

CELEBRATING TOLKIEN'S LEGACY

Review by Christian Trenk

Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy: Essays by Nancy Bunting, Seamus Hamill-Keays, and Toby Widdicombe; Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. Paper, \$25.75 from amazon.com.

The 52nd volume of Walking Tree's Cormarë series will feel familiar to many long-time readers of "Beyond Bree", as four of the nine chapters are revised versions of earlier articles published here (ch.1: "Tea in Hay" [BB May'15], ch.2 on the Diamond Jubilee and Bilbo's Birthday [BB June'19], ch.3 on Mary Incledon [BB May'19], ch.5: "J.R.R. Tolkien: Ambidexter" [BB Oct'17]), with an additional piece previously appearing in "Lembas" June'21 (ch.6 on Mabel Tolkien's last year). This review therefore focuses primarily on the four remaining chapters.

The volume opens with an introduction by Toby Widdicombe and a preface by Nancy Bunting. Widdicombe provides a useful summary of the content, though his assertion that the collection "reassesses [Tolkien's] achievement; [...] suggests some fruitful ways forward in scholarship [and...] celebrates the complex history of Tolkien's relation to fiction and epic as something tantamount to his being the founder of modern fantasy" (p.xiii) may overstate the book's actual scope. His next paragraph, which describes the book as largely focused on the historical context of Tolkien's life, is a more accurate characterization. The book is split in two parts with the first – "Past: Biographical Explorations" – spanning 247 pages over 7 chapters, and the latter – "Future: New Directions" – ranging from page 251 to 301. In how far these latter two essays "consider where Tolkien studies [*sic*] may go in the next few decades" (xiii) remains for more susceptible readers to discern.

Here and in his essays, Widdicombe writes with conviction and an openly critical stance. He is unafraid to challenge figures such as the Tolkien Estate, Humphrey Carpenter, Christopher, Michael, and J.R.R. Tolkien, as well as the broader Tolkien scholarly community. While many of these critiques are warranted in principle, the tone may explain why another reviewer has described the volume as "full of spite".¹

Other than the understandable, and widely shared complaints about the Tolkien Estate's treatment of research interests, Widdicombe also voices concern that Tolkien scholarship risks becoming dominated by "professional linguists" (xvi), a position that is not explored any further, and therefore must remain somewhat cryptic.

Nancy Bunting's preface is more methodological in scope. It provides a refreshingly honest reflection on her approach, one familiar to "Beyond Bree" readers. She acknowledges the sometimes speculative nature of her arguments, noting that "no absolute certainty exists". (xix) Regardless of how the reader's mind "weighs the probabilities" (ibid.) of her arguments, they always offer biographical insights into Tolkien's life, and fresh perspectives on his potential inspirations that are worth considering.

Bunting's essay "The Interlace of Autobiography and Faërian Imagery in Smith of Wootton Major" is a detailed 100-page long contribution, and the heart piece of this book. The argumentative structure occasionally oscillates between various points, resulting in a broad but sometimes confusing argumentative web, and while some links between ideas are more associative than explicit, and some sections seem largely removed from the actual subject matter (e.g. the connection between the Ineluctable Wave and Smith, 217–21), the essays offer a lovingly detailed exploration of a plethora of potential parallels and laboriously researched links between Tolkien's life and work(s). The reliance on Carpenter's Tolkien: A Biography in a most prominent place (143) against Verlyn Flieger is almost ironic, given Widdicombe's critique of it elsewhere in the volume, and Bunting's frequent – and understandable – criticism of it in general.

Widdicombe's first essay, "For Want of a Biography, the Story Was Lost", is a sharp critique of the existing biographical record, particularly Carpenter's work, and the role of the Tolkien Estate/ Family in its production. While the concerns he raises are not without merit, the essay might have benefited from a more focused and economical presentation, and the professional distance Widdicombe demands elsewhere. In short: the existing biographies are incomplete; we need a new one built on full access to all material posthaste. Remarkably, Widdicombe then goes on to state that we already "know what we will find" (97), rehashing a relatively unspectacular summary of the life of J.R.R. Tolkien and people close to him, thus undermining the urgency to his whole essay.

His final chapter, "Christopher Tolkien as Editor: The Perils of Kinship", continues this critical tone, scrutinizing Christopher Tolkien's editorial decisions across his father's posthumous publications, and can be summarized in equal brevity: Christopher Tolkien was ill-suited to be literary executor and editor of his father's works. Widdicombe identifies six "pivotal moments" of editorial mishaps that conform precisely to the younger Tolkien's major publications or the first one in a new series, leaving the reader with the clear impression that he went wrong whenever he set out to publish something. Widdicombe's critique is sometimes detailed and always passionate, and he freely offers his advice on what should have been done instead. Perhaps, his passion constitutes a similar lack of professional detachedness that he lamented in Christopher Tolkien?

The highlight of the volume, in this reviewer's opinion, is Widdicombe's chapter "Tolkien as Forgotten Utopia". Here, he sets aside polemic to offer a compelling exploration of utopian and dystopian themes in Tolkien's *legendarium*. Drawing from a wide selection of Tolkienian texts, the essay demonstrates Widdicombe's strengths as a literary scholar, and while the proposed strictly the symbolic reading of "Leaf by Niggle" (274) may feel overly rigid, the essay convinces with clarity and originality of argument, and an erudite exploration of the conceptual basis for Utopia. In fact, its main shortcoming is that it comes so short, as much more could have been said for many of the examples raised by Widdicombe, and it is to be hoped that this and the concluding meta-observations (272–5) will be expanded on by the author in future publications.

A general bibliography (305–20), and an extensive index (325–41) make up the remaining pages of this collection of essays that do not quite always provide what the title suggests, but offer a wide exploration of biographical research, two impassioned critiques of Tolkien Studies censorship and restrictions, and a scholarly investigation of Tolkien's attempts at utopia.

Note

1. Douglas Charles Kane, "Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy: Essays (2024), by Nancy Bunting, Seamus Hamill-Keays, and Toby Widdicombe", Journal of Tolkien Research, Vol. 21, Iss. 1, p. 1, 2025.