

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and lived most of his life in Oxford, but his grandparents (on both sides of his family) lived in or near Moseley, and for a short but important time Tolkien himself lived in Moseley and in Kings Heath. Many people know of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. This note is about the early life and background of their author. It tries to show where some of his ideas came from, and tells only briefly of his life as a professor.

His father Arthur was born and brought up in Moseley, went to King Edward's School in New Street, and worked for Lloyd's Bank. But he went to South Africa where he worked for the Bank of South Africa in Bloemfontein. In 1891 Mabel Suffield, from Kings Heath, sailed to South Africa shortly after her twenty-first birthday and married Arthur Tolkien. Their boys, Ronald and Hilary, were born there. Mabel did not like South Africa and was pleased to be able to take some home leave in April 1895, but Arthur had to stay to finish some work. Unfortunately he became ill, and died before Mabel could return to look after him.



*J.R.R. Tolkien's grandparents' homes
at "Beechwood", Church Road, and at 9 Ashfield Road.*

So Ronald, aged three, and his one-year-old brother Hilary came to stay at Grandma and Grandpa Suffield's at 9 Ashfield Road, Kings Heath. John Suffield had been a draper, but became bankrupt and worked as a commercial traveller. He had been educated at Queen's College, a Methodist school in Taunton, but later turned Unitarian. Grandma and Grandpa Tolkien lived at Beechwood, in Church Road, Moseley. The family had been piano makers, but John Tolkien had also become bankrupt and had turned to selling music. The publishing of music had been a family concern for at least a century; when Moseley Hall had been rebuilt in 1796, after the damage caused in the Priestley Riots of 1791, a great house-warming party was given by John Taylor II for which some music entitled *The Moseley Quadrilles* had been composed; the publisher of this music was called Tolkien.

Shortly after her husband died, Mabel and the boys went to live in Sarehole, a hamlet down the Wake Green Road, at 5 Gracewell (now Gracewell Homes). The boys were delighted. Opposite was a mill; up the road was a deep tree-lined sand pit, and by this was Moseley Bog. These later became the background for stories.



The Tolkien's' home at Gracewell

In 1899 Ronald went to King Edward's School in New Street. There was in those days no Number 1 bus, but a walk up the hill and down again into Moseley to catch a tram. So the family moved to 214 Alcester Road, on the corner of Tudor Road and on the tram route. Ronald thought the house "dreadful", and was probably pleased when they had to move so that it could be made into a fire station. (It is now an insurance agent's.) By this time Mabel Tolkien had become a Roman Catholic, to the horror of most of her relations, and was attending Saint Dunstan's, at that time a building of corrugated iron and wood on the corner of Station Road and Westfield Road. She therefore chose 86 Westfield Road. This was a much more interesting place for the boys. The railway, with a siding, ran across the bottom of the garden. Ronald was fascinated by the names on the Welsh coal trucks. Such as Gwaen-cae-Gurwen, Gilfach Goch, Yniscedwyn, Aberpergwm, Groeswen, Blaenrhondda, Pontrhydyfen and Tirpentwys.

After a couple of years, Mrs Tolkien "fell out" with the house and with Saint Dunstan's. She found the Oratory, and moved to 26 Oliver Road which was little more than a slum - the whole road has been completely rebuilt. For a time the boys were moved to Saint Philip's School, but Ronald soon outpaced his classmates and Mrs Tolkien taught both boys at home. In 1903 Ronald won a Foundation Scholarship to King Edward's, and returned there.



The Tolklens' home at 214 Alcester Road

Early in 1904 the boys had to go and stay with relatives while their mother was in hospital. When she left hospital Fr. Morgan, a priest at the Oratory who had befriended the family,

arranged for them to stay at a cottage in Cofton belonging to the Oratory. On 14th November 1904 Mrs Tolkien died. Fr. Morgan took charge of the boys and arranged for them to live with their aunt Beatrice Suffield in Stirling Road, Edgbaston. But they were not happy, and moved to Mrs Faulkner's at 37 Duchess Road. There is a plaque on Duchess House, Hagley Road, indicating that J. R. R. Tolkien lived nearby.

At school Ronald became interested in Old English and associated languages as well as Latin and Greek. He spoke at the school debating society in Latin, Greek and Anglo-Saxon. He was also good at rugby (and broke his nose in one match). In 1910 he won a Classical Exhibition to Exeter College, Oxford, where he continued playing rugby and debating. His interest in languages widened to include Old Norse and Finnish. In 1915 Ronald Tolkien completed a First Class honours degree in English Language and Literature.



The Tolkiens' home at 86 Westfield Road

But now we must return to Mrs Faulkner's. where the boys had a second-floor room. The room below was occupied by a (very good-looking) young lady pianist, Edith Bratt, and she and Ronald used to talk through the open windows. Eventually they started going on bicycle rides together, but Fr. Morgan disapproved, forbidding them to communicate until Ronald was 21. When it was discovered that they were still meeting (on bicycle rides) it was arranged that Edith should go to live with relations in Cheltenham. When Ronald was 21 he wrote to Edith. But she had become engaged because she thought that Ronald would have forgotten her after three years. They arranged to meet, and Edith broke off her engagement: she married Ronald in March 1916.

During the war Ronald served in the Lancashire Fusiliers, but he caught trench fever and spent much time in hospital and convalescing. After the war he went to Oxford and worked for a time on the New English Dictionary and teaching Anglo-Saxon until, in 1920, he became Reader in English Language at Leeds. In 1924 he became Professor of English Language. By this time there were two boys, and later that year Christopher was born. A daughter, Priscilla, was born in 1929.

Ronald Tolkien always wanted to go back to Oxford, and in 1925 he was elected Professor of Anglo-Saxon. Twenty years later he became Professor of English Language and Literature, a post he held for fourteen years until he retired in 1959. Tolkien did much research, but he did not always publish because he wanted. what he published to be perfect,

and he did not have the time to do all the rewriting. He wrote stories and poem, many of them started for his children, but few were published and some were never finished.

After retiring the Tolkiens lived at Headington, and later in Bournemouth, a place where they had often stayed on holiday. Edith died in 1971, and the next year Ronald was invited by Merton College to become an Honorary Fellow with rooms in a college house. But after only little more than a year, on a visit to friends in Bournemouth, he died on 2nd September 1973.

Tolkien is best known for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The stories show how well he remembered living in Moseley and visiting his relations in Worcestershire. Hobbiton was Sarehole, and "Bag End" (where Mr Bilbo Baggins lived) was the local name given to the farm at the end of a lane in Dormston, near Inkberrow, where his Aunt Jane lived.

The Silmarillion, a book of legends, as started as *The Book of Lost Tales* in 1917 but, because Tolkien kept revising and rewriting it, the book was only published posthumously after being edited by Christopher Tolkien. Sometimes Ronald Tolkien got carried away. Asked to write a preface for a book by George MacDonald, he began to explain by example what a fairy story is. But the example became Smith of Wootton Major - the preface was never written!

J. R. R. Tolkien was fond of company, especially that of men of similar interests. At Oxford C. S. Lewis led a group called "The Inklings" who met to read and discuss each other's works. Tolkien disliked Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, although he was sorry that he did so. Although he liked *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*, he did not like the final part of the trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*. Ronald was not always easy to listen to because of his manner of speaking, which he blamed on a rigger injury. because of this, Christopher Tolkien was invited to read *The Lord of the Rings* because he read better than his father.

Roy Thomas

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