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Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy

Essays by Nancy Bunting, Seamus Hamill-Keays and Toby Widdicombe

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This book brings together a number of diverse topics under the theme 'Tolkien's legacy'. What the authors mean by this is not always clear. In addition to biographical sketches, the authors make critical remarks about the Tolkien family's role in how father Tolkien and his family are presented to the world. Christopher Tolkien's work on his father's legacy is also critically examined. The result is a stimulating, but also somewhat unbalanced collection, which does not fully live up to its pretensions.

In 2021, Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays published a biography of Edith Bratt, Tolkien's wife.¹ They focused on her early years, up to 1917, when she and her later famous husband were finally able to resume their family life after his return from WWI and the infirmary. While my review of this biography in the *Lembas* was quite positive, the book was more critically received elsewhere. The available sources were

often about a hundred years old and sometimes completely absent. This led to speculative interpretations of the sources that were present. To give just one example, it was suggested that Edith, as an illegitimate child, would share the sad fate of other illegitimate children in Victorian times: very low on the social ladder and in the care of foster parents who gave her too little to eat. It was uncertain whether that was correct. The authors were sometimes accused of steering the image of Edith in the direction they desired.²

Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy contains several biographical sketches. Apparently, the reception of the book about Edith Bratt made the authors feel the need to respond (without explicitly naming their critics) to the criticism on that book. But before I elaborate further on that, first some general remarks on the purpose of the collection as a whole, judging from the title.

1) Cormarë Series no. 46, Walking Tree Publishers, 2021.

2) See a list of reviews, including mine in *Lembas* 196 on the website of Walking Tree Publishers, <http://review.walking-tree.org/?book=cormare46> (accessed on 27/01/2025).

It is a well-known question on school exams: explain the title of the book. *Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy* is a challenge, because the title does not seem to be entirely in line with the authors' intentions. In his introduction, Toby Widdicombe writes that the reason for the collection is that the last of Tolkien's children (Priscilla) died in 2022, so that another generation of the family is now at the helm of the estate. And also that 2023 will be the fiftieth anniversary of Tolkien's death:

In such a situation, it is essential that the variety of perspectives on his work be preserved, indeed widened, and at the same time his legacy not become (as it is in danger of being) the preserve of professional linguistics. (...) This collection dwells at length on the life and not the academic profession.

The fact that Tolkien studies are dominated by academics is indeed a real problem in my view, even though I read many studies with admiration and appreciation. But what the authors mainly seem to be concerned with is their belief that greater insight into the life of Tolkien and his family does contribute to understanding his work.³ The first seven articles fit into this perspective, arranged under the theme 'Past: Biographical explorations'. The last two articles are presented under the theme 'Future: New directions'. I do not quite see what that theme has to do with Tolkien's legacy, not to mention that, as we shall see, there is little concreteness given to these new directions. Let alone talk of 'celebrating': Widdicombe is undisguisedly critical of the role of the Tolkien family in more than one article. The biographical sketches give the impression that there would be much more to tell, if only the family had been more cooperative. I then leave aside the fact that it is not made clear why the extinction of a generation of the family can serve as justification for a volume like this. The biography on Edith Bratt has appeared before 2022, and so have several of the articles in the volume.⁴

I begin the review of the first part by quoting from Nancy Bunting's foreword. She elaborates on the problems faced by writers of biographies and, as

mentioned, seems to want to respond to the criticisms levelled at her and Hamill-Keays:

Many of the essays in this collection, however, deal with matters that are not completely certain or lack documentary evidence which can support a claim of truth. Consequently, these issues require critical thinking that weighs the possibilities or likelihood that the claims or conclusions are true and relevant and then evaluates the context created by new explanations or implications of previously assumed 'facts'. (...) As a result, logically justified 'speculation', based on the best available evidence of life at the time in which Tolkien lived, can be used to learn more about Tolkien's life, given the absence of specific documentary evidence about that life. The type of critical thinking about Tolkien's life leads to an accumulation of findings which build one on another. What is true is independent and separate from what we know.

This effort, described with verve, stands or falls, where biographical sketches are concerned, with the persuasiveness of these speculations. But the more speculative, the more likely the reader is not to be convinced. Precisely because they are speculations and because the meaning attached to them is determined by the writer's subjective insights. Precisely because the facts are named as 'facts'. Let me make this concrete by elaborating on some biographical sketches. Several chapters deal with Tolkien's earliest childhood: a chapter about a tea in Kinver, about the 'Diamond Jubilee' of 1897, to celebrate Queen Victoria's 60th year as monarch, and a sketch of the Suffield and Incledon families, with an emphasis on Aunt May Incledon (born Suffield, i.e. a sister of his mother). When it comes to facts, the Incledon family proves to be especially interesting. The Incledons were extremely successful entrepreneurs.⁵ The family was wealthy and aunt May is believed to have made a significant financial contribution to Tolkien's somewhat frivolous spending habits during his studies at Oxford. Detailed and moving is the chapter on the course of the diabetes that affected Mabel Tolkien and which ultimately resulted in her death. Tolkien's ambidexterity is also pointed out.

3) They are not alone in this. In their preface, Walking Tree Publishers recall that already in the preface to the biography on Edith Bratt they had expressed the hope of more research on other women in Tolkien's life.

4) The reprinted articles have, however, been revised and expanded for this publication, according to the foreword of Walking Tree Publishers.

5) In South Africa, they founded Cape Incledon, a company that made steel pipes and tubes. The company still exists and the name of H. (Herbert) Incledon is still listed on its website: <https://incledon.co.za/about-us/> (accessed on 27/01/2025).

But all these chapters also attempt to make numerous connections with Tolkien's legendarium. And they are certainly not always convincing. I will not deny that Tolkien could be inspired by family events. It seems certain that his play *The Bloodhound, the Chef and the Suffragette* was based on his turbulent love affair with Edith at the time of writing (I express myself cautiously, as the play has not been published to my knowledge; I have never read it). Also striking, according to the authors, are the similarities between Mr. and Mrs. Artaxerxes in *Roverandom* and Walter and May Incledon. But the similarities between the characters in that book and Tolkien's real life are taken quite far, to such an extent that the book is characterised as 'something in the manner of a *roman à clef*, and that comes across as too twisted, too willed in many ways. See, for instance, the hardly supported assumption that the Kinver Rock Houses (where the tea was consumed) were models for hobbit houses and that the Diamond Jubilee was the inspiration for Bilbo's long-expected party. From this it follows that the least satisfactory contribution in the volume is an article speculating on the many autobiographical elements in *Smith of Wootton Major*. And yes, there are certainly autobiographical elements to be identified in this wonderful short story, but not, I am convinced, as many as assumed. One example: Bunting reminds us that Smith is 57 when he undertakes his final journey to Faery and that at that age, Tolkien was finalising the 'main draft' of *The Lord of the Rings*. I don't see the connection. Not only because it is unclear what is meant by 'main draft', but also because Tolkien spent a considerable amount of time in Middle-earth, so to speak, even after that time. Or take this sentence: "Galadriel is also like Mabel Tolkien as both are mothers." And like Galadriel, Mabel was athletic in her youth because she played golf and tennis. Ultimately, such vague, general connections detract from the strength of the articles.

Nevertheless, I can appreciate the authors' attempts to substantiate the importance of biographical portraits. And this brings me to the first article by Toby Widdicombe. It is the fifth article in the volume, but would have done better as the first of the first part. Indeed, in his article Widdicombe defends the importance of a good biography and shows why the many biographies on Tolkien and his family members fall short. As such, this article effectively forms



the 'programme' of this first volume and could have put the biographical articles in perspective.

Widdicombe lists an impressive array of biographies about Tolkien at the beginning of his article. All good then? Widdicombe: "*It isn't doing well, however. Very far from it. (...) Tolkien has been the most ill served by his biographers [compared to other major British writers from the 20th century]. (...) This situation is not remotely acceptable [italics in original].*" But surely we have Humphrey Carpenter's biography? That one falls hopelessly short, Widdicombe says, because of its lack of scholarly thoroughness (an old complaint) and because of the apparent influence exerted on it by the family. The family has not given access to the family archive to anyone but Carpenter, but how he made certain choices in his material and what material he actually had at his disposal is completely unclear. We, readers and researchers interested in Tolkien, are thus "wholly unaware" of which part of the archive was or was not presented. Tellingly, the appendix to Carpenter's biography states that Christopher Tolkien "made radical and invaluable suggestions, which have had a considerable influence on the final shape of this book". I have always interpreted this comment positively: it became a better book thanks to Christopher. But Widdicombe quotes Carpenter who, in an interview, twenty years after the biography was written, explained how this sentence should be read: "The first draft of that life [the biography] was a long sprawling thing, and was deemed unacceptable by the Tolkien family, or by the member of it who controlled permission to quote previously unpublished material. I went away and rewrote it, and it was then deemed acceptable. What I'd actually done was castrate the book, cut

out everything which was likely to be contentious. I've therefore always been displeased with it ever since." In his *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, published in 2001, Michael White says the same thing in different words: "I consider myself a long-standing fan [of Tolkien], but I am dismayed by the over-protective stance of 'official' or 'authorised' material about Professor Tolkien. (...) No authorised description ever questions Tolkien's inner drives or tries to identify the man's personal demons." Widdicombe links this to a call on the Tolkien family (i.e. the next generation) to open the archives generously to... everyone, apparently: "... digitize the entire Bodleian collection of Tolkien's papers." The family does not have to worry about what will come of it, he is convinced, because it can only contribute to a better understanding of the man and his legendarium. In short: "What the Tolkien family has done with their father's life is entirely legitimate. It may even be morally defensible. *That doesn't make it right in a broader literary and cultural sense* [emphasis in the original]." A stimulating contribution! But anyone who, with this insight in mind, subsequently reads the often unconvincing connections made in the biographical sketches between lives and the legendarium, will still wonder whether expectations may not be set too high. Although to Widdicombe's credit: we don't know what we don't know.

The second part of the book takes up about a fifth of it. That is an indication of the book's imbalance. And in addition, the title 'Future: New Directions' is not lived up to. The first article is also by Widdicombe and is about utopian and dystopian places in the Legendarium. That article is little more than a list and brief description of famous places such as Lórien, Rivendell and Angband. No new lines of thought are offered.

The last article is also by Widdicombe. It is as thought-provoking as his article that I discussed at length above, even if here too the 'New Directions' theme does not emerge. It is called 'Christopher Tolkien as Editor: The Perils of Kinship' and after what I have said above about Widdicombe's views on Christopher's influence on Carpenter's biography, it will come as no surprise that he is also highly critical of his work as editor of Tolkien's legacy. Widdicombe criticizes the dual role that Chris-

topher fulfils as both guardian of the legacy and deliverer of it: an impossible position, he believes, "unexampled in literary history". As an example of this, he mentions that the publication of Tolkien's translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo* included a short medieval poem entitled *Gawain's Leave-Taking*. But father Tolkien gave that title to the poem and it has nothing to do with the three other poems. The inclusion of this poem is therefore only motivated, Widdicombe states, by the link with Tolkien and not on the basis of any scientific criterion. This shows that Christopher Tolkien continually navigated between science and popular culture, so to speak. Tolkien is a writer with an audience of millions that must be served. Also because this generates a lot of money – a fact that is repeated a little too often. When it comes to the delivery of *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*, Widdicombe points out that we only know this material through Christopher's work, without anyone being able to verify it, due to lack of access to sources. According to him, that is a serious problem. "In almost all cases, we only have what the son says his father wrote; we do not have what his father wrote in any verifiable form." How convincing the reader finds Widdicombe here will partly depend on the answer to the question of how honest the reader thinks Christopher Tolkien was. I am more positive about that than Widdicombe, but I also have to admit that I don't know what I don't know. Widdicombe also has serious doubts about Christopher's scientific qualities. In sum, also for this article I would conclude: thought-provoking.

In summary: a collection that does not live up to the title, but that stimulates and makes you think at times. A collection that also tries to convey a message: Tolkien's legendarium is closely intertwined with the events in the lives of himself and his family, although the sustainability of that message can be questioned. With articles of very uneven length and a second theme that does not emerge at all. In that sense, the authors might have made sharper choices. But their biographical research into the facts (apart from interpretations) in particular is admirable. Because even without the connections made between the people described and the legendarium, the stories about Tolkien and his family are fascinating and enjoyable to read.