

A WAGNER STORY ALSO?

Review by Ryder W Miller

Tolkien and Wagner: *The Ring and Der Ring* by Christopher MacLachlan. Zurich & Jena: Walking Tree Publishers: 2012. Paper, available on amazon.com for \$24.30.

There are a lot of stories together that tell Tolkien's life and put him into historical and literary perspective. There is his childhood in South Africa and the spider of debatable influence that bit him there. There are his war days where after the Great War he was left with almost no friends. There is his sojourn into old British literature and myth that helped shape his Middle-earth. There are his times and trials as a scholar and critic. He also mythologized his relationship with his wife, even to having had written Beren and Lúthien on their tombstones. There was also a youthful editor he had to satisfy, and children to raise and entertain. Tolkien also convinced CS Lewis to accept Christianity as a mythology of Western Society that was true. Later there would be international fame and then fortune, but it was never fully agreed upon where all his stories came from. He called it "The Leaf Mould of the Mind" as he was influenced by life, colleagues, religion, myth, and fantasy literature.

His relationship to Richard Wagner (1813-1883) is also an interesting one and it is debatable if it was really one of the major stories of his life. Tolkien is quoted to have written in a letter that the Ring is not "der Nibelungen Ring" - Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (first performance: 1876) is not similar to *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). His words: "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases". (Letters 306) One imagines that Tolkien was trying to write something different even if he and Wagner were sharing some of the same mythological source material. In this book from Christopher MacLachlan, both Tolkien (1892-1973) and CS Lewis are on record as having seen *Der Ring des Nibelungen* together.¹ Wagner's operas were very famous during this time and it is likely that many who were familiar with *The Hobbit* (1937) remembered Wagner's operas. Tolkien also could not publish *The Silmarillion* (1977) (which would have explained much about the sources of *The Lord of the Rings*) in his lifetime. One of Tolkien's life stories is the pressure he was under after the success of *The Hobbit* to produce another fantasy book. This book became *The Lord of the Rings*, which wasn't all available for a generation after *The Hobbit*. The idea to bridge to link the two with the magic ring Bilbo found under the Misty Mountains was not immediately conceived by the author.

It is also not hard to imagine that those around Tolkien, his editors, publishers, writing colleagues, family, fans, had *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in the back of their minds in the process of inspiring Tolkien to create his masterpiece. Both share many of the same elements, archetypes, and motifs. They are also the wellspring from a somewhat common mythological past. One could say they both had some of the same contents in both of their "Leaf Mould of the Mind". Surely some along the way would have the same expectations of both works. There are bound to be some similar themes in the works that fit together for categories like epic fantasy.

MacLachlan's book is an in-depth treatment of this subject and it brings up subjects like whether or not Tolkien was plagiarizing Wagner. Tolkien would probably argue that he did different things with the source material. There seems to be a Tolkien story here which includes Wagner and others as contemporaries that were writing similar epic fantasies in the same literary tradition. Tolkien's canvas was wide and his works can be understood in traditions of fantasy, religious fiction, children's literature, and British mythology. One cannot argue after reading that book that there was some artistic overlap here. MacLachlan shows how some of the characters from each are similar to each other. One could write other books about the sources Tolkien shares and Wagner in this orbit is only an element in a wider story about Tolkien's influences.²

One should not forget that Tolkien as a soldier, scholar, and critic, fought against The Germans who adopted Wagner. It might even be fair to say that Tolkien was happy to have possibly supplanted him. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* has some heady subjects like the passing of the gods, the nature of evil, and maybe even creatures for a not so imagined past.

Tolkien was from the other side, and Middle-earth could be seen as a place to sojourn for a needed adventure. Bilbo may also be considered to have an English character, like also the other hobbits we meet, and here Tolkien is justifying the national perspective that was under an onslaught against those who criticized imperialism. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* could also be considered about growing up and getting back into contact with the English past. They are also books that foster bravery, confronting the young reader with a world out there that is dangerous, not to be ignored, and beyond one's control. Tolkien survived The Germans who unleashed some unbelievable horrors in their time and was in conflict with them for generations. From his denial it shows that Tolkien sought to write something different and succeeded. The major Tolkien life story in this regard seems to be his rejection of Wagner who sadly helped fuel some of the fires of the Nazis unknowingly. His heroes have been replaced by more contemporary ones. We will however not likely forget Wagner who wrote the "Bridal Chorus" which is still played as a processional in English-speaking countries.

NOTES

¹ [Tolkien and Lewis studied the libretti of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in preparation for the 1934 Cycle at Covent Garden, but there is some question as to whether they actually attended all four operas. (Chronology 788) Ed.]

² [Another study of Tolkien and Wagner is *Wagner and Tolkien: Mythmakers* by Renée Vink, also from Walking Tree. Ed.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Scull, Christina and Wayne G Hammond. *The JRR Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Tolkien, JRR. *The Letters of JRR Tolkien*, Selected and Edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.