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"Uncle Curro": J.R.R. Tolkien's Spanish Connection (2018) by José Manuel Ferrández Bru

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"Uncle Curro": J.R.R. Tolkien's Spanish Connection, by José Manuel Ferrández Bru. Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2018. xiii, 150 pp. £17.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781911143352. [Also available as an ebook. An earlier version of this book was published in Spanish in 2013 as *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien: El "Tío Curro."*]

Francis Xavier Morgan has long been an intriguing but peripheral figure in accounts of Tolkien's life. A Roman Catholic priest, in 1902 he befriended Tolkien's mother and her sons when they moved to a home near the Birmingham Oratory; Mabel Tolkien had converted to Catholicism in 1900. After Mabel's death in 1904, Father Francis became legal guardian to Ronald and Hilary Tolkien, ensuring that they remain in the Catholic faith—many of their relatives were anti-papist—and that they would not want for support.

José Manuel Ferrández Bru has been concerned to show, first in shorter writings¹ and now in his book-length study *"Uncle Curro,"* that Father Francis was of more importance to Tolkien than biographers have suggested. He was one of Tolkien's "leading guides" in both his faith and his studies. "Indeed, he was primarily responsible for ensuring that Tolkien attended Oxford University, thanks to his financial support and, indirectly, giving his initial opposition to Tolkien's relationship with the woman who later would become his wife" (*"Uncle Curro,"* p. xii). He was a regular visitor to the Tolkien family when they lived in Leeds, and he continued to be close after they moved to Oxford. Tolkien remembered him as a "second father" who had miraculously come into his life with "love and care and humour," and when his guardian passed away in 1935 it was a moment of poignant grief such as he had felt at the death of his mother.²

Roughly the first half of *"Uncle Curro"* expands our knowledge of the background and early years of Father Francis, whom Humphrey Carpenter inadequately called "half Welsh and half Anglo-Spanish (his mother's family were prominent in the sherry trade)."³ Ferrández Bru traces at great length the course of his subject's families as well as the evolution of the sherry industry in which they made their fortunes. The father of Francis Morgan, also named Francis, was of Welsh ancestry, but English for all intents and purposes. As wine merchants, his family had close ties to producers in Spain; he himself settled there and married Maria Manuela Osborne, whose parents were Spanish and English. Francisco Javier Morgan-Osborne, the third of four children of Francis and Maria Manuela, was born in 1857 in Port St. Mary on the Bay of Cadiz, and was usually called "Curro," the Andalusian colloquial equivalent of "Francis." Like his mother, he was raised Roman Catholic. In time, his name would be shortened (omitting his maternal surname) and anglicized, as he attended the Oratory School in Birmingham and pursued Catholic studies in London and Louvain. He became

an Oratorian novitiate in 1877 and was ordained a priest in 1883, joining the Community of the Birmingham Oratory shortly afterward.

Father Francis figures most prominently in biographies of J.R.R. Tolkien in what is arguably the most dramatic episode of Tolkien's youth. In 1908 Ronald met Edith Bratt, an orphan like himself. By the next summer, they were in love. Although they kept their relationship clandestine, at last their meetings became known to Father Francis, who was shaken to learn of his ward's deception. Tolkien was supposed to be studying for the Oxford scholarship examination, and his interest in Edith may have contributed to his failure to win an award on his first attempt. When Ronald and Edith continued to meet, despite his guardian's clear wishes, Father Francis forbade him to see or write to Edith until he came of age three years later (Tolkien was then eighteen, Edith twenty-one). Because of this "firm stance against a young love with poor prospects (at that moment) for Tolkien's career and, in general, for his future," Ferrández Bru writes, "a covert and unjust animosity" has existed toward Father Francis among Tolkien biographers (p. xii). But this is overstating the case.

When one reads any account of Tolkien's early relationship with the woman who would become his wife, it is hard not to take the side of young love put asunder. But Humphrey Carpenter in his biography of Tolkien shows clearly that Father Francis acted reasonably under the circumstances, and that Tolkien responded according to the social conventions of the day, which demanded obedience to a parent or guardian. Raymond Edwards tells the same story in his *Tolkien*, but defends Father Francis at greater length against a charge of tyranny; Edwards points out that as Tolkien was under the age of twenty-one, he could not even have become engaged (at that time, a legally binding contract) without his guardian's consent. Joseph Pearce, on the other hand, in *Tolkien: Man and Myth* applies the words "furious," "ultimatum," and "reprehensible" to Father Francis, in contrast to the figure in Carpenter who seems more disappointed than angry, strict but loving. And Michael White, in his *Tolkien: A Biography*, imagines Ronald's conversations with his guardian even more dramatically, with the priest's anger "boiling over."⁴

Ferrández Bru asserts that there is also a perceived image of Father Francis, "an unpleasant portrait, depicting Morgan as noisy and vulgar, his personality defined as petty and shortsighted, and his temperament invariably presented as firm and intransigent" (p. xiii). Carpenter describes him as "not a man of great intellect, but . . . [with] an immense fund of kindness and humour and a flamboyance that was often attributed to his Spanish connections. Indeed he was a very noisy man, loud and affectionate, embarrassing to small children at first but hugely lovable when they got to know him" (*Biography*, p. 27). These, Ferrández Bru says, "are stereotypes rather than realities" (p. xiii), though even in his own account they seem to have a basis in truth. He effectively demonstrates his

subject's warm personality and natural generosity, in part with memories provided by Tolkien's daughter Priscilla; and he shows that, although Father Francis may not have furthered his ward's intellect to a significant degree, nevertheless he helped to fashion Tolkien's personal religious vision.

Ferrández Bru necessarily draws upon existing biographies of Tolkien, but he does so with care, and through extensive original research adds information of value. His suggestion that Tolkien's Middle-earth writings have parallels with Spanish Historical Romanticism may be worth pursuing further. And he makes a remarkable comparison between one of Tolkien's riddles in *The Hobbit*, "Voiceless it cries, / wingless flutters," and a very similar riddle composed by Father Francis's great-aunt, the novelist Cecilia Böhl de Faber. He is less effective when he speculates on ways that Father Francis might have inspired aspects of Tolkien's works: for example, that an occasion in which he upset a small child could have been the inspiration for the troll frightening Mrs. Thomas in the poem "The Bumpus" (revised as Mrs. Bunce in "Perry-the-Winkle"), or that the homeland of Father Francis in southern Spain was an influence on the geography of Middle-earth. "Is it possible," Ferrández Bru asks, "that Arcos de la Frontera [a town in the province of Cadiz] was the inspiration for Minas Tirith, and Andalusia [the larger region of Spain] for Gondor?" But he admits that this is "speculating wildly" (p. 132).

"*Uncle Curro*" includes two family trees, a selection of photographic portraits and reproductions, and a bibliography, but unfortunately no index.

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1. These include "J.R.R. Tolkien and the Spanish Civil War," *Mallorn* 51 (Spring 2011), 16–19; "'Wingless Fluttering': 'Some Personal Connections in Tolkien's Formative Years,'" *Tolkien Studies* 8 (2011), pp. 51–65; and "J.R.R. Tolkien's 'Second Father' Fr. Francis Morgan and Other Non-Canonical Influences" in *The Return of the Ring: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Conference 2012*, ed. by Lynn Forest-Hill (Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2016), pp. 9–17. Some of the material in these essays appears again in "*Uncle Curro*."

2. Letter to Michael Tolkien, 24 January 1972, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 416–417. In this letter Tolkien states that

Father Francis died in 1934 at the age of 77; in fact, his death was in 1935, aged 78.

3. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 27.

4. In addition to Carpenter's authorized biography of 1977, the works cited here are Edwards, *Tolkien* (London: Robert Hale, 2014); Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (London: HarperCollins, 1998); and White, *Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Little, Brown, 2001). The earliest full biography of Tolkien, Daniel Grotta-Kurska's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976), includes the story of Father Francis's actions, but with errors.