

“SOMETHING HAS GONE CRACK”: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON J.R.R. TOLKIEN IN THE GREAT WAR

Review by Nancy Laney

“Something Has Gone Crack”: *New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War*, ed Janet Brennan Croft & Annika Röttinger, Comarë Series No. 41; Walking Tree Publishers, 2019. Paper, \$29.15. 6½ x 9¼" (15.5x23.4 cm), 388 pp. Cover: brown, with drawings of young soldier Tolkien with pipe, a "crack", and older civilian Tolkien with pipe.

Some months ago, it came to my attention that I knew zip about World War I. Oh, I am conversant in World War II, but aside from the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, I was totally at a loss. So, I got some books together and started in to correct my ignorance. After making a start at correcting my ignorance, Nancy Martsch [editor of "Beyond Bree"] asked for a volunteer to review this volume and I thought, why not? I'm already working on WWI, why not add some of my favorite professor into the mix? This might not have been my best idea but, having volunteered, I will complete my task.

To begin with, I will note that this book is a book for scholars about scholarly things. I am not a scholar, so I found pounding my way through sixteen scholarly papers a hard slog. Each paper was clearly written to stand on its own, so each author provided a summary of Tolkien's experiences in WWI, his objection to The Lord of the Rings being seen as an allegory, and the comparison of the Dead Marshes to the Somme. Further, almost every author included some degree of justification for going ahead and making links from WWI to LOTR despite the Professor's injunction. Individual papers ranged from quite interesting to a non-scholarly reader, to mildly interesting, through amusing, and finally to practically incomprehensible to one without the required specialized vocabulary. Some specifics:

The introduction contains an excellent timeline and detailed map, allowing the reader to follow in Tolkien's footsteps day by day across the French countryside. Some future scholar might improve reader understanding by taking this map and applying animations of Tolkien's movements in parallel with other actions to make a truly interactive experience.

Glenn E Peterson's "Strategic Blunders in the First Age Great Battles" takes Tolkien's injunction against allegory and kicks it out the window by literally comparing five battles of the First Age directly to battles of the World Wars. He even draws a direct parallel between Fëanor and General Sir Douglas Haig. I admit to chuckling at this level of audacity.

John Rosegrant's "Fault Lines Beneath the Crack" refers to Tolkien's statement after Rob Gilson's death, "...something has gone crack". He points out Tolkien's practice of stating emotional reactions as physical in his writings. He notes that Tolkien was susceptible "to physical ailments particularly at times of stress" and the rest of the paper digs into this linkage (including a table listing Tolkien's physical state vs. his military status from Oct. 1916 when he was diagnosed with Trench Fever to Nov. 1919 when he was awarded disability pay).

If you happen to be in East Yorkshire and are a Tolkien fan, I can heartily recommend Michael Flowers' "Tolkien in East Yorkshire, 1917-18: A Hemlock Glade, Two Towers, The Houses of Healing and a Beacon" for your walking tour. Who wouldn't want to see the glade where Lúthien danced for Beren? By the way, if someone does, please film it and post it where people can enjoy it.¹

Anna Smol's "Bodies in War: Medieval and Modern Tensions in "The Homecoming [of Beorhthoth Beorhthelm's Son]" is a terrific analysis of HBBS. The connection she makes to WWI is, in my opinion, tenuous but it does not detract from her overall scholarship about the play.

Lynn Schlesinger's "Angels of Care and Houses of Healing in World War I: Their Possible Influence on Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings" contains a brief but excellent history of women as nurses and other health care providers in the Great War. It also includes first-hand accounts which really brought the past to life.

Finally, Alicia Fox-Lenz's "Contemporary Reflections of War: Soldier-Servant Relationships in The Lord of the Rings and Downton Abbey" did a lovely job of explaining for a modern (and American) audience the Batman and his officer. I am not familiar with Downton Abbey, so the second half of the paper was lost on me, but I can recommend the first half.

In summary, while any compilation of Tolkien studies would be enhanced through purchase of this collection, the book is emphatically NOT intended for the non-scholarly audience. For me the interesting facts and new insights of some of the papers was not balanced by the discomfort of attempting to understand the ones I found incomprehensible.²

Notes

1 [It's a pity pictures couldn't be included in "Something Has Gone Crack", but, as per Note 3 p 122, Flowers has posted pictures and essays on his blog, www.eybirdwatching.blogspot.com A few photos were published in "Beyond Bree" July'17. Ed.]

2 Such as: "Unlike fantasy texts, by setting this gap in 'reality' modernist and realist works valorize and reinforce this sense of alien- ation by hailing the ultimate foreclosure of the subject's interiority." (p 240)

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