TOLKIEN - HISTORY MEETS LEGEND

Review by Todd Jensen

Tolkien - History Meets Legend: Essays by Nancy Buntiing; Walking Tree Publishers, 2026. Paper, $24.30 from Amazon.com.

Bunting's essays examine many of Tolkien's writings from the perspective of his early experiences, suggesting that they were strongly influenced by the events of his youth. In particular, they study them through the prism of his remarks in "On Fairy-stories" of how: a) fairy-stories draw on the events of the Primary World, thrown into the Pot of Story and transformed, and how b) fairy-stories offer such benefits as Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. Bunting argues that Tolkien was inspired by the often traumatic events of his past as a way of confronting them and finding healing.

The first essay, "'Aldarion and Erendis' as an Imagined History of Tolkien's Early Life" speculates that Aldarion and Erendis were modeled on Tolkien's parents, Arthur and Mabel. In particular, the clash between Aldarion and Erendis over Aldarion's love of the seafaring life and Erendis' resentment that it took him away from her parallels Arthur Tolkien's love of life in South Africa and Mabel's dislike of it. Ancalimë is, in a sense, an alternate version of Tolkien who had been born a girl, her education being modeled on the likely education Mabel would have visited upon this hypothetical daughter. Bunting concludes the essay with the speculation that the story of Aldarion and Erendis was, in part, based on Tolkien's speculations on what if his father had not died when Tolkien was only four, and conclusion that it might have been worse than his actual childhood, witnessing a serious conflict between his parents.

The second essay, "Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: S.R. Crockett's The Black Douglas", explores the influence of S. R. Crockett's historical novel The Black Douglas upon Tolkien's writings. This essay was of particular interest to this reviewer, who had read The Black Douglas many years ago and submitted a review of it to "Beyond Bree" [June'05]. (In particular, I noted that Bunting, like me, thought that the fight with the werewolves in Crockett's tale was actually closer to the fight with the phantom-wolves in The Fellowship of the Ring than to the dwarves being treed by the Wargs in The Hobbit, and also noted the similarity between a suit of armor given one of the characters and Bilbo and Frodo's mithril-shirt.) Alongside these, Bunting suggests that the villainous Gilles de Retz influenced the depiction of Sauron in the account of the Fall of Númenor (both engage in human sacrifice, for example), and that Lady Sybilla, who betrays the title character and his younger brother to their deaths but afterwards repents of it, is an example of Tolkien's periodic use of a "Dark Lady" archetype, which will be more fully discussed in a later essay.

The third essay, "Faramir and Tolkien, in War and Courtship", studies how Faramir was based on Tolkien himself (Tolkien himself admitted in one of his letters, quoted in this essay, that of all his invented characters, Faramir most resembled him). Both have no love of war, but take up the sword to defend the arts of beauty and poetry. Bunting discusses how Tolkien found much value in the friends he made serving in the First World War, an experience shared by many of his fellow-soldiers. Bunting also studies Faramir's courtship of Éowyn, arguing that it was drawn not only from Tolkien's courtship of Edith, but also from the romance between one of Tolkien's friends, Rob Gilson (a fellow member of the T.C.B.S. *[p 4]*) and Estelle King (with a sadder ending; GIlson was killed in the war). One other parallel Bunting brings up; the nightmare about the destruction of Númenor by the "Great Wave" that Faramir mentions to Éowyn is based on Tolkien's own recurring nightmares about the Great Wave, that led to his writing the story of Númenor and its destruction.

The fourth and fifth essays are the longest in this book, and its heart. "Tolkien's 1904 Trauma and its Exorcism" speculates that many of the darkest moments in Tolkien's works (not only the familiar "Middle-earth legendarium" but even Roverandom) were based on a nightmarish experience when he was twelve, not long before his mother died. Tolkien, his younger brother Hilary, and their mother Mabel all fell ill at the same time - the boys from childhood illness, Mabel from the diabetes that would cost her her life. Bunting raises the possibility that Mabel, under the effects of her illness (further enhanced by a lack of food; they were all too ill to shop for it), went temporarily mad and attacked Hilary, with Tolkien coming to his younger brother's aid and receiving an injury to his right hand in the process; Bunting offers this suggested incident as an inspiration for such moments in Tolkien's writings as Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam's clashes with giant spiders (both the ones in Mirkwood and Shelob), Frodo's encounter with the Barrow-wight, and Denethor's attempt to burn Faramir. Bunting brings up the role of spiders in all these scenes (the Barrow-wight's hand is compared to a spider, and Denethor is likened to "an old patient spider"). Bunting also suggests that Mabel left two separate memories on Tolkien: a loving and beautiful mother on the one hand, and the madwoman she temporarily became, who would inspire various "Dark Ladies" in Tolkien's writings such as the Corrigan in "Aotrou and Itroun", Guinever in "The Fall of Arthur"; and the hint of what Galadriel would have become had she taken the Ring. In his writings, Tolkien was attempting to reconcile these two different images and find healing from his memories of the latter.

"Past is Prologue: The Bombadil Chapters in The Lord of the Rings" continues this approach with a look at the three Bombadil chapters (Book One, Chapters Six to Eight) in The Lord of the Rings, which, despite their seemingly taking a break from the main story (and even being often omitted from dramatizations such as the Bakshi and Jackson movie adaptations), clearly meant much to Tolkien (and found their final form quickly). In Bunting's analysis, Tom Bombadil is based on Father Francis Morgan into whose care Tolkien entered after the traumatic events of 1904, and whose "love and care and humour" (as Tolkien described his qualities in one of his letters) were the origin of Bombadil's own similar qualities. It is Bombadil who saves the hobbits from the horrors of both the Old Forest and the Barrow-downs (Bunting studies the increasing hostile watchfulness in the Old Forest, suggesting that it was based on the troubled mood Mabel Tolkien underwent during her illness - and also suggests that some of the Old Forest scene was based on earlier events, such as a young Hilary Tolkien's near-drowning in the mill pond at Sarehole - the

kernel of inspiration, perhaps, for Sam's own near-drowning before Frodo comes to his rescue), just as Father Morgan, and the Church that he was part of, saved the Tolkien brothers in their dark moments in 1904. Bunting stresses Bombadil's untroubled love and freedom from greed and hatred, pointing out that he does not even try to destroy Old Man Willow but simply reminds him that he should be acting like a tree and go back to sleep, rather than preying on the hobbits. She also suggests that there was some bearing here on the fact that Tolkien never fully completed the tale of Beren and Lúthien, where Lúthien was, in a sense, based on Edith, and comes to Beren's rescue; in the Bombadil chapters, Tolkien recognizes that our rescue from the tribulations of earthly life cannot truly come from other humans, but from God and the Christian faith. She also, in pointing out the role of forgiveness in Tolkien's works (including that which Frodo shows towards Gollum and even Saruman), suggests that Tolkien was here forgiving his mother for the above 1904 traumatic events.

I will leave it to others, more expert on Tolkien's early life than I am, to judge how accurate Nancy Bunting's speculations are. However, I found her essays moving and enjoyable to read, and recommend them to all readers of "Beyond Bree" with a strong interest in this aspect of Tolkien's life and work.