale, albeit with a juvenile flavour because of Tolkien’s habit of addressing the reader directly - its story elements lay the groundwork for what would follow: *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Hobbit* we learn how the One Ring came to Bilbo Baggins, who in turn would give it to his nephew, Frodo. We also learn about Gollum, who plays a pivotal role in the long tale that follows, and we meet the wizard Gandalf, who assumes an even more significant role as the war for Middle-earth clouds the horizon.

J. R. R. Tolkien on *The Hobbit*

“If you care for journeys there and back, out of the comfortable Western world, over the edge of the Wild, and home again, and can take an interest in a humble hero (blessed with a little wisdom and a little courage and considerable good luck), here is the record of such a journey and such a traveler. The period is the ancient time between the age of Faerie and the dominion of men, when the famous forest of Mirkwood was still standing, and the mountains were full of danger. In following the path of this humble adventurer, you will learn by the way (as he did)—if you do not already know all about these things—much about trolls, goblins, dwarves, and elves, and get some glimpses into the history and politics of a neglected but important period.

“For Mr. Bilbo Baggins visited notable persons; conversed with the dragon, Smaug the Magnificent; and was present, rather unwillingly, at the Battle of Five Armies. This is all the more remarkable, since he was a hobbit. Hobbits have hitherto been passed over in history and legend, perhaps because they as a rule preferred comfort to excitement. But this account, based on his personal memoirs, of the one exciting year in the otherwise quiet life of Mr. Baggins will give you a fair idea of this estimable people, now (it is said) becoming rather rare. They do not like noise.”