

Something Has Gone Crack: New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War

Edited by Janet Brennan Croft and
Annika Röttinger
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With the centenary marking the end of World War I just passing in 2019, the time was ripe for Walking Tree – the prolific publishers of the Cormarë Series – to commemorate the occasion with a volume focusing on Tolkien’s experience as a soldier, and of course as a war writer. As explained in the acknowledgements by series editor Peter Buchs, the original plan to host an international conference marking the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme in 2016, ideally in Northern France where Tolkien served, was substituted by the offer to organise a volume of essays on the topic of Tolkien and the Great War by editors Janet Brennan Croft and Annika Röttinger.

The subject has, of course, been explored before. Croft is a notable scholar in this area, having written the 2004 monograph *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* and edited the 2015 collection *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I*. Likewise, Röttinger brings her expertise in military history to the table. The most notable predecessor in this field is undoubtedly John Garth’s *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003), a celebrated work of scholarship and biography that tells the story of Tolkien’s early life and wartime experiences. While acknowledging that a certain amount of the way has been paved, Croft rightly notes in her introduction that even at the end of this volume the topic is ‘by no means exhausted’ and that:

There is still detective work to be done in discovering facts about [Tolkien’s] service and convalescence; there are themes and motifs still to be examined [...]; other works of scholarship in other fields may illuminate aspects of Tolkien’s work that have not yet been considered. (vi)

It is in the first of these pursuits – the ‘detective work’ – that *Something Has Gone Crack* makes the strongest impression. While Garth’s earlier biography focused on the emotional narrative of Tolkien’s life and relationships, this volume drills down into a wide variety of minutiae regarding wartime themes and historical events as they relate to Tolkien’s life and work. This academic tone is struck early on with the inclusion of a map of the Battle of the Somme and a detailed chronology of Tolkien’s service. While this slightly Nigglesque interest in dates and details might make for a less engaging experience for the general reader, it should be of value to the researcher.

The volume is split into four sections. The first, on the 'Conduct of War', looks at parallels between the Great War and the various wars of Middle-earth. The second section focuses on new applications of Great War research to Tolkien's biography. The third section traces the 'Roots of Major Themes of the Legendarium in the Great War'. The final section looks at various 'Alterities', approaching the war and Tolkien's fiction from less obvious and well-documented avenues related to race, class, gender and sexuality.

Given the great variety of topics, I will mention several particular highlights. Tom Shippey and John Bourne examine the 'Steep Learning-Curve' encountered by the British Army in this period and explain the circumstances which led to the 'New Army', largely made up of new and untrained recruits, offering vital historical context. Glenn Peterson's 'Strategic Blunders in the First Age Great Battles' proposes that Tolkien's service outfitted him with plenty of ammunition for the creation of the epic battles of Middle-earth, focusing on leadership and cooperation between allies. Tal Tovey's article on 'Aspects of Total War' convincingly argues that Tolkien's hobbit books reflect the historical shift to 'Total War' (the ideological shift from feudal conflicts between rulers and dynasties to wars between nations and peoples) in Western civilisation. 'Fault Lines Beneath the Crack' by John Rosegrant speculates about Tolkien's uncharacteristically vague assertion that '*something* has gone crack' in the wake of the death of his friend Rob Gilson and proposes that it is an expression of Tolkien's physical and psychological trauma. Michael Flowers' essay on 'Tolkien in East Yorkshire' endeavours to fill in the gaps of previous research into Tolkien's stay in that region which influenced the memorable hemlock glade of the tale of Beren and Lúthien and potentially other real-world allusions. John Garth tells the strange and intriguing tale of an urban legend inspired by Arthur Machen's short story 'The Bowmen' and its parallels with Tolkien's early mythology, born at the same time. Lynn Schlesinger pushes back against the notion of WWI as an exclusively male environment and looks at the possible influence of 'wartime women, who directed and worked in hospitals, drove ambulances, ran canteens, and so forth, on Tolkien's characters (p. 288). Felicity Gilbert's 'Mighty Men of War' complicates the expectations of gender roles during wartime, showing how male and female characteristics become fluid. And Giovanni Costabile makes a fascinating connection between Éowyn and the Scottish 8th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders Regiment via the Glaswegian painter Frederick A. Farrell (read the book to find out more!).

In summary, *Something Has Gone Crack* provides a dense and varied supplement to previous work in this area. In particular, it takes advantage of its format to delve deeper into specific tangents and historical parallels to Tolkien's writing than a more general work is often able to do. A few of the essays are less convincing in making their points than others, and occasionally a given topic can prove a little dry to read; but this is largely an engaging volume, and all of the authors acknowledge Tolkien's discomfort with biographical

criticism and clearly intend to spark discussion rather than argue for any necessary intention or correlation on Tolkien's part. For more serious fans of Tolkien's writing and particularly researchers interested in this period of his life, this is an essential collection to have on the shelf.

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