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## Flora of Middle-earth (2017) by Walter S. Judd and Graham A. Judd

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*Flora of Middle-earth: Plants of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium*, by Walter S. Judd and Graham A. Judd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi, 406 pp. \$34.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780190276317. [Also available in ebook format.]

At first glance, the most impressive thing about *Flora of Middle-earth* by botanist Walter S. Judd and illustrator Graham A. Judd (son of the former) is the sheer scope of the book. Apart from a complete survey of *all* the plants mentioned in Tolkien's legendarium, with minute descriptions of their characteristics, uses, etymology and many other things, it also contains an introductory course in botany that covers issues such as plant evolution, taxonomy and morphological terminology, and provides detailed keys for plant identification. For this reviewer, who painfully found out early in his academic career (elementary school) that the humanities would be the only possible means of redemption after struggling desperately and unfruitfully with anything remotely related to science, the mere scrutiny of the Table of Contents inspires awe. To put it bluntly, my initial response to the rather hardcore marriage between Middle-earth and science proposed by the authors was to wonder if all this cumbersome botany would really be worth it. The Judds, surely aware that potential readers would include people like myself, explain in the Introduction that "Tolkien's descriptions of Middle-earth are richly detailed . . . and thus create a realistic stage for his dramas . . . Thus, it is critical for our appreciation and understanding of Middle-earth to envision these scenes accurately" (2).

The skeptic now frowns dismissively: why, may we ask, should realism be an inherently positive trait to begin with? The answer is given a little further on, when the authors clarify that "one of our goals is to increase the visibility of and love for plants in our modern culture . . . taking the Ents as our role-models, we hope to foster the desire to protect the forests and meadows near our homes (and across the world)" (3), connecting the idea to the Tolkienian concept of Recovery: "Tolkien's fantasy allows us to see oaks, beeches, and pines in a fresh light" (3).

This type of reasoning is certainly alluring, and by now they have almost convinced me, but I can't help groaning slightly when the Judds go on to defend the amount of general botanical information in the book on the grounds that Tolkien, in one of his letters, states that "botanists want a more accurate description of the mallorn, of elanor, niphredil, alfirin, mallos and simbelmynë" (*Letters* 248) and contend, rather hastily, that "many readers have a similar desire" (4). Such assertions strike even me as unscientific: "many" is clearly a relative concept unless properly quantified, and I believe their assessment to be overly optimistic. After all, a desire to obtain more information about dragons does not necessarily entail a wish to acquire a zoological understanding of giant lizards or dinosaurs; if anything, it probably triggers a pursuit of anthropological, literary or otherwise culturally-related knowledge, perhaps centering on questions of what prompted people to invent

the dragon, and why it was clothed in garments of myth, legends or modern fantasy literature, rather than on strictly scientific considerations.

Then again, maybe I am biased in this respect. I have lived my whole life in close contact with all sorts of plants, and I have never felt the need to resort to botanical explanations to be able to appreciate and respect them. In this day and age, however, with a steadily growing number of people living in cities, and with a virtual dimension increasingly replacing physical landscapes, perhaps “common” trees and plants like beeches and firs are susceptible to cause awe and wonder in the general public, and not only among the ranks of botany aficionados or neo-romantics. Maybe trees and plants are so far removed from everyday experience of the city-dwelling masses that scientific botanical knowledge comes through as a fascinating and even imaginatively stimulating mythological grammar.

The question I will henceforth address is, however, more specific in nature: do I think that *Flora of Middle-earth* is successful in making the plants of the real world more interesting for Middle-earth fans and scholars? As I read through the book, my response to this question is rather mixed. The scant references to the legendarium in some chapters—especially the third, fourth and fifth—may well come through as a little overwhelming for the prospective convert. At the same time, the suggestive illustrations and the growing amount of references to Tolkien’s works from chapter six on (the greater part of the book, in all senses, at least for me), are a blessing for foot-sore pilgrims.

But let us now scrutinize the contents of *Flora of Middle-earth* with a more clinical eye. After the Introduction, Chapter Two features a survey of the climate zones of Middle-earth, and how they compare to the real world. This section, while offering very little in the way of analysis, does have the merit of providing an outline of correspondences which, I surmise, are valuable for, say, illustrators of Middle-earth scenes, or location scouts for future screen adaptations of Tolkien’s works, among others. We learn, for instance, that regions such as the western slopes of Ephel Dúath contain the kind of mixed deciduous forest that we would expect to find in the taiga zone “across northern Europe from Scandinavia and northern Russia, and across Siberia, extending eastward into extreme northern China” (10). What I miss in the general discussion of this chapter—and indeed in the rest of the book, by and large—is some assessment of the implications of such correspondences. For example, the authors say that it is “interesting that the boreal forest zone is absent in Middle-earth,” but leave it at that, without any further clarification or speculation. Apart from some scattered instances where the Judds provide perfunctory explanations of the protagonism of a given geographical feature—such as the frequent setting of wetlands in the episodes concerning Húrin, Huor and their children, which the authors feel is due to the influence of Ulmo, “who had chosen the House of Hador to accomplish his purpose” (23)—the chapter is almost exclusively descriptive. This, in itself, is not necessarily a fault, and some sections do contain fascinating information and perspicacious observations, for instance the fact that the trees of Middle-earth

include all the 20 genera of trees that are autochthonous in Britain except maple and hornbeam, adding that sugar maples do appear in Alan Lee's illustration of Cerin Amroth for the illustrated edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (24).<sup>1</sup>

A final section of the chapter discusses how Men, Hobbits, Elves and “angelic beings” (Valar and Maiar) have altered the landscape on Middle-earth. Some potentially fruitful parallels are established here, for instance that Saruman's actions “clarify those more mythological activities of both Morgoth and Sauron” (28), but as before, the arguments are not further pursued. I don't think the book would have suffered if the authors had given the reader a little more meat on the bones here, perhaps by explaining, in the referred example, how Saruman's activities at Isengard reflect Morgoth's thwarting of the Spring or Arda and his killing of the Two Trees, as well as Sauron's fouling of Dorthonion, his desecration of the Meneltarma and the darkening of Greenwood the Great. One may argue that this is not the purpose of this book, but I think the position of the writers (and the editors at the Oxford University Press) is not entirely consistent in this respect, as on other occasions the text does offer more detailed speculation. Thus the lack of depth in most of the discussion therefore seems to betray a want of knowledge rather than a conscious omission. This inconsistency is also reflected in the general bibliographical references, which include some obscure secondary sources on the plants or Middle-earth—such as a privately published Australian compendium by one Geoff Williams—but leaves out important books and articles on the role of nature and the plant-world in Tolkien's works (Liam Campbell's *The Ecological Augury in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Cynthia M. Cohen's “The Unique Representation of Trees in *The Lord of the Rings*,” and Shelley Saguario and Deborah Cogan Thacker's “Tolkien and Trees” come to mind).

Chapter Three briefly defines what a plant is (from the botanical point of view), outlines the evolution of plant life and presents basic taxonomic information. The authors then proceed to compare the scientific view with the mythological origins of plant-life as described in *The Silmarillion*, contending that Tolkien “likely held a theistic evolutionary viewpoint”<sup>2</sup> in this respect: “there is, in fact, no conceptual conflict between the mythological statements concerning the creation of plants provided in *The Silmarillion* . . . and [Tolkien's] view that the pattern of plant diversity in our world reflects genealogical descent with modification” (35). Such statements could have been qualified by other theological approaches to nature in Tolkien's work, for instance Alfred K. Siewers's article “Tolkien's Cosmic-Christian Ecology”, or

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<sup>1</sup> As an aside at the very end of the book, the authors state that maples also appear in the poem “The Trees of Kortirion” (345), adding (somewhat arbitrarily), that maples are left out of the discussion because of their absence elsewhere in the legendarium.

<sup>2</sup> The authors explain that this view was probably first articulated by a Harvard plant systematist named Asa Gray in 1880, in response to Darwin's findings.

Yannick Imbert's thomist perspective, as explained in his essay "Eru will enter Eä: The Creational and Eschatological Hope of J.R.R. Tolkien". It may be that I am making unjustified demands on a book purporting to describe the plant life of Middle-earth, but as the aims also include a wish "to foster the desire to protect the forests and meadows near our homes" (3), a more nuanced view of the theological perspective could have been provided for the benefit of ecologically concerned Christian (or otherwise spiritually inclined) readers.

Chapter Four describes the general morphological traits of plants. The justification for this is that we need to distinguish between the plants around us in order to appreciate them, "including those plants characteristic of J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium" (37). The very phrasing here betrays that the botanical agenda is higher on the list of priorities than a study of Tolkien's works as such. This feeling is accentuated when the authors casually state that in order to appreciate these plants "we need a few descriptive terms" (37)—and then proceed to explain no fewer than 155 of these terms over the next ten pages, without any reference to Tolkien's works. Personal experience tells me that one can be perfectly appreciative of plant-life without knowing the meaning of such terms as epiphytes, rhizomes, or lenticels (or indeed most of the other terms on the list), and though readers are free to skip the chapter if they feel we can do without these concepts, the suspicion this far into the book is that the authors are using Tolkien as an excuse to stimulate an interest in botany, in a vein similar to that employed by Brian Bates in *The Real Middle-earth: Exploring the Magic and Mystery of the Middle Ages, J.R.R. Tolkien and "The Lord of the Rings"* (2002) which, however fascinating in itself, delivers a lot of Anglo-Saxon history and next to nothing of the Tolkienian content promised in the subtitle.

The already fine line between botanical propaganda and information relevant for Tolkien fans and scholars is pushed even further in the fifth chapter, which is essentially made up of two keys for the identification of "plants of Middle-earth"—a misleading label, as these keys could have been extracted from any guide to plant identification in general and there is no mention of the specificities of Middle-earth whatsoever. The effect of all this accumulation of data is that sixty-six pages into the book, rather heavy demands are made on readers who have acquired this book because of a primary interest in Tolkien and Middle-earth rather than a fascination with botanical intricacies, and I suspect many will feel compelled to give up at this stage.

The authors and editors were probably aware of this risk and strategically made the Two Trees the subject of the sixth chapter. Most of the first (and longest) section here is devoted to rehearsing the presence and role of these trees in *The Silmarillion*, and the account is not always accurate—for instance, the authors say that in the Third Age, the only vestiges to be found of the unsullied light of the Two Trees are found in Eärendil's star, and in the phial Galadriel gives to Frodo (68-69), while we know from *The Silmarillion* that

Varda created stars from vats of the Two Trees, among them the constellation of the Valacirca (57). The best part is an illuminating discussion of how the Two Trees combine elements of real plants, although the conclusion to which we expect to arrive—that they somehow embody both the tangible plant-world in general, and the more elusive spiritual reality—is not made explicit. The chapter ends with a sweeping survey of trees of similarly paramount importance in other mythologies, and an etymological and a botanical description based on information taken from Tolkien’s oeuvre.

One important point about the Two Trees which is not discussed in this chapter (or elsewhere in the book), and which has great implications for both the the plant-life and the existentialist conception of Arda across time, is a reference from one of Tolkien’s letters in which he asserts that the combined light of the Two Trees, “(derived from light before any fall) is the light of art undivorced from reason that sees things both scientifically (or philosophically) and imaginatively (or subcreatively) and ‘says that they are good’—as beautiful” (*Letters* 148). The ideal approach (ideal because the light comes from Ilúvatar) to the world is thus premised on a combination of art and reason, imagination and science—or, to take the argument one step further, aesthetic and utilitarian appreciations. Given the importance of the Two Trees for the legendarium, I think the authors would have done well to research this a little further, because the implications in later ages are significant. As Tolkien hints in his letter, apart from the sacred, artistic and aesthetic connotations, life in Middle-earth also has a more prosaic and utilitarian dimension. To Verlyn Flieger’s contention, that “Tolkien has devised for his light a sequence of diminution and fragmentation leading to its increasing spiritual and physical distance from the peoples of Middle-earth” (97), we could add that the darker dimensions of mortality are shown not only in people but also in plants, and especially trees. In effect, as we move from Valinor of the First Age to Númenor of the Second and Middle-earth of the Third, trees progressively lose their divine connotations (though never completely).<sup>3</sup> The cyclical decline of the White Tree of Gondor, and with it the Gondorian

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<sup>3</sup> Númenor is in many ways pictured as an ostensibly *earthly* paradise, as opposed to the Undying Lands in Valinor, and the various species of Nísimaldar (fragrant trees) brought to the Númenóreans by the Elves of Tol Eressëa (closer to Valinor) reflect this: not only are they extremely large, abundant, fragrant and evergreen; their names also relate them to the spheres of the divine: *oiolairë* (ever-summer); *nessamelda* (beloved by Nessa); *vardarianna* (gift of Varda), *taniquelassë* (leaf of Taniquetil), and *yavannamíre* (jewel of Yavanna). (*Unfinished Tales* 167). However, Tar Aldarion, the sixth King of Númenor, sets the scene for future disasters of the island when he adopts a merely utilitarian stance with regards to trees, appropriating them for imperialistic purposes, without taking into account their sacred and aesthetic dimension. Later, in Middle-earth, the trees are pictured as pale shadows of their once majestic selves, and not even Gil-galad can make the *mellyrn* grow there; only Galadriel can do so through her special powers (*Unfinished Tales* 168), and even then they are much smaller than their Númenórean counterparts.

kingdom, is mediated by a series of preceding White Trees, increasingly distanced from Valinor in time and space. In other words, it is important for our general understanding of trees in the legendarium to take into account the meaning of the combined light of the Two Trees, and its lingering influence, however diminished.

The bulk of the book is made up of the seventh chapter, 273 pages long, which contains detailed information concerning no less than 141 plants of Middle-earth. The information is divided into seven categories: the common and scientific names of the plant; a quote from Tolkien's works in which the plant features; a discussion of the importance of the plant in Tolkien's works; the etymology of the plant's names in different languages (including Middle-earth languages); the distribution and ecology of the plant; economic uses; and a description of the plant under study. All in all, roughly the first half of each entry is related to the legendarium, as the second (distribution, ecology, economic uses and description) is applicable to the plant independently of its presence in Middle-earth. While the etymological discussions sometimes refer to Middle-earth languages, it seems to me that the most obviously relevant category for anyone primarily interested in Tolkienian matters would be the part devoted to the significance of the plant in the legendarium. Alas, this discussion is again mostly descriptive—though there are exceptions, such as the entry on coffee, in which the authors discuss Tolkien's doubts concerning the plant in his revisions of *The Hobbit*, and the possible reason that led him to keep it (while deleting the references to tomatoes). In general terms, however, I feel that a lot more could be made of the symbolic significance of the plants, which are woven into the fabric of the legendarium in a much more intricate way than the Judds are ready to acknowledge.

Let me give one example of this. In the discussion of the plant aeglos, (gorse or whin), the authors comment on its presence on Amon Rhûd and conclude that

although the placement of these plants on this mountain is ecologically appropriate, neither do they simply contribute to the veracity [sic] of Middle-earth. Plants such as aeglos and seregon contribute to the mood and give the reader a clearer understanding of the unfolding narrative theme. When the reader understands aeglos and seregon, we better understand the tragic life of Túrin. We don't expect, in the end, much good to come from Túrin's new home (79-80).

While such conclusions could be true for Túrin, they are not so for his cousin Tuor, who encounters a similar scenery, with similar species, when drawing near to the mountains that surround Gondolin: Túrin's entrance in the mountain puts him on a dark and self-destructive path leading to suffering and death for both Elves and Men, himself included, but Tuor's entrance sets him on a path that leads to illumination for both his own kin and that of the Elves.

It should perhaps be added that Túrin not only encounters aeglos on the fateful hill Amon Rhûd, but also “ancient thorn-trees rooted in rock” (*Children of Húrin* 128), which are the exact same trees that figure in the description of Tuor’s approach to Gondolin: “a tangled thicket of thorn trees” (*Unfinished Tales* 44). This intriguing parallel, however, is absent from the discussion—the Judds choose to centre on the associations of hawthorn with the entrance to the world of fairy in Celtic folklore (173) for the Tuor-episode—but if it *had* been taken into account, it could have led to different and more far-ranging conclusions. For instance, Túrin’s coming through the thicket to Amon Rhûd heralds disaster, which is intimately connected to his refusal to engage with Elves on any deeper level, Tuor’s penetration of the tangled trees takes him to the luminous Hidden City which holds a twin destiny with the elf Idril in store for him, and he later leads the Gondolin refugees to safety in the paradisiacal Nan Tathren—something which later allows their son Eärendil to take the Silmaril up into the sky and throw Morgoth out of Middle-earth once and for all.

The reasons for Tolkien’s use of trees in these examples may well be as intricate as the trees that guard the entrance to both places. Personally I believe that it is not the specificities of aeglos or hawthorn that are important here, but rather the fact that they are part of a larger category of thorny plants or trees with tangled branches that prevent both Elves and Men from seeing Ilúvatar’s guiding light clearly. Tom Shippey says as much in his discussion of trees and forests in Middle-earth as part of “a set of images presenting a world-view. . . . The stars give a promise . . . of a world elsewhere; the trees represent both this world and a barrier to starlight, something through the branches of which mortals look up to try to catch a glimpse of the vision which would otherwise be clear” (202). Shippey continues: “the world is like a wood, in which one can easily wander lost and confused [but] in the end (and in this context that perhaps means after life in Middle-earth) all will become clear” (203). Overall, crouching and thorny trees and shrubberies in the tales concerning Túrin and Tuor are used to emphasise the risk of losing one’s way and falling prey to animal instincts. In “Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin” it is explicitly stated that the “lacing branches” of the hawthorn “were a dense roof . . . so low that often Tuor and Voronwë must crawl under like beasts stealing back to their lair” (44), and there are countless other examples of the same thing, as I have discussed elsewhere (Simonson 2017).<sup>4</sup> While Tuor accepts Voronwë and Idril as companions and helps both Elves and Men, the obnoxious, proud and solitary Túrin, unwilling to create deeper bonds with Beleg and various elf-maidens, emerges from Amon Rhûd only to lose his way and ends up leaving Men (and women) and Elves that attempt to befriend him dead in his wake. In other words, the paradox expressed by the combined

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<sup>4</sup> It is true that instances of such effects are separately mentioned in the entries for “Hazel” and “Hawthorn” in the Judds’ book, but no general contentions are established.

light of the two trees is yet again reflected by the plant world, this time in Beleriand, and seems to hint that the twin destiny of Elves and Men is something inherently positive, though difficult to achieve. While such unions embody the combined light of Telperion and Laurelin, tangled and encroaching trees frequently show the difficulties of both seeing and remaining true to the light in the mortal lands of Middle-earth.

All in all, even with its flaws, *Flora of Middle-earth* is a substantial and valuable addition to the corpus of studies that highlight the realistic features of Tolkien's legendarium. Indeed, I think this book does more than most to unveil solid layers of realism in Tolkien's work. For Tolkien scholars, the most immediate value of the book is that it comprehensively shows how the plant-life (and indeed climate zones) of Middle-earth correspond to the real world, thus lending a whole new weight to Tolkien's statement (quoted by the Judds) that Middle-earth is the real world but in an imaginary time period (*Letters* 220). Most previous scholarship devoted to elucidating correspondences between Middle-earth and the real world has focused on cultural traditions and languages, and comparatively little research has been done on the realistic features of the natural world in Tolkien's legendarium.<sup>5</sup> In the end, rather than a showroom displaying elaborate woodwork, this book comes through as a clearly delimited plantation from which a wealth of primary resources can be extracted for purposes of elucidating the role of trees and other plants in certain episodes of the legendarium, and produce more polished works of scholarship. As an encyclopaedia it is not only informative—apart from the detailed descriptions of the plants of Middle-earth, the book also contains sections devoted to “Plants of Ithilien,” “Food plants of Middle-earth,” “Hobbit names,” “Bree names,” and “Unidentified and excluded Middle-earth plants”—but also highly innovative and even delightful, owing to the mixture of fact and fiction, science and art.

One last word needs to be said about the illustrations, which are “integral to what we seek to accomplish,” in the words of illustrator Graham Judd (347). Judd's black-and-white relief wood carvings combine accurate representations of the morphological features of most of the plants under study with symbolically rendered scenes from the legendarium, and they thus manage to convey the mixed essence of the book as such: art and science. This, I feel, is especially appropriate in a book purporting to deal with plants and trees in Tolkien's work, precisely because of Tolkien's previously quoted words concerning the blended light of the original Two Trees as “the light of

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<sup>5</sup> Concerning the world of plants in Tolkien's world, Dinah Hazell's *The Plants of Middle-earth* is no more than a perfunctory introduction in comparison. Cynthia M. Cohen's article “The Unique Representation of Trees in *The Lord of the Rings*” is valuable but brief, and centers only on trees in *The Lord of the Rings*. Karen Wynn Fonstad's *The Atlas of Middle-earth* also includes important observations concerning the natural world, including plant distribution, but that is not the focus of that work either.

art undivorced from reason that sees things both scientifically (or philosophically) and imaginatively (or subcreatively)” (*Letters* 148). My favourite illustration, the one for hemlock, is at once abstract and realistic and subtly captures both dimensions: intricate beauty and austere majesty, light and gloom, immortality and mortality, which are indeed elements integral to the stories concerning Elves and Men in Tolkien’s works.

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