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## "Something Has Gone Crack": New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War (2019), edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Annika Röttinger

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*"Something Has Gone Crack" New Perspective on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Annika Röttinger. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019. [x], 383 pp. \$29.15 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703412.

The role that the Great War played in the shaping of J.R.R. Tolkien's life, letters and fiction has been a central to Tolkien studies in the twenty-first century. John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003), Janet Brennan Croft's *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2004) and Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond's *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* are all essential, landmark publications on the topic and have sparked further searches into Tolkien's wartime experiences. It is surprising then, that after forty previous publications, this is the first volume by Walking Tree Publishers which deals with Tolkien and the Great War. However, this does not disparage from the excellent collection of chapters that are presented and, as Croft notes, the study of Tolkien's Great War experiences is "by no means exhausted" (vi). In the light of the Great War's recent centenary, the book hopes to spark new ideas from its readers, generating a renewed interest in the Great War and its applicableness to Tolkien's work (vi).

In the opening pages of the book, a chronology details Tolkien's activities between his initial reporting for military service in October, 1914 and final demobilisation on the 16th July, 1916. This becomes a wonderfully essential resource as various chapters jump backwards and forwards across Tolkien's chronology, referencing dates but not the connected event, or the event but not its date. Additionally, a map of the Battle of the Somme by Derek Clayton is provided and comes in use for several chapters.

The book itself is structured into four sections: (1) The Conduct of War: Reading the Great War in Middle-earth's Wars; (2) Biography: The Personal Becomes Art; (3) Roots of Major Themes of the Legendarium in the Great War; and (4) Alterity: Race, Class Gender, and Sexuality in War. The book relies heavily on *The Lord of the Rings*, leaving some room for enlightening discussions on *The Book of Lost Tales* and "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." There is some overlap of material in these sections (as may be expected in a collection of sixteen chapters) and some chapters feel misplaced between various sections. The Conduct of War contains four chapters and deals with the wider scope of the Great War, giving significant context to Tolkien's experiences.

We start with Tom Shippey and John Bourne, whose chapter links with Michael Flowers's later chapter as they all aim to correct key misconceptions about the Battle of the Somme that have become inflated in the public conscience over the past century. They critically illuminate how these elaborated, generic ideas have fed Humphrey Carpenter's "conventional" approach to the Battle of the Somme in his authoritative biography on Tolkien. Shippey and Bourne remind

readers that the aim of the Battle of the Somme was not to thwart the Germans, but to secure observation points (14). In the light of this research and other biographical studies of Tolkien, the chapter's argument raises the question of how authoritative Carpenter's work is in 2019. Carpenter's original biography was published in 1977 and is now forty-two years old (almost half a century). It has only seen major competition in the form of Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* and the chronological work of Scull and Hammond. But, if Carpenter relies on convention when detailing Tolkien's reaction to the Great War, are there possibly other areas of the biography where he has relied on other social and political conventions? With the staggering wealth of material that has been unearthed in this time, is a new biography required that avoids such blunders?

The chapter closes with a robust evaluation of how Tolkien employed the word "hero." It is argued that Tolkien's outlook on heroism mirrors that of his contemporary Catholic and fellow King Edward's student, Field Marshal Sir William Slim. They both came to the conclusion that heroism could be found in loneliness and this stemmed from their experiences on the Front. This is what forms the courage and heroism of the hobbits; Bilbo faces the spiders and Smaug alone, Sam faces Shelob and Cirith Ungol alone. We could add to this how characters from *The Book of Lost Tales* such as Lúthien, Beren, Turin and Eärendil all exhibit a similar courage in the face of loneliness and defeat.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Tolkien identified this in his early characters and wished to bestow it more fully into his hobbits. The positioning of this chapter at the start of book sets an impressive tone and standard for what is to come afterwards. Applying a "new perspective" certainly helps to peel away the overlooked errors of past scholarship.

Picking up from Shippey and Bourne, Glenn E. Peterson examines the parallels between the strategic blunders of the Great War and five chronological battles that occur in the First Age of Arda. Peterson argues that although Tolkien did not have first-hand experience in some of these battles, he will have been exposed to information through the media as "the war . . . would have been inescapable in English society at the time" (28). He convincingly compares the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand with Fëanor's father, Bruithwir. Before Peterson moves on to the main body of his argument however, he digresses into an interesting albeit underdeveloped and misplaced comparison of Aragorn and Beowulf's roles as leaders. The section merits its own study; it does not fit into the overall tone or argument of Peterson's study on the First Age and key Great War battles.

Annika Röttinger's addition to the book sets out to examine *The Lord of the Rings* through "the lens of *applicability*" (46). This is done in three distinct

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1. The spelling of Eärendil will change depending on the chapter and text is being discussed.

categories: "Visual descriptions," "Emotional impressions," and "Political and social level." The core elements of the chapter are not greatly innovative as much of the material has been covered elsewhere and the author's supposedly fresh approach to the Dead Marshes raises the question of why John Garth's article "As Under a Green Sea': Visions of War in the Dead Marshes" is not referenced. The applicability of Tolkien's experiences in war is clear for all to see. As the author interestingly notes, the orcs themselves are biologically mass-produced weapons by Sauron to annihilate his opposition. Just as the forces of evil embody the devastating effects of war, the hobbits best represent the soldiers that returned. When it comes to Frodo leaving the Shire and Middle-earth, readers frequently conclude that it is due to his inability to reconnect with life in the Shire. The PTSD that Frodo experiences leaves him in a vulnerable position; the only cure lies in metaphorically dying and transcending above his earth-bound trauma and towards Valinor.

Tal Tovy shifts our focus to the broader concept of "total war" and how *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were conceived and written in a period when total war became the new form of warfare. The chapter opens and closes with an unneeded comment on "intentional fallacy." Where Tovy wishes to place *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* clearly within the contextual parameters of the nineteenth century and World War Two, broader comments on the reader's temporal experiences of 9/11 and more modern warfare feels misplaced. However, Tovy draws on various contemporary voices to Tolkien that commented on and predicted the changes in warfare between the small scale wars of the nineteenth century and the large-scale wars of the twentieth century. The reader is expertly navigated through the complex history of Western war in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, explaining how the French and American Revolutions brought new objectives to war. It moves through the twentieth century where the industrial revolution, whole nation enlistment, and the assault of the home front through aerial bombardment meant that the whole nation, not just the soldiers, suffered. Tovy identifies this in Sauron and the Fellowship's objectives; whereas one desires to destroy and enslave Middle-earth, the other intends on destroying the Ring and eradicating a global threat (82 - 83). Tovy further establishes that before the Great War, there had been a century without any major wars or conflicts. Here, a clear comparison to The Watchful Peace of the Third Age has been missed. After all, Tolkien did repeatedly come back to the idea that Middle-earth was the primary world and that he had "found" *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The second section of the book moves on to examining Tolkien's personal experiences of the Somme and other locations during the Great War. John Rosegrant and Wilhelm Kuehs both look into what Tolkien meant by the titular phrase "something has gone crack" and two distinctly different interpretations are

drawn. Rosegrant argues that the phrase is deeply personal to Tolkien and expresses how he relies on somatization to channel his trauma psychologically and physically. His reaction to the war (and the personal losses he experienced throughout his life) either led to prolonged illnesses that re-emerged or descriptions of receiving a physical blow. Rosegrant convincingly traces this between 1916 and 1919, arriving at the conclusion that his trauma led to his trench fever (which typically lasted five to six days) recurring over the course of eighteen months. His illness was aided by his additional ailments that occurred at strategic moments, such as when he was declared fit for duty in June 1917 and April 1918. When juxtaposed against Rosegrant's internalisation of the phrase, Kuehs externalisation opens up a fascinating dialogue of meaning. Kuehs compellingly suggests that the "crack" was the fracturing of the heroic code and Arthurian chivalry that Tolkien had read about in his youth. Kuehs bolsters his argument by adding how the frames and codes that the Hague Convention of 1899 initially mapped out were crushed under the weight of mechanised warfare. Within the Great War, the soldier was "no longer important as a possible hero," in the evolution of total war the soldier "became part of the material of war" (159). The chapter carefully applies the theories of Umberto Eco and this is where Kuehs and Rosegrant split. The former draws on Eco's ideas of the open and closed text to claim that German society was highly militarised and gave rise to the closed, Fascist literature of Ernst Jünger, whose novel *In Stahlgewittern* and essays meta-abducted the author's experiences of the soldier on the Front. Jünger cast away the ancient, mythical heroes and rebranded the modern soldier as a "mythological superman" (161). These soldiers, Kuehs purports, are the ideal "prototype" (162) of Tolkien's orcs and ascertains through this insight that Tolkien was indeed commenting on the Nazi's "ruining, perverting, misapplying" of Germany's "noble northern spirit" and cultural history (*The Letters of Tolkien*, no. 45).

Michael Flowers echoes a similar message from Shippey and Bourne's opening chapter, calling Carpenter's biography "very sketchy" in its guess work around Tolkien's time in East Yorkshire (121). Other attempts to fill in Tolkien's biography in East Yorkshire and its impact on the legendarium by John Garth and Phil Mathison have, Flowers considers, been helpful but "neglectful" (122). This is due to the unfamiliarity of the writers with East Yorkshire or Tolkien's writings. Admirably, Flowers takes up the mantle of filling in the blanks. The sole focus of the chapter is to flesh out the partially constructed chronology of Tolkien's time in East Yorkshire and Flowers superbly displays his acute familiarity with the surrounding area by painting a vivid picture of East Yorkshire in 1917-1918. He proceeds by tracing various ways in which East Yorkshire directly influenced Tolkien's legendarium, drawing detailed geographical and biological comparisons through his own primary research at the locations. One of

the most interesting aspects of this survey is the minute similarities in three-trunked tree in Roos's church grounds and Tolkien's description of Hírilorn, the mighty Beech tree that Tinwelint locks Tinúviel in. The chapter closes with a newly constructed chronology that draws on previous scholarship and Flowers's new and highly insightful additions.

Section three turns its eye towards the immediate influence of the Great War on the thematic elements of Tolkien's legendarium. It opens with a striking addition to the book by John Garth, who places the creation of Eärendel within the creative epoch after the Battle of Mons that gave rise to the similarly mythical angelic-cum-revenant beings in Arthur Machen's "The Bowmen" (1914). Garth's usual meticulous attention to contextual details pays dividends here as Eärendel becomes part of a collective, national response to the rumours that either angels or St. George and a troop of Agincourt bowmen came to the aid of the English at Mons. Garth draws on David Clarke's study of the phenomenon to illustrate that English society's belief in the Angels of Mon was strengthened due to Machen's short story and traditional folklore inherent in it (184). In addition, Garth highlights how Tolkien will have been surrounded by soldiers at the Somme who had been trained by the survivors of Mons, making the "Angels of Mons" a frequently repeated phrase on the Front. The second half of the chapter focuses on the development of Eärendel. Briefly, however, it touches on the critical importance that Beren and Túrin play as revenant characters in the First Age and The Final Battle. Initially, Éarendil started out as a tool for Tolkien to express his "personal longing" for home but changed dramatically in the "Qenta Noldorinwa" (1930-1931) (189). Eärendel became an agent of hope who led the Valar to Angband. His appearance above the battle provided a counterargument to the disenchanting literary bombardments of the 1930s as he stood as a "sign that a divinity shapes our ends" (195).

The use of sound in Tolkien's legendarium has been approached in various guises: philologically, aesthetically, musically. However, Łukasz Neubauer contributes a worthy and compelling study of how the uncanny silence experienced on the War Front became (consciously or not) part of the canvas of *The Lord of the Rings*. The chapter frequently references Wilfred Owen's poem "Exposure" and the "worry" and anxiety that soldiers experienced in the seconds, minutes or hours of silence that built into a terror felt by the soldiers. What is most resonant is Neubauer's argument that the whole of Middle-earth displays the uneasy silence and the sense that the enemy is always nearby, watching or listening in to what the Fellowship are doing or saying. Neubauer emphasises that commonly, the enemy is heard before it is seen; the cries of the Nazgûl being a prominent example, as they effortlessly cut through the thick textures of Middle-earth and strike fear into the hearts of all. The fear that is generated is also labelled as a chief weapon of Sauron. This generates a significant level of intrigue

but, as Neubauer states, the chapter is but the “tip of the iceberg” that aims to “spark further interest” (220). This is why the final third feels overburdened and respectfully demands further study and development. I implore Neubauer to continue his research on this worthy topic.

Victoria Holtz Wodzack follows by exploring just this with a study on underground spaces in Middle-earth. She draws chiefly on Erebor, Moria and the Paths of the Dead and emphasises how sound had a habit of betraying the soldiers on the War Front just as it did Bilbo and Pippin respectively. But this is a small portion of her argument. The wider implications draw from Jeff Gusky’s strong stance that Tolkien’s sensory experiences of Trench warfare and knowledge of the *souterraines* in Bouzincourt, France, heavily impacted the author’s use of underground spaces in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Wodzack builds on this well and suggests that Gimli’s perspective of the Paths of the Dead gives an “organic response to the underground space” (234). However, as a minor point Gimli’s background as a dwarf and an underground dweller is overlooked. By channelling his trench experiences through Gimli, Tolkien skilfully heightens the Paths of the Dead’s otherworldliness because of how uncanny and alien it is to someone who feels most at home below ground.

Molly Volanth Hall’s chapter explores how Tolkien reconstructs contemporary approaches to loss and ecology. At the heart it is the split between the subjective and objective perceptions of reality and the subject’s relation to ecology. Whereas realist fiction in the first half of the twentieth century displaced the two and alienated the subject from nature, fantasy tried to knit the two together. This, Hall argues, takes place within *us* because we do not enact our trauma upon ecology. She highlights how Frodo becomes a stranger in the Shire because he goes through a “gradual accrual of loss” and a replacement of the Shire with the Ring (252); as the subject he is displaced, not the Shire. It is further characterised when he asks Sam to “re-engender a love” for the Shire by orally sharing the story of the War of the Ring (258). Ecology will continue beyond man’s limited time on the earth and even the Elves’ trauma built up by the Long Defeat is a slow process that ends with the diminishment of what memory they have attached to Lothlórien; the realm itself will continue to thrive after their passing.

Anna Smol turns the sections attention away from Tolkien’s Secondary World and onto his other works. In this case it is “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” and Smol illustrates how the effects of the Great War can be witnessed across Tolkien’s fictional and academic achievements. Her concern is with the portrayal of heroism and how Tolkien’s “dialogue between” traditional and modern forms of heroism can be found in his medieval *prequel* to “The Battle of Maldon” (280). This has been a running trait throughout the book, identifying Tolkien as a man who inhabits the middle-ground between the cynicism of 1930s literature and the more reflective figure who questions how

traditional warfare has adapted. Ultimately he seeks to connect the two through his blending of the medieval and modern. Smol is particularly successful in presenting this in her discussion of the poem's setting and the characters' dialogue. Although it is a medieval environment, Smol is keen to draw the reader's attention to the "common Great War scene" of the verse-drama (265): "focus on the aftermath of a defeat in battle, on the uncanny feelings it evokes, and on the conversations that arise among those low in status contemplating the deeds of more famous people of high status . . . the general tenor of their comments suggest that those in charge or those who should have led acted in misguided or cowardly fashions, learning the young men to die unnecessarily" (270). Such lines recall Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and without doubt tie Tolkien's verse-drama to the Great War.

The final section broadens its viewpoint to consider issues of gender, race, sex and class in relation to the Great War and Tolkien's work. Three chapters deal with the question of gender and Éowyn, offering alternative perspectives, interpretations and sources of inspiration for Tolkien. Before I come onto these however, I shall comment on Alicia Fox-Lenz's chapter, which provides a deeper look into the role of the batman and draws many parallels between accounts of officers and Sam's actions. The hobbit's social mobility and ascent to Mayor of the Shire and owner of Bag End also reflects the post-war "democratization of the cultural hierarchy" (350). This is then contrasted with the twenty-first-century view of *Downton Abbey*, reminding the reader that if the TV show had been produced in the first half of the twentieth century, the presentation of the class system would have been wholly different.

Lynn Schlesinger is the first of the three to examine Éowyn and begins by blasting away the myths surrounding the types of women that worked alongside the men in the Great War, binding her research through the theme of "healing." The chapter celebrates and brings to light fourteen distinct female voices from varying classes and stations—one of which (Edie Appleton) followed a similar war biography to Tolkien. We swiftly move through the chronology of various nursing services and groups, highlighting along the way how opinion was split with regards to the level of training nurses required before working with soldiers. Schlesinger admirably demonstrates how women were exposed to the "same physical and emotional challenges as men" and rounds her study up with a renewed perspective on Éowyn (293), classifying her as a "transgress figure" who "acknowledges her femininity and her power" and embodies qualities that Tolkien actually admired (307).

In a more transparent light, Felicity Gilbert continues Schlesinger's inquiry into Tolkien's feminine characters. Various female characters are addressed and although Éowyn is found to be a challenging and transgressive figure, Gilbert cannot fully agree with Schlesinger; Éowyn still falls back into her female role as

the house wife to Faramir. Gilbert employs a range of philosophical and critical studies to support our understanding of how women (and men) should and do act in Middle-earth. This helps to identify war as an androcentric concept that started to break down in the confined trenches of the Great War. Male soldiers found solace and comfort in one another and they additionally took on other pre-conceived feminine roles (healing). Gilbert harnesses this perspective to eliminate the idea that Sam and Frodo harbour homosexual feelings for one another, preferring to see them as transgressive of gender boundaries and embodying a homosocial space. What is interesting to note is how characters like Frodo, Sam, Elrond and Aragorn are juxtaposed with individuals like Sauron, Saruman and Denethor, the latter of which tick off the traditionally perceived characteristics of the patriarchal, aggressive male.

Giovanni Costabile concludes the book and the three chapters on gender and Éowyn. He reverts back to Schlesinger's positive outlook on the shieldmaiden, suggesting that in her exchange with Aragorn and conclusive fight with the Witch King, Éowyn presents three types of femininity: the individual feminine, the familial feminine, and the sociopolitical feminine. This final one trumps the others, Éowyn bases her decision to ride to war not on her gender (and equality) but on her station as a member of the House of Eorl, the noble line of Rohan. Costabile comments on the racial levelling of the Rohirrim and Hobbits in the fight with the Witch King but this is the only real comment in Section IV on race. The second half of the chapter works towards a fresh insight into the origins of Éowyn's revelatory dialogue on the Pelennor Fields, suggesting that Tolkien was familiar with the phrase 'I am no Englander; I'm a Scotsman!' from Frederick A. Farrell's "*Surrender Englander!*". Some contextual details surrounding the event that inspired the painting are given but as Costabile admits, we cannot be sure of this influence. However, the new perspective certainly adds an intriguing potential source for Tolkien.

As a whole the book is a wonderful achievement that certainly accomplishes what it set out to do in its introduction. Neubauer's conclusive comments prominently reminds us how the echoes of the Great War may have not been fully acknowledged by Tolkien (hence his disinclination to admit its presence in his fiction). Smol's chapter stands out for being the only one to consult a text that is not connected or a part of Tolkien's Secondary World. Not only should we continue to delve into what Arda may yield, we should also take note from Smol's approach and remember the wealth of literature Tolkien wrote not connected with his imagined world. However, *The Lord of the Rings* overshadows *The Book of Lost Tales* in this volume. Moving forward, we should follow the example from Peterson, Flowers and Garth who seek to remind the reader that although the "echoes" of the Great War are apparent in Tolkien's later writings, his more contemporaneous and immediately reactive writing to the war will be found in his

work from the 1910s and 1920s. Croft and Röttinger must be commended for collating this volume of valuable perspectives on Tolkien's connection to the Great War. It has certainly breathed new life, new source material and a renewed attraction for the Great War into Tolkien studies and we eagerly await the scholarship that will inevitably bloom from this new landmark publication.

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