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Tolkien Maker of Middle-earth, a Story-Teller's History

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What first strikes the reader of *Maker of Middle-earth* is the magnificence of the book *qua* object: a large, satisfying tome, though hardly handy to manipulate. A beautiful object despite the odd typo, here and there (a slightly surprising fault for a book of this quality). Inasmuch as it is the catalogue of an exhibition marking what would have been Tolkien's 126th birthday had he been of Númenorian or Elvish descent, the man-and-his-work approach was inevitable, but the surprising interconnectedness — highlighted by the catalogue — of the author's life, his academic activity and his creative endeavour is such that even those averse to this approach should not be put off. Indeed, the book fulfils its mission on both accounts: bringing the reader closer to the man while offering an interesting commentary on his work.

The book, prefaced by Richard Ovenden, Bodley's librarian, consists of an illustrated collection of essays followed by the catalogue proper presenting more illustrations (photographs, sketches and paintings, letters, drafts, maps, etc.).

The collection of essays opens up on a "Biographical sketch" by Catherine McIlwaine, a well-balanced, accurate cameo, followed by another enlightening biographical presentation by John Garth focusing on the coming together of the Inklings and on the group's influence of Tolkien's writing (with particular attention paid to his close friendship with C.S. Lewis). These two narratives, both concerned with the relevance of the biographical information to the genesis and nature of Tolkien's work, are most complementary and prepare the reader for the four essays they precede. The latter respectively focus on Tolkien's aesthetics and his conception of "Faërie", analysed by Verlyn Flieger; on "Inventing Elvish", his logopoetic activity stemming from his philological research and erudition, presented by Carl Hostetter; on his philosophical, aesthetic and narrative rediscovery of what Professor Tom Shippey, author of the essay, calls "That Noble Northern Spirit"; and, finally on his activity as an amateur artist, "Tolkien's visual art", by Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull. Despite the depth of those analyses and the technicality of such topics as diachronic linguistics, the essays are eminently legible and enjoyable, notably Professor Shippey's in which he displays his customary erudition, perceptiveness and underlying humour.

As far as the catalogue section is concerned, it covers various periods of Tolkien's life ("Childhood," "Student Days" and "The Professor's Study"), his artistic output ("Sheer Invention") and his literary work (namely, *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*) before ending on cartography ("Mapping *The Lord of the Rings*"). Opting for the presentation of the works following the chronology of their conception — rather than that of their publication — makes perfect sense, *The Silmarillion*, published last, being the matrix whence the other two sprang. However, inserting the section on "The Professor's Study" between "*The Silmarillion*" and "*The Hobbit*" seems unjustified and slightly confusing. The other problem, this one inherent to that type of publication, is repetition. Indeed, some of the clichés of the Tolkien "hagiography" (his being orphaned at a young age, his Roman Catholic faith, the anecdote of the blank exam paper on which he scribbled "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit", his telling of the story to his children before publishing it, etc.) necessarily appear, again and again, in the texts that

accompany the various illustrations. While visitors to the exhibition might take those repetitions in their stride, the latter become somewhat irritating when regrouped in book format. Again, this is hardly avoidable, considering the format, but the documents they accompany — some of which were hitherto unpublished — are a treasure trove for anybody tempted by genetic criticism. They should also meet the expectations of readers eager to know more about the man. Indeed, the reader is brought very close to the man behind the work. A closeness verging on the embarrassing at times as the reader is shown glimpses of, sometimes, extremely intimate expressions of affection.

The overall impression that emanates from *Tolkien Maker of middle-earth* is one of a multiple *mise en abyme*. The reader is shown an academic, working on existing mythologies, producing a mythology of his own which turns him into an almost mythical character, himself the object of study on the part of other academics. The recurring phrase “Tolkien’s legendarium” thus takes on an obvious double meaning. The catalogue, as a whole, highlights the extraordinary correspondences between the man’s personal and academic life and the author’s work. For example, the commentary on “The Map of the Ship of the World”, a drawing illustrating a pre-*Silmarillion* text, reveals connections between real places (England, the village of Great Haywood) and fictitious ones (respectively, Tol Eressëa and Tavrobel), generating the impression of a fictitious world gradually extricating itself from the real one. Another striking example is the placing side by side of the tattered manuscripts of *Beowulf* and of his own translation of it, both, in turn, calling to mind the stained, torn and singed pages from “The Book of Mazarbul”, diary pages painstakingly — and uselessly — produced to illustrate *The Lord of the Rings* as they proved too expensive to print). As regards manuscripts, considering Tolkien’s handwriting, the praise lavished on Christopher Tolkien for his Herculean editing feat is more than deserved. And here again, Tolkien’s special relationship with his son is mirrored in Bilbo’s relationship with Frodo, his nephew (a surrogate son in many mythologies). The lines become so blurred that Old Norse and Elvish are placed on a par in an analysis of Gandalf’s original name, Bladorthin, that calls upon an etymological explanation on the part of “scholars [putting] a strong case for the name to be glossed as ‘grey wanderer’ based on information given in early Elvish texts: *thin* = grey; *blador* = wide lands.” (p. 312). With Lúthien, inscribed on his wife’s gravestone and Beren on his, one might be tempted to say that, having extricated itself from the real world, the fictitious one ends up encompassing it. The surprising use of the past tense in summaries of the action might be motivated by a deliberate intention to blur the lines between reality and fiction but, whatever the reason, it does feel slightly strange. Despite this (in my opinion) minor flaw, *Tolkien Maker of Middle-earth* is a splendid collective effort that offers the reader a beautiful, accurate and at times moving portrayal of Tolkien, the man and the author. But, just as importantly, it successfully captures the complexity and depth of Tolkien’s literary endeavour, presenting the reader with a monumental palimpsest.