

2022

## Switzerland in Tolkien's Middle-earth: In the Footsteps of His Adventurous Summer Journey in 1911 (2021) by M.S. Monsch

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### Recommended Citation

Wayne G. Hammond, Christina Scull &. (2022) "Switzerland in Tolkien's Middle-earth: In the Footsteps of His Adventurous Summer Journey in 1911 (2021) by M.S. Monsch," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol14/iss2/2>

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*Switzerland in Tolkien's Middle-earth: In the Footsteps of His Adventurous Summer Journey in 1911*, by M.S. Monsch. Foreword by John Howe. Zurich: Martin S. Monsch, 2021. 294 pp. \$36.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783907323021. Also available in ebook format.

Tolkien's visit to Switzerland as a young man, in the company of his Aunt Jane Neave among others, has fascinated his readers since Humphrey Carpenter wrote about it in his *Biography*, quoting from Tolkien's own account to his son Michael in a letter of 1967. Bilbo Baggins' "journey from Rivendell to the other side of the Misty Mountains" in *The Hobbit*, "including the glissade down the slithering stones into the pine woods, is based on my adventures in 1911", Tolkien said; it was an "*annus mirabilis* of sunshine in which there was virtually no rain between April and the end of October, except on the eve and morning of George V's coronation" (*Letters*, p. 391). His recollections fifty-six years later included vivid mental pictures of his travels, but details were no longer clear to him. One of his companions, Colin Brookes-Smith, also left a private memoir of their Swiss holiday, likewise long after the event, but his account and Tolkien's do not entirely agree. More recently, enthusiasts such as Denis Bridoux, Alex Lewis, and Elizabeth Currie have written about their attempts to trace the journey of Tolkien's group more precisely, as far as that is possible in Switzerland as it is today, with its reduced glaciers among other changes in the past century. With limited and uncertain evidence for Tolkien's route, his followers naturally have had to make many educated guesses.

The latest publication in this vein is Martin S. Monsch's *Switzerland in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Subtitled *In the Footsteps of His Adventurous Summer Journey in 1911*, it includes detailed suggestions for those who wish actually to follow in Tolkien's footsteps among the mountains, hills, and valleys of Switzerland. It has many excellent photographs and maps, and it attempts to reconcile Tolkien's and Brookes-Smith's accounts where they vary. If we were to find ourselves on a visit to Switzerland, and wishing to view the same sights as Tolkien in 1911, we would want to have Monsch's book at hand. This is not, however, its particular slant, which is revealed in its title proper: Monsch is primarily concerned to find sources for characters and places in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* within Swiss landscapes and literature.

In a perceptive foreword, artist John Howe comments that "pinpointing a source of inspiration is not as simple as following a watercourse upstream to its fountainhead. Inspiration may go underground, change direction and flow, branch as well as receive tributaries. Inspiration is syncretic, a source may not be exclusive, but a conjoining of impressions" (xi–xii). Apart from a good *apologia* for source-hunting in general, this serves as a rationale for Martin Monsch casting a wide net

for Tolkien's sources, as they may have been, specifically as they may have been concerned with Switzerland. He followed Tolkien's route of 1911 (as he interpreted it) "through some of the most spectacular parts of the Alps", in search of his "treasures of inspiration" (xv). "In addition to the landscape, I was on the lookout for local tales, legends, and literary works by other famous travelers", Monsch says, and came to suspect that Tolkien "might have been inspired not only by the geography but also by the stories connected with the landscape." Although he acknowledges that "Tolkien was inspired by a wealth of sources", such as "Germanic-Norse and Celtic legends . . . and the novels of William Morris and George MacDonald", Monsch "became convinced that the influence of the Swiss journey was immense, not only for the geography of Middle-earth and the plot in *The Hobbit*, but also for the plot in its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*" (xvi).

With this introduction in mind, we steeled ourselves for a book which was heavily speculative, and indeed that is the nature of *Switzerland in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. But it soon became apparent that, unlike so many other writers about Tolkien in recent years, who present speculation as if it should be fact and then treat it as if it were, Monsch is always aware that he can be certain of very little in regard to Tolkien's sources or intentions. Part of the way through his first chapter ("In the Bernese Oberland: Rivendell and the Misty Mountains"), for example, he points out that for all of the works he lists, "an influence on Tolkien seemed likely to me, *but please see for yourself*. There is always a certain danger that a third source influenced both Tolkien and the text" (50, italics ours). When arguing that the Rhine Falls were a source of inspiration for the Falls of Rauros, he admits that he "may be a bit biased", for he grew up in their vicinity, and he allows immediately that Tolkien could have been inspired instead by Niagara Falls, the Blue Nile Falls in Ethiopia, or Victoria Falls in Zambia – which is as good as saying "anything is possible". Again it is John Howe in his foreword who puts it most helpfully: Monsch is not in his book "necessarily proposing that *every* parallel he draws is true, but that all are worthwhile weighing and considering" (ix).

Those who follow trends in Tolkien studies will know that one of these is the desire to document, or to claim with wishful thinking, that Tolkien visited a specific location, or that he based one of his fictional landscapes on a place in the real world. The unspoken corollary to this argument is, of course, that he found it hard to invent without something external to guide him, and that notion cannot possibly stand against what we know of his genius for creation. Switzerland, at least, is one of the few places he visited without doubt, and which we know influenced his fiction because he told us so. Monsch, therefore, is on solid ground (so to speak) in devoting a book to Tolkien and Switzerland. He himself is Swiss, and knows well his country's hiking paths and history.

It must be said for Monsch that he has considered, for better or worse, a remarkably wide and unusual variety of possible sources for Tolkien's stories of

Middle-earth (and that being so, it is all the more unfortunate that his book does not have an index). When seeking inspirations for the Mines of Moria and the Bridge of Khazad-dûm in *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, he suggests the Lötschberg Tunnel and the Jungfrau Railway – both under construction in 1911 – the Aar Gorge, the Schöllenen Gorge and the Gotthard Tunnel (which “inspired famous writers and artists of the Classical and Romantic Period”, 35), the Devil’s Bridge (Teufelsbrücke) over the Reuss River, the novella “The Shepherd of Lake Heli” by Heinrich Zschokke (“since it is unknown whether Tolkien knew the story, caution is advised”, 41), the Swiss legend “The Lords of the Red Valley”, the paintings of Emil Nolde, Friedrich Schiller’s “Song of the Mountain” (“Berglied”), Lord Byron’s dramatic poem *Manfred*, and the art of “William Turner”, that is, the English artist J.M.W. Turner, who “immortalized the [Devil’s Bridge] in several paintings” (48), two of which are in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

We were especially impressed by Monsch’s documentation of verifiable events in Switzerland during Tolkien’s visit. He confirms that there were heavy thunderstorms at the time, which we know from Tolkien’s letter of 1967 inspired his description in *The Hobbit* of “terrible . . . thunder and lightning in the mountains at night, when storms come up from East and West and make war”. And he suggests that since Tolkien signed the guest book in the Lauterbrunnen Valley on 5 August 1911, he may have “just arrived in Interlaken when he saw the bonfires above the lakes of Thun and Brienz”, kindled every year on 1 August to mark Swiss National Day; “and if he saw them with his own eyes, it seems highly likely that they at least co-inspired the warning beacons of Gondor” (161) – well, who can say. More interesting still, because it gives us a better picture of Tolkien’s experience in 1911, is that there were forest fires in Switzerland when he arrived in the Valais region; these were always distant (neither he nor Colin Brookes-Smith mentions them), but smoke may have been visible now and then, and possibly a red glow at night.

Here Monsch draws a number of parallels, such as with the fume Éomer saw in the sky near Isengard in *The Lord of the Rings*, and with the burning of Dale in *The Hobbit*. He even – irrepressibly – compares a Swiss fire horn to the horns of Rohan. He would, perhaps, be more convincing in his book if he did not present so many parallels to, or similarities with, elements in Tolkien’s stories. One idea leads to another, then another, and another: the process seems endless. Monsch will enthusiastically present possibilities for inspiration, then pull back from them, then argue that he himself is convinced, though others may think differently. At least his is an honest approach, and one cannot say he is not thorough.

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