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## The Fall of Númenor (2022) by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Brian Sibley

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*The Fall of Númenor and Other Tales from the Second Age of Middle-earth*, by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Brian Sibley. London: HarperCollins, 2022. xxxiv, 298 pp. £25.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780008537838. New York: William Morrow, 2022. xxxiv, 298 pp. \$40.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780063280687. Also available in ebook formats.

*The Fall of Númenor*, edited by Brian Sibley, is the second book published since the 2020 death of Tolkien's son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, that is part of J.R.R. Tolkien's extended secondary universe. However, unlike the first one, *The Nature of Middle-earth*, which was edited by Tolkien linguist and scholar Carl Hostetter, *The Fall of Númenor* is made up entirely of material that has been published previously. That by itself does not mean that the book has no value. Christopher himself published valuable stand-alone editions of the three major "Great Tales" of the First Age of his father's secondary universe that had little or no newly published material. The first one, *The Children of Húrin*, published in 2007, consists almost entirely of material that was previously published in *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and *The War of the Jewels*, edited together in order to create one continuous and cohesive narrative. The other two, *Beren and Lúthien* and *The Fall of Gondolin* (published in 2017 and 2018, respectively) consist entirely of previously-published versions of those stories, with extensive additional commentary by Christopher Tolkien, tracing the development of those Great Tales over the course of the creation of Tolkien's legendarium.

When it was first announced that Sibley would be editing a volume called *The Fall of Númenor* it seemed likely that he would utilize either the "continuous narrative" model of *The Children of Húrin* or the "tracing the history" model of the other two Great Tales. However, Sibley did not follow either of those models. Instead, he uses an approach that (as my good friend Eldy Dunami aptly put it in a posting at the messageboard theonering.net), "treat[s] the Second Age as mere fodder for backstory to [*The Lord of the Rings*] rather than something with inherent worth as its own part of the legendarium."<sup>1</sup> This is unfortunate, because the material covered is an important part of the legendarium in and of itself, and the approach that Sibley used fails to either successfully create a cohesive narrative or to accurately trace the history of this part of the legendarium.

As Sibley notes in his Introduction, Tolkien's creation of Númenor, which would become such a crucial feature in his legendarium, stems from a conversation that he had with C.S. Lewis. As Tolkien wrote in February 1967, letter to Charlotte

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply grateful to Eldy for helping to crystalize my own thoughts about this book. In certain places, my opinion so closely matches her statements that it would have bordered on plagiarism for me to try to put in my own words, so I include several quotes from her post where my opinion and hers converge.

and Denis Plimmer: “L. said to me one day: ‘Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.’ We agreed that he should try ‘space-travel’, and I should try ‘time-travel’. His result is well known. My effort, after a few promising chapters, ran dry: it was too long a way round to what I really wanted to make, a new version of the Atlantis legend. The final scene survives as *The Downfall of Númenor*” (*Letters* 378).

As that quote suggests, Tolkien’s creation of Númenor and its fall stems from very deep roots. Tolkien notes in a June 1955 letter to W.H. Auden: “I have what some might call an Atlantis complex. Possibly inherited, though my parents died too young for me to know such things about them, and too young to transfer such things by words. Inherited from me (I suppose) by one only of my children, though I did not know that about my son until recently, and he did not know it about me. I mean the terrible recurrent dream (beginning with memory) of the Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably over the trees and green fields. (I bequeathed it to Faramir.) I don’t think I have had it since I wrote the ‘Downfall of Númenor’ as the last of the legends of the First and Second Age” (*Letters* 213). Similarly, in January 1956, he wrote to a Mr. Thompson, “when Faramir speaks of his private vision of the Great Wave, he speaks for me. That vision and dream has been ever with me — and has been inherited (as I only discovered recently) by one of my children” (*Letters* 232).

Nonetheless, as Christopher Tolkien notes, there was never a time that the legends of Númenor existed separate from the main mythology (*Lost Road* 10). “I conclude therefore that ‘Númenor’ (as a distinct and formalized conception, whatever ‘Atlantis-haunting’, as my father called it, lay behind) arose in the actual context of his discussions with C.S. Lewis” (*Lost Road* 9). He first wrote a quick outline of the history of Númenor, then a fuller, untitled draft narrative: the first version of “The Fall of Númenor.” Soon after, Tolkien wrote a second version of “The Fall of Númenor” and further developed the narrative during the same the same time period that he was working on “The Lost Road” (*Lost Road* 9, 11–36). He mostly set aside the Númenor story when he started working on what started out to be a sequel to *The Hobbit*, and eventually developed into the sprawling continuation of his mythology that is *The Lord of the Rings*, though he did some revisions to the second version of “The Fall of Númenor” during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, “including a rewriting of the passage describing the World Made Round” before writing a third version of “The Fall of Númenor” (*Sauron Defeated* 331).

Then, during a break in the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* in late 1945 and through the first half of 1946, Tolkien turned to a new time-travel story, “The Notion Club Papers” that brought the Númenor saga back to the forefront, leading to development of a new language, and brand-new version of the story, “The Drowning of Anadûnê,” of which he wrote two preliminary versions before

completing a final version. Finally, in around autumn of 1948, while working on material to be published in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien wrote the final version of the story of the Downfall of Númenor, which was edited by Christopher Tolkien and published in *The Silmarillion* as “Akallabêth”<sup>2</sup>, developing the text mostly from “The Drowning of Anadûnê” but taking some elements from the final version of “The Fall of Númenor” (*Sauron Defeated* 406–407).<sup>3</sup>

John D. Rateliff suggests that the conversation between Tolkien and Lewis that led to this development took place in early 1936, and that they started writing “hard on the heels of Lewis’s discovery of Lindsay and Williams in February to April 1936” (Rateliff 204). At that time, Tolkien had already written the only completed version of what would become the “Quenta Silmarillion” – the “Quenta Noldorinwa,” which was completed in around 1930. And he had already completed most of the writing of *The Hobbit*, a children’s story mostly independent from the main mythology, but with certain very clear references to it. At that point, there was no conception of different ages of the mythology. The main mythology was set in some amorphous older time, and to the extent that *The Hobbit* was related at all to the mythology it was set in some more recent, but still older time. It was the creation of the legends of Númenor and its downfall that would provide the bridge between the older mythology and the soon to emerge sequel to *The Hobbit* and allow Tolkien to develop the concept of the three ages of Middle-earth that became so crucial to both the overall legendarium in general, and to that sequel, which become much more a sequel to the older mythology and is generally considered Tolkien master work: *The Lord of the Rings*.

As such, the story of the Fall of Númenor is an important milestone in the development of Tolkien’s legendarium, and it contains some of Tolkien’s best writing. For that reason, *The Fall of Númenor*, is at least in conception, a book worth having produced, and the fact that the driving force behind its publication is to tie into Amazon’s massive television show loosely (very loosely) adapting the history of the Second Age does not change that fact. However, how successful the execution of that conception is, is another story altogether.

Sibley’s main previous connection to Tolkien was having written the widely-praised 1981 radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. He also has written several “making of” books associated with Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies of films, as well as other movie series such as Harry Potter. He does have some experience writing original fiction based on the works of others, having been

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher notes that none of the texts bore the title “Akallabêth” but that his father consistently referred to the work by that name (*Peoples* 142).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher notes that his father considered the “Fall of Númenor” to be in the “Elvish Tradition” and “The Drowning of Anadûnê” to be in a “Mannish Tradition” while the final version that he published as “Akallabêth” was a mixture of Elvish and Númenórean traditions (*Sauron Defeated* 406-407).

one of four writers contributing new stories about Winnie-the-Pooh for a 90th birthday collection in 2016. However, he has little history of Tolkien scholarship; prior to his somewhat disappointing contribution to *The Great Tales Never End: Essays in Memory of Christopher Tolkien*, there does not appear to be much if any scholarly studies of Tolkien that he has written.

The press release put out by the publisher about the coming publication of *The Fall of Númenor* noted that it would collect together Tolkien's writings about the Second Age, and use "The Tale of Years" in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* "in order to present the content in an order and a style that works well for readers." As such, instead of following either the continuous narrative model of *The Children of Húrin* or the history-tracing of the history of the creation of the particular tale that Christopher used in editing the stand-alone volumes model of the other two Great Tales, *Beren and Lúthien* and *The Fall of Gondolin*, Sibley uses "The Tale of Years" from Appendix B to *The Lord of the Rings* as a template and pigeonholes all of the other writings into that template; the annals from the Second Age portion of that appendix are literally used as the table of contents and as the chapter headings.

Sibley notes that for the Númenórean history he used the text of the "Akallabêth" as published in *The Silmarillion*, and "Aldarion and Erendis" and "The Line of Elros" from *Unfinished Tales*, while "taking into consideration material found in 'The History of the Akallabêth' (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*), 'The Early History of the Legend' and 'The Fall of Númenor' (both in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*) and 'The Drowning of Anadûnê' (in *Sauron Defeated*)" (xiv). He also uses some material from *The Nature of Middle-earth* (xiv-xv). He adds that "the events that unfold in Middle-earth concurrent with those on Númenor have been selected from the text of 'Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age' (in *The Silmarillion*), 'The History of Galadriel and Celeborn' (in *Unfinished Tales*), and 'Galadriel and Celeborn' (in *The Nature of Middle-earth*)" (xv). He states about material from *The Nature of Middle-earth* (though this could apply to the rest of the material that he uses as well) "passages used do not necessarily appear as originally presented in that volume, but in an order best suited to the chronological narrative" (xv).

Unfortunately, the attempt to use the Tale of Years as the chapter headings and cut and paste from different works and place them roughly chronologically often results in an incoherent mess. The attempt to pigeon-hole excerpts from different works into the "chapters" delineated by the annal entries often results in a lack of coherence or flow. The use of the annals as chapter titles often results in the text getting unnecessarily chopped up into little pieces, further giving the book a disjointed feeling. As Eldy Dunami writes, "Chopping up the Second Age texts into little chunks destroys any sense of them as coherent works, and using the Tale of

Years as a table of contents is pretty much the apotheosis of looking solely through the lens of [*The Lord of the Rings*].”

A passage in the chapter created for the annal “3175 – Repentance of Tar-Palantir. Civil War in Númenor” (167–168) provides an example of how disjointed the narrative can be. First there is a paragraph introducing Ar-Pharazôn and describing his friendship with Amandil, the future Lord of Andúnië that is taken from “The History of the Akallabêth” from *The Peoples of Middle-earth*. In this paragraph it states that Pharazôn was often a guest in the House of Valandil (Amandil’s family) and that “there came Zimraphel [named Míriel in the Elven-tongue], his cousin, daughter of Inziladûn who was later King Tar-Palantir.” That is followed by another paragraph taken from a different section of “The History of the Akallabêth” stating Míriel had been loved by Elentir the brother of Amandil (a character that is not mentioned anywhere else in the book), but that her heart was turned to Pharazôn instead. Then the final paragraph is taken from the published “Akallabêth” itself; in discussing Tar-Palantir’s death this paragraph introduces Míriel as if she had not been mentioned previously, even though she had been discussed extensively in the previous two paragraphs. It then goes on to state that Pharazôn “took her to wife against her will” despite having just stated two paragraphs earlier that her heart had turned to him, suggesting that their marriage was completely consensual.

A good example of why dividing the text up into sections into chapters delineated by the annal entries of the Tale of Years is problematic is described by Eldy Dunami. “Sibley’s presentation of Aldarion and Erendis is, to me, the most egregious example. [Aldarion and Erendis] is the closest thing to a Second Age novel Tolkien wrote, and while it’s a crucial source of information about Númenor—I assume this is why Sibley included it despite it not appearing in the Tale of Years—it’s also a psychologically astute depiction of a failing marriage, with some of Tolkien’s most in-depth character writing and an unusually frank examination of the role of women in the legendarium. But presenting only excerpts, chopped up and separated by other material covering different events from the same time span, results in a lessened reading experience. This can be seen at the outset: Sibley removed the first several paragraphs of A&E, saving about a page worth of space at the cost of a naturally flowing introduction to the work. In the full story, one of our first examples of Aldarion’s differences with his father is that he disliked and avoided ‘the north country’ of Númenor, but Sibley’s version fails to convey this, because he cut out the preceding statement that Aldarion’s father spent much of his time in the Forostar (and, implicitly, brought his young son with him). This is a minor detail, but it exemplifies how trimming non-essential information creates something more akin to an ‘explainer’ blog post than a work of narrative fiction.”

Another result of using the Tale of the Years as the table of contents is that the title of the book is somewhat of a misnomer, because the focus is not really on the

Fall of Númenor except as one part of the tale of the Second Age. The text is not dictated by how to best tell the story of the Fall of Númenor, it is dictated by what events happen to occur in a particular chronological order. In many places, the book feels like exactly what it is: a bunch of extracts from different works, cut and pasted together, without any real transition. The lack of flow is made worse by the repeated interruptions of the text with asides that are references in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, which only serves to further emphasize the sense that the story of the Second Age is being treated as merely a backstory to the “main story” told in *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>4</sup>. Oddly, Sibley also includes extracts from Tolkien’s 1951 letter to Milton Waldman in which he described the legendarium in random places, as if he needs to have Tolkien tell us what is happening in the story, instead allowing the text to speak for itself. Another odd feature that further exacerbates the disjointed nature of the text is that instead of including the list of the ruling kings and queens of Númenor from Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings* (Annals of the Kings and Rulers) as a full list, he inserts them individually as they appear chronologically as little sections of their own.

The book opens not with the people of three Houses of the Edain who would become the Númenóreans but rather with the Elves who remain in Middle-earth, then switches abruptly to describe the foundation of Númenor. But rather than continue the narrative, Sibley then inserts thirty pages of various descriptive texts about Númenor, reprinted from *Unfinished Tales* and *The Nature of Middle-earth*, describing the geography, flora and fauna, and the social customs of Númenor. While interesting, this material does nothing to move the narrative forward. Then when Sibley returns to the narrative, instead of further developing the story of the Númenóreans, Sibley turns to the Dwarves leaving their ancient cities to go to Moria, simply because that is what the next annal in the Tale of Years is (43). Later, Sibley adds a tangent about the Third Age history of Galadriel and Celeborn and Androth their son (144–145), which is one alternative story told in the vastly complicated “History of Galadriel and Celeborn” in *Unfinished Tales* and is irrelevant to the story of the fall of Númenor or to the Second Age in general.

While some of the same problems of flow resulting from the cutting and pasting from different texts persist to the end, the book is strongest in the final chapters from the point where Ar-Pharazôn seizes the throne, through the downfall itself, the return of the Númenóreans exiles to Middle-earth, the last alliance battle with Sauron and his defeat, and the end of the Second Age. However, the use of Isildur’s refusal to destroy the Ruling Ring and his subsequent death as an Epilogue, as well as “A Brief Chronicle of the Third Age of Middle-earth” as Appendix A are more examples of Sibley treating the Second Age as backstory for *The Lord of the Rings*.

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<sup>4</sup> Another sign that Sibley is treating this material as mere background to *The Lord of the Rings* is that while he includes small maps of Middle-earth and Númenor in the Second Age, the main map included is the map of the west of Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age.

In contrast, Appendix B, in which Sibley gives the complete Númenórean chapters from “The Lost Road” is perhaps the very best part of the book. Alan Lee’s illustrations are as always, a nice accompaniment to the text, though his work tends to be less vibrant than some of the best Tolkien illustrators.

Sibley does give endnotes at the rear of the book that trace where each passage comes from, but it is an extremely laborious process to flip back and forth between the text and the notes to try trace where material comes from (though to readers familiar enough with Tolkien’s work, much is recognizable on sight). The notes have some explanatory material, but it is of limited benefit; Sibley simply is not a scholar. There is no key to abbreviations; instead, the abbreviation for each source material is given at the first instance, which can be easy to miss. While most of the references are self-evident, the references to passages that come from “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age” from *The Silmarillion* as simply “Rings” can be confusing if you miss the first reference.

Overall, the book has value, mostly because the stories of the Second Age are worth reading. However, Sibley would have been better off to follow more closely one of the Great Tales models that Christopher Tolkien used rather than try to pigeon-hole as much different material as possible within the artificial confines of the Tale of Years. The most straightforward approach would have been to follow the model used in *Beren and Lúthien* and *The Fall of Gondolin*: gather up all the material related to the fall of Númenor and related second age topics and explain how they developed and interacted with each other. Such an approach would have allowed a stricter focus on the story of the fall of Númenor itself, and there certainly is abundant material to have a book, and the progression of the development of that story is worth telling. The more radical approach would have been to develop a truly cohesive narrative, mostly using Tolkien’s own words but edited together more smoothly, broken into reasonable sized chapters that make sense. Such an approach would have required considerable care and some liberties but handled correctly it could have had very satisfying results. Perhaps the best comparison to this book is *The Silmarillion* itself. It too consists of material taken from numerous different sources pieced together, but the result is far more cohesive. Perhaps the biggest take-away of this new book is that – just as there was only one J.R.R. Tolkien, so too was there only one Christopher Tolkien,<sup>5</sup> and the service that he did for his father’s work is even more highlighted.

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<sup>5</sup> With all due respect to Guy Kay and the assistance that he gave to Christopher in preparing the text of *The Silmarillion*. While the extent of the help that Kay gave is unclear, the final responsibility for the text was of course solely Christopher Tolkien’s.



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