



“Deep Roots are Not Reached by the Frost”: Tolkien and the Welsh Language

J. R. R. Tolkien was intensely conscious that he was English, indeed West Mercian. His legendarium, of which *The Lord of the Rings* is the most widely-read part, was also intended to be intensely English, as was his self-declared purpose in writing it: “to make a body of more or less connected legend . . . which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country.”¹

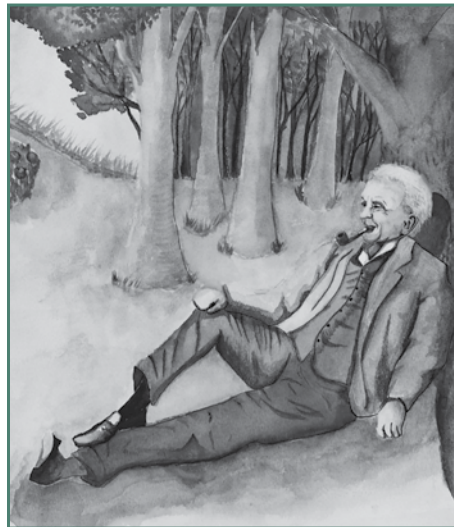
Yet, surprisingly, when native Welsh speakers heard Tolkien’s invented Elvish language, Sindarin, spoken in the Peter Jackson film adaptations, they initially thought they were hearing Welsh, and certainly not any form of English, ancient or modern.

This was by no means accidental. As Tolkien himself said in his O’Donnell Lecture on “English and Welsh”, delivered at Oxford University in October 1955, “the names of persons and places in this story were mainly composed on patterns deliberately modelled on those of Welsh (closely similar but not identical)”. He went on to observe that “this element in the tale has given perhaps more pleasure to more readers than anything else in it”.²

As J. S. Ryan has observed, “the ‘Welsh’/Celtic strand to [Tolkien’s] writing . . . must be given the serious attention hitherto accorded only to his Old English and Old Norse analogues”.³ As we shall see, this strand extends to the inspirational influence of tales and legends from the Welsh cultural heritage, a heritage with which Tolkien was very familiar. For example, the inscription on the Ring (One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them) which Gandalf reveals written in letters of fire to a quavering Frodo, hearkens back to the inscription on the ring given as a token of love by the famed mediaeval Welsh ruler Llewellyn the Great to his betrothed Joan in 1206: *Un Fodrwy i ddangos*

ein cariad, Un Fodrwy I’n clymu—“One Ring to show our love, One Ring to bind us”. This is still inscribed on many Welsh wedding rings to this day.

Another property of the Ring, that of making its wearer invisible, was shared by the ring given by Luned to Owain in the old Welsh tale *Iarllles y Ffynnon*, “The Lady of the Fountain”, which was included in the collection of ancient stories and myths to which its nineteenth century translator,



Bridget Ruffing, *Tolkien Smoking*.

Lady Charlotte Guest, gave the name *The Mabinogion*, a book with which Tolkien is known to have been very well acquainted. The stories in *The Mabinogion* were taken from the “The Red Book of Hergest”. It is intriguing, therefore, that Tolkien presented *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as “translations from the Red Book of Westmarch”, especially as Hergest Court, from which “The Red Book of Hergest” gets its name is in Herefordshire, a part of England bordering Wales known as the Marches. From the viewpoint of Tolkien’s native Warwickshire it is the West March.

But why should Tolkien’s intended “my-

thology for England” thus extend its roots beyond the soil of England? The good Professor himself suggests the answer in his 1955 O’Donnell Lecture: “Welsh is of this soil, this island, the senior language of the Men of Britain, and Welsh is beautiful.”

Tolkien loved the sound of Welsh from childhood. “I heard it coming out of the West. It struck at me in the names on coal-trucks; and drawing nearer it flickered past on station signs, a flash of strange spelling and a hint of a language old yet alive; even in an *adeiladwyd 1887*, ill-cut on a stone slab, it pierced my linguistic heart.”

Tolkien, critically, soon saw through the “strange spelling” to the elegant simplicity of the orthography of the Welsh language, rooted in the adaptation of the Latin alphabet to a Celtic language by monks 1400 years ago. Read according to its own rules the Old Speech of Britain has, as Tolkien saw even as a child, a mellifluous beauty, a language worthy of *beirdd a chantorion*, of bards and singers.

English-speakers are in no position to complain about Welsh orthography. That of their own language, as George Bernard Shaw is reputed to have observed, enables “fish” to be spelled “ghoti” (“gh” as in “tough”, “o” as in “women”, and “ti” as in “nation”). The old monks saw to it that Welsh spelling was far more rational and consistent!

As an undergraduate, Tolkien would spend the Skeat Prize he won for English at Exeter College Oxford in 1914 on a book on Welsh grammar by J. Morris-Jones. The collection of Tolkien’s books deposited after his death in the Library of Oxford’s Faculty of English shows that over the years he amassed a significant collection of books in and about Welsh, many annotated in his own hand. By 1920, when he holidayed in Trwyn Llanbedrog with his fami-

ly, it seems he could speak at least some of the modern Welsh language, in addition to being able to read it fluently in its mediaeval incarnation. He also lectured and wrote on themes related to Welsh language and literature throughout his academic career.

Welsh seems indeed to have appealed to him aesthetically even more than his beloved Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse, as he confides in a letter to W. H. Auden.⁴ In that letter he places Finnish equal in its appeal to him with the latter two languages, and this no doubt led him to base the other of his main invented languages, Quenya, the ancient “High Elven” speech, on Finnish, as Sindarin, the usual speech of Elves in Middle Earth, is based on Welsh.

But the Welsh roots of Tolkien’s legendarium go deeper than mere aesthetics or phonetics, deeper than the aural beauty of the language. It is clear that they are founded more profoundly in his comment that Welsh is “the senior language of the Men of Britain”. He was aware that the language which now survives as Welsh was spoken, in its ancestral form, in what is now England, long before the arrival of those who spoke what we now know as Old English.

The truth is that Tolkien’s “mythology for England” has roots that reach deeper than those of the English language and the people who called themselves English, roots sinking deep into the common British linguistic and ethnic heritage.

Tolkien actually dissented from many other scholars in his academic field, the philology of the English language, in arguing that, contrary to the prevailing view, the Old English, Anglo-Saxon, language had been influenced significantly by the native British speech ancestral to modern Welsh. “I would say to the English philologists that those who have no first-hand acquaintance with Welsh and its philology lack an experience necessary to their business.”

Tolkien drew practical inferences from that view. When he took up his first academic position as Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds in 1920, he introduced an option in mediaeval Welsh into the syllabus, which he taught himself. Much later, as Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford, Tolkien was largely responsible for adding mediaeval Welsh to the subsidiary language options available to undergraduate students in his subject, in the hope that this would “encourage some English candidates to take the first steps in Celtic philology”.

Tolkien was a generation ahead of most

of the scholars and archaeologists of his day in rejecting the view that the Anglo-Saxons had exterminated or driven out the native Britons when they conquered and colonised England. They imposed their rule and their language on the people they conquered but the indigenous people remained and intermarried with them.

In his lecture on “English and Welsh” he argues that “neither Celtic nor Germanic forms of speech belong in origin to these islands. They are both invaders and by similar routes. The bearers of these languages have clearly never extirpated the peoples of other language that they found before them”. He concludes that “the inhabitants of Britain, during recoded history, must have been in large part neither Celtic nor Germanic, that is *not* derived physically from the original speakers of those varieties of language, nor even from the already more racially mixed invaders who planted them in Britain. In that case they are and were not either ‘Celts’ or ‘Teutons’ according to the modern myth that still holds such an attraction for many minds”.

Tolkien cites much evidence from language and place names such as Walton, Walworth, and Walcot to support his argument that the Anglo-Saxons did not replace the people they called “wealas” (the origin of the modern words “Wales” and “Welsh”). Modern scholarship has largely come around to Tolkien’s view, supported most recently by DNA studies. Based on such studies, geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer argued in *The Origins of the British* (2006) that the Anglo-Saxons contributed only about 5.5% to the gene pool of the modern English people.

It follows, if this is the case and as Tolkien believed, that modern English people are descended, in the main, from the speakers of proto-Welsh. Such knowledge inspired Tolkien’s love for the Welsh language: “For many of us it rings a bell, or rather it stirs deep harp-strings in our linguistic nature. In other words: for satisfaction and delight—and not for imperial policy—we are still ‘British’ at heart. It is the native language to which in unexplored desire we would still go home.” It should be stressed that “British”, in this context, means the Old British language ancestral to modern Welsh, not the modern political state. With respect to the latter, Tolkien regarded himself as by nationality English, even Mercian, rather than British.

Considering his deep-rootedness, it is little surprise that Tolkien strongly supported

the Welsh people in their struggle to preserve their ancient language and heritage, not least because it was, he believed, his heritage as an Englishman also.

Tolkien clearly valued linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, as is shown by its presence in his subcreated world. Carl Phelpstead in his magisterial study of the issues covered in this essay, *Tolkien and Wales*, quotes my good friend Elwyn Fairburn on this point. Writing in *Tolkien: A Celebration*, edited by this magazine’s editor Joseph Pearce, Fairburn remarks of the Free Peoples of Middle Earth, Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Ents and Men: “They each preserve, without mutual hostility, their own speech and way of life and ethnicity.” Professor Phelpstead goes on to observe that “[s]uch diversity would not have survived under Sauron but is fostered by Aragorn when he becomes King of the West”.⁵ Tolkien was “at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches” and, Professor Phelpstead concludes, “his love of Wales and Welsh were inseparable from his love of, and sense of belonging to, England”.⁶

A Hobbit at heart, Stephen Brady has retired as near to the Shire as he can get, although he does not—yet—live in a hole in the ground.

References

1. Humphrey, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 144.
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, 1955 O’Donnell Lecture, “English and Welsh”, fn 33, published in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (New York: HarperCollins), 2006.
3. J. S. Ryan, “Mid-Century perceptions of the ancient Celtic peoples of ‘England’”, reprinted in J. S. Ryan *Tolkien’s View: Windows into his World* (Zurich & Jena, 2009), p. 197.
4. *Letters*, p. 214.
5. Carl Phelpstead, *Tolkien and Wales: Language, Literature and Identity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 115. The present author heartily recommends this work, by Tolkien’s present-day counterpart at Cardiff, which was a worthy winner of the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Inklings Studies in 2012. This book has greatly assisted him in writing this essay and it amplifies and expands eruditely the points raised within it.
6. *Ibid*, p. 116.