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# The Friendship of Lewis and Tolkien

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume I**

A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

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## **The Friendship Between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien**

John Seland

## The Friendship Between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

by John Seland

I would like to talk about the friendship of C.S. Lewis and John Tolkien. How did it begin? How did they influence one another? What caused the friendship to cease?

They had much in common. Both had taken their degrees at Oxford; both had their education interrupted by service in World War I; and both were medievalists. Both also began their teaching careers at Oxford in the same year, 1926 (Richard West, 3). Lewis describes their initial encounter at a Faculty Meeting in Oxford, May 11, 1926:

"[Our meeting] marked the breakdown of old prejudices. At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist. Tolkien was both (*Surprised by Joy*, 204-5).

He also wrote in his diary: "He [Tolkien] is a smooth, pale, fluent little chap. Thinks the language is the real thing in the school. . . No harm in him: only needs a smack or so" (Green and Hooper, 88).

"By 1929, they were meeting on a weekly basis in Lewis's rooms in Magadalen, where Tolkien often brought along some of the manuscripts which were to make up *The Silmarillion*." (Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien. A Biography*, 178) In a letter to Warnie, dated November 22, 1931, Lewis described one such meeting as "one of the pleasant spots in the

week." They read and criticized each other's poems, and talked about English school politics, theology or "the state of the nation" (Hooper, C.S. Lewis, 16).<sup>1</sup>

One of their mutual interests was mythology. In May 1927, Tolkien invited Lewis to join the Coalbiters, a discussion group he had founded at Oxford to translate and share ideas about Icelandic sagas. This interest in myth led to something that bound them even closer together: their faith. On September 19, 1931, after a long discussion with Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, Lewis was led to faith in God. They told him that "the account of Jesus' death and resurrection was a myth, like the pagan myths that he responded to emotionally, but one that was also historically true" (Joe R. Christopher, "Who Were the Inklings?" 114; *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 421, 427-8; Wilson, 126-7). "The lines of myth and history cross with Jesus." (Christopher, 48) The influence of his friends was decisive. On 21 December, 1941, Lewis wrote to his friend Bede Griffiths: "What I owe to them (the Inklings) is incalculable. Dyson and Tolkien were the immediate cause of my conversion" (*Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 196).<sup>2</sup>

One reason for their friendship was literary. They had been writing, mainly poetry, since their childhood. What each wanted was someone with whom he could share his ideas.

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Their meetings gave them opportunities to read their works to each other and to give and receive encouragement.

Lewis and Tolkien were also drawn closer to one another through the Inklings. This was a group of friends who met from about 1930-1963 to talk and read aloud their compositions. (Hooper, C.S. Lewis, 16) The members met on Thursday evening in Lewis's room in Magdalen. On Tuesday, some also met for lunch at the Eagle and Child pub in St. Giles. Friendship was one of the main reasons for the Inklings, and the force that drew everyone together was Lewis. "He was the link who bound us together," said Dr. Havard, his personal physician. "He gave one a warmth of friendship which I have never met anywhere else." (Como, 218)

The conversations shared by Lewis and Tolkien resulted in certain ideas and plans that strongly influenced their fiction. Somewhere around the year 1936, they spoke of their desire to write the kind of stories they liked, "stories that looked over the edge of reality, that took imaginative and philosophical risks." (Flieger, 235) Lewis was to write about space travel; Tolkien about time travel. <sup>(3)</sup> Tolkien called his stories "sub-creations." The writer would invent "Secondary Worlds," imaginative creations independent of the real Primary world in which we live. (Downing, 47; Glover, 17,25,30) The stories would be ways by which history could be bridged; past with present, and the present with time in the future. (Flieger, 235) In this way—and in showing that there were other worlds beyond the one we live in—the fantasies would serve to fulfill man's sense of longing for a higher, better world, and thus instill joy in his heart. (Tree and Leaf, 25,36, 45, 64) Lewis's own idea of Joy, a concept he had been thinking about since he was a child, relates directly to

this. In the heart of each person, there is an innate longing for another, higher world. His fiction would address itself to this longing.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis began to work immediately, and in 1938 published *Out of the Silent Planet*. Tolkien began *The Lost Road*, a time-travel story about a land called Numenor, his version of the Atlantis myth. (Carpenter, 361) Tolkien never finished the story. Nor did he finish another, later attempt to express his ideas about the interconnection of different time periods, a story entitled "The Notion Club" Papers, modeled on the Inklings, with Oxford as its setting. (Flieger, 19, 125-9) But the ideas lingered in his mind and became the underpinning for *The Lord of the Rings*.

There was, then, a definite purpose about their friendship. They had a plan, as it were—Charles Williams would become a part of it several years later—to challenge the literature they saw being written and were not pleased with. Instead, they would write "romance," the kind of imaginative literature that would, Lewis, hoped "at least hint of another world." (*They Stand Together*, 451-52)

Meanwhile, the readings continued. "Beginning in 1937 the Inklings began listening to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Charles Williams read *All Hallows' Eve*. And over the years the Inklings read and criticized *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *The Screwtape Letters* and many other of Lewis's works." (Hooper, C.S. Lewis, 18)

Encouragement is a key word. Tolkien once admitted: "But for the encouragement of C.S. Lewis, I do not think that I should ever have completed or offered for publication *The Lord of the Rings*." (Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 303-362) In Lewis's case there were other influences, like Owen Barfield and Charles Williams, but Tolkien's friendship

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seems to have been the most important. A.N. Wilson writes that it “released in Lewis wells of creativity . . .”(117-8) There were problems, however, and from around 1940, the two men drew further apart.

In *The Four Loves*, Lewis writes: “True Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth.” (59) Lewis was the living embodiment of this idea. But Tolkien wasn’t. George Sayer remarks, “the two had different concepts of friendship. Tolkien wanted to be the first among Lewis’s friends. Lewis may have loved Tolkien as much, but he wanted him to be one among several friends.” (“Recollection of J.R.R. Tolkien,” 25)

When Lewis met Williams, in 1936, he was immediately captivated by his personality. (Carpenter, 99, 101) “Our friendship,” he wrote, “grew inward to the bone.” (Hooper, *C.S. Lewis*, 17, 22; Sayer 179) Then, when Williams came to Oxford in 1939, Tolkien had to put up with something like hero worship on Lewis’s part. (Carpenter, 120, 123) For nearly 10 years—since the late 1920’s—Tolkien and Lewis had talked and drank beer together, but now Williams made a third. Also, the conversation became more literary than Tolkien cared for. He wasn’t widely read after Chaucer, while Williams and Lewis were. All in all, Tolkien was somewhat jealous. He even felt betrayed.

After Williams came to Oxford, he became an important member of the Inklings. In a letter dated November 11, 1939, Lewis wrote to his brother Warnie:

On Thursday we had a meeting of the Inklings. . . the bill of fare consisted of a section of the new Hobbit book from Tolkien, a nativity play by Charles Williams. . . and a chapter of the book on

*The Problem of Pain* from me. I wished very much that we could have had you with us. (*Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 170-71)

A cordial atmosphere continued during the war, but gradually Tolkien’s friendship with Lewis and with other members of the Inklings became strained. Dyson, for example, became very critical of Tolkien’s reading of *The Lord of the Rings*. (Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 212) In 1949, the Thursday meetings of the Inklings came to an end. (Hooper, *C.S. Lewis*, 732) “The Tuesday morning meetings continued, and Tolkien and Lewis still saw one another fairly often, but it was never the same.” (Hooper, *C.S. Lewis*, 732) In 1950, Lewis read part of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* to Tolkien, but Tolkien disliked the book, as he came to dislike the others. Joe R. Christopher writes that it was on account of their softening of mythology: “if Lucy met a faun—that is, a satyr—the result would have been a rape, not a tea party.” (*C.S. Lewis*, 110-11) Clearly, the original enthusiasm of the group was dying out. When Lewis moved to Cambridge in 1954, it was just a matter of time until the Inklings meetings ended altogether.

Another problem was Lewis’s marriage. Tolkien felt hurt when Lewis did not tell him about it. (Carpenter, 242; *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 341; Hooper, *C.S. Lewis*, 83) Tolkien told Christopher Bretherton: “CSL was my closest friend from about 1927-1940, and remained very dear to me. . . . But in fact we saw less and less of one another after he came under the dominant influence of Charles Williams, and still after his very strange marriage.” (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 349) Perhaps Lewis was silent because previously they had disagreed about divorce. Tolkien called it “abominable,” while Lewis favored allowing it in certain cases. (Hooper, *C.S.*

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*Lewis*, 84; *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 60-1; Carpenter, 242)

There were other causes for friction. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic; Lewis was an Ulster Protestant. Not surprisingly, their thinking about religion often differed: Lewis was critical of Franco, Tolkien was more supportive; Lewis accepted cremation, Tolkien did not; Lewis saw the Eucharist as one of several other important elements of worship; to Tolkien it was of supreme value. (Brian Rosebury, 131) Lewis's apologetic writings and his wartime BBC broadcasts also caused friction. (Tolkien—again, perhaps somewhat jealous—once referred to him as "Everyman's Theologian.") The focus of their writings also differed. "Lewis," says Sister Pauline, CSM, "wrote with a set purpose firmly in mind while Tolkien simply told a tale which had no purpose but to entertain." <sup>(5)</sup> Tolkien was a perfectionist, as can be seen in the precisely detailed scenes of *The Lord of the Rings*. This also caused him—unfairly, one feels—to be critical of Lewis's Narnia stories, where such precision is glossed over, in favor of the story and what happens in the story, and where different things—myth, fairy tale, and Christian themes—are mingled together. Tolkien may also have been upset because of the way Lewis connects the world of Narnia with the real world, even to the extent of sometimes addressing the reader as "You." Tolkien always stressed the independence of his created worlds. He does not want the reader to connect his world with the real world. Lewis, on the other hand, always shows the interpenetration of his secondary worlds with our primary world. His "strategy" is to make readers sense that his fantasy world is more real than they might have supposed—and that their "real world" is more filled with the fantastic than they might have supposed. (Downing, 47; Sayer,

"Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien, 352) Lewis also used allegory in the stories, which was at variation with Tolkien's propensity to avoid it as much as possible. He may also have been jealous of Lewis's speed—the seven Narnia novels were written in 8 years (between 1949 and 1956)—while he had worked 17 on *The Lord of the Rings*.

There is still one more item. On October 20, 1965, Tolkien wrote a letter to Clyde S. Kilby saying that many of those who write about Lewis "all miss one of the essential points of temperament. Barfield who knew him longest—gets nearest to the central point." (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 363)<sup>6</sup> Previously, Barfield had written: "Was there something . . . which . . . somehow . . . was volu? . . . some touch of a more than merely ad hoc pastiche"? On the one hand, Lewis shows a "distinctive . . . intellectual . . . maturity [and] moral energy [but also] . . . a certain psychic or spiritual immaturity." (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, footnote, 451-2) Perhaps Tolkien was referring to this—"a certain psychic or spiritual immaturity"—when he wrote about "the central point" of Lewis's character.

Several critics—Humphrey Carpenter, Donald Glover, and Colin Manlove—have pointed out Lewis's fondness for going back to childhood experiences. It was as if one part of him had not fully matured. Perhaps related to this is the fact that after a certain time in his life—sometime in the 1930's—he did not like to think too deeply about himself. Barfield also writes about this. "At a certain stage in his life, he deliberately ceased to take an interest in himself." (Como, xxxiii; Jocelyn Gobb, xvi) If this is true, it may have been that Lewis felt that, except for examining himself for his faults and weaknesses, introspection was merely a form of selfish pride.<sup>7</sup> The central point Tolkien wrote about may have a relationship

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to this. Had Lewis thought more deeply of the matter, for example, perhaps he would have realized that turning his attention so abruptly from Tolkien to Charles Williams hurt Tolkien deeply. Or perhaps with little more reflection, he would have realized that listening to Tolkien speak about family troubles would have been comforting to Tolkien. A certain amount of reflection might have helped him to realize that by telling Tolkien beforehand of his marriage, he would have avoided hurting Tolkien's feelings.

Lewis and Tolkien had different temperaments. Tolkien had a good sense of humor, but he was basically a serious person, and rather pessimistic about life. Lewis was more buoyant and "sunny." (Hooper, C.S. Lewis, 16; Wilson, 119) I think Tolkien especially liked this. He saw in Lewis someone like himself: a dedicated Christian and scholar with whom he could share ideas and feeling. This meant very much to him when he was working out his ideas for writing and also in his personal life. When he experienced difficulties with his wife, Edith, for example, he wrote: "Friendship with Lewis compensates for much." (Carpenter, 32; Wilson, 119)

They were "almost" ideal companions. I say this because not all went well between them. Mythic literature and faith in God brought them together. But religion—they each had their own prejudices—certain character faults, and poor judgments separated them.<sup>8</sup>

A few years after Lewis's death, Tolkien wrote a letter to his son Michael. "We owed each a great debt to the other, and that tie with the deep affection that it begot, remains. He was a great man of whom the cold-blooded official obituaries only scraped the surface . . ."

(*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 341) Part of the "great debt," I believe refers to the many themes and ideas they shared and were able to clarify as a result of their friendship—time (temporary and eternal), death, immortality, longing, escape, joy—all these seen from a Christian perspective. Largely as a result of their friendship—particularly for the first 14 years, when they enjoyed a close, loving relationship—they were able to expand on these themes and deal with them with greater clarity and depth.

### Notes

1. Their fondness for reading each other's writings embellished their friendship. Besides reading sections of what would later become part of *The Silmarillion*, sometime during the year 1929 Lewis read Tolkien's poem "Tinúviel" and offered some suggestions that Tolkien accepted. Two years later, in 1931, Tolkien wrote "Mythopoeia," a poem that speaks of Lewis's conversion to Christianity. Two years after this, Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves that he's been reading *The Hobbit* (*They Stand Together*, 449) This process continued both privately and in their Inking meetings, usually with Tolkien reading and Lewis listening and commenting. When Tolkien published *The Hobbit* in 1937, and later, *The Lord of the Rings*, in 1954 and 1955, Lewis wrote very praiseworthy reviews.
2. Lewis's journey to faith, of course, was much more complex. His early reading and love for mythology and romance helped him to accept the myths of the Christian religion about which Tolkien and Dyson spoke. (See R.J. Reilly, 100)
3. Both writers, particularly Lewis, were critical of much of modern literature.

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Frequently in his letters, Lewis wrote about writers that he did not like: Edith Sitwell, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden. He did not like *vers libre*, nor was he fond of writers like D.H. Lawrence, who favored the theories of Freud.

4. In his essay, "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien wrote about sub-creation, and about his idea of joy, which he called "eucatastrophe." It referred to the good turn at the end of the fairy tale. Tolkien's essay had a great influence on Lewis, and fit in closely with his own ideas about joy. His term for joy was *Sehnsucht*. It was an "inconsolable longing" that is in itself felt as a delight (*Surprised by Joy*, 72, 165). It seems always to be a longing for something not given in experience, coming as a by-product of focusing attention and desire on something else. (Gilbert Meilaender, 14).

In his essay, Tolkien called for the writer to make a Secondary World with its own laws. Once the mind of the reader enters this world, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. "You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (*Tree and Leaf*, 36-37) In his *Defense of Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney said that the poet brought forth a golden world, in contrast to the real world of brass (section 3). (For more information on Tolkien's idea of sub-creation, see Letters of C.S. Lewis, 271, and Christopher, C.S. Lewis, 118)

5. Pauline, Sister, CSM. "Secondary Worlds: Lewis and Tolkien." The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society, 12, May 1981, 3-8. Charles S. Moorman writes that "The seven

books became rather deliberately, if not allegories, then at least deliberate expositions of the great articles of the Christian faith . . ." Lewis's purpose was didactic. "Narnia is essentially Christian and Middle-earth essentially pagan." (*The Precincts of Felicity: The Augustinian City of the Oxford Christians* (Gainesville: U of Florida, 1966) 60-61.)

6. According to Barfield, some time after his conversion, Lewis changed. It seems that he decided that, except for helping to see his faults and weaknesses, introspection was not necessary. Indeed, introspection—thinking too much about one's self—could be a sign of pride. (This ties in with his idea that literature should focus on the work, not on the author. As he argued in *The Personal Heresy*, he was against the idea that poetry was the expression of the poet's feelings.) One feels, however, that here Lewis was making a mistake. Had he reflected a bit more, for example, perhaps he could have seen that he was neglecting Tolkien when Charles Williams came to Oxford. Or he could have seen that listening more sympathetically when Tolkien told him about his problems with Edith could have greatly helped Tolkien. In any event, his reluctance to look more into his heart seems to have been a blind spot in his character. (See *Light on C.S. Lewis*. See also VII, Vol. 2, 74.)

7. George Sayer points out the influence on Lewis of Samuel Alexander's work, *Space, Time, and Deity*, and how "it increased his distrust of introspection." (*Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times*, 131)

Although most of the writers included in James Como's book, *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table* give very high praise to Lewis both for his scholarship and his personal traits, there are some dissenting voices. Leo Baker



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makes the following remarks. "He lived in an enclosed world with rigid walls built by his logic and intelligence, and trespassers would be persecuted. . . . The lesson was that to escape from personal suffering he must hedge himself round, keep apart from emotional contacts, and live the life of a very private man . . . [At a boarding school in England] he was driven inward and became his own society. So in Oxford. He was determined not to suffer there as he had done in those previous societies. Hence the secrecy and privacy. Mixing was not for him. He was ambitious for scholarship and poetry; therefore he must concentrate. But of course some companion was inevitable . . . (Como, 4, 5, 6)

John Wain writes about his inability to share his inner life, as seen in *Surprised by Joy*. (70) He writes about Lewis: "one simply never got near him. There was a heavily protected inner self that no one ever saw." *A Grief Observed* is "just as impersonal, as nonintimate, as anything signed by Lewis. . . ." (71) "His impersonality in human contacts, his construction of a vast system of intellectual outworks to protect the deeply hidden core of his personality." (72)

8. In his book, *A Challenge to C.S. Lewis*, Peter Milward points out several of Lewis's prejudices. He claims that Lewis made very little claim for allegory, both in literature and for his own writings, especially the later ones. Milward says this shows a prejudice against Catholic literature in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. Shakespeare, for example, relied on the allegory of the Morality Plays. Lewis also glosses over the Reformation. Milward says this is because Lewis doesn't want to admit that Protestants made Catholics suffer a lot. [No mention is made of how

Catholics made Protestants suffer.] Henry VIII dealt the death blow to medieval England. In his book, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), Lewis downgrades or overlooks Catholic authors of this period, while favoring Protestants. For example, he strongly favors Tyndale rather than More, and John Foxe and John Jewel over Thomas Harding and Robert Persons who refuted them and whose prose, Milward claims, deserves his praise. In short, Lewis, a scholar in this period, shows unusual ignorance of the Roman Catholic side of very important religious controversies that occurred between 1570 and 1590. Milward notes that Tolkien was very critical of Lewis's book. "It's one-sidedly Protestant, while doing less than justice to the Catholic side" (91).

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