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## Everything I Ever Needed to Know About the North Pole I Learned from Father Christmas (and Karhu the Polar Bear [and Ilbereth the Elf]).

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Everything I Ever Needed to Know About the North Pole I Learned from Father Christmas (and Karhu the Polar Bear [and Ilbereth the Elf]).

Adapted and slightly expanded from part of a Keynote Address presented at the 50<sup>th</sup> Tolkien Society Oxonmoot, St. Anne's College, Oxford University, September 2, 2023.

Note: The Tolkien Estate has graciously reproduced a large number of the *Father Christmas Letters* illustrations on their official website (<https://www.tolkienestate.com/painting/for-children/>). I direct the reader to illustrations on this site numerous times within this paper, using the citation (Tolkien Estate 2022).

During the Christmas Season of 1920, three-year-old John Tolkien asked his father about Father Christmas and his home. Imagine his surprise when a letter arrived from the North Pole, written by Father Christmas himself, accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations (Tolkien Estate 2022). Through 1943 letters arrived to the Tolkien home, addressed first to John, and then his siblings in turn, until the youngest, Priscilla, was at last too old to hang a Christmas stocking.<sup>1</sup> As the children apparently wrote multiple letters to Father Christmas in some years, sharing both their Christmas lists and anecdotes from their personal lives, Father Christmas sometimes returned the favor, and letters arrived in late fall on occasion as well as the traditional Christmas Eve/Day timeframe. The first few letters were brief, but in true Tolkienian tale they “grew in the telling” (*FOTR* 5) and quickly became mythological in nature, reflecting the Professor's innate talent for detailed storytelling.

Tolkien himself explained that every year Father Christmas

sent an account of the (often calamitous) events at his house (near the N. Pole), especially during sorting and packing time sometimes with pictures. His troubles were largely due to the ineptitudes of his chief assistant the P(olar) B(ear). Also to the infamous proceedings of goblins who invaded his store-cellars and so provided a good explanation of why things specified as desirable did not always turn up but were replaced by substitutes. His North Polar Stamps were quite good, and were apparently accepted by the

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<sup>1</sup> The 1921 and 1922 letters are lost (Scull and Hammond 2017b, 420).

P. Office – though how this was arranged was not revealed. I since keep most of this correspondence. (*FC* 6-7)<sup>2</sup>

True to his word, a brown envelope containing most of the letters was found in Tolkien's study after his death (P. Tolkien 1992, 9). Christopher's wife, Baillie, edited a selection of the letters' text and pictures for publication in 1976 as *The Father Christmas Letters*, to mainly positive reviews. In particular, Terry Pratchett famously offered that the charming letters would "appeal to any kids whose appreciation of new worlds hasn't been blighted by Action Man and enlightened schoolteachers" (Scull and Hammond 2017b, 423). A relatively complete set of the letters and envelopes (reproduced and transcribed) has appeared in several editions since 1999 under the title *Letters from Father Christmas*. For the sake of brevity, I will henceforth refer to the published collection of letters as simply *FC*.

The goals of my talk are simple. Firstly, I hope to convince anyone who has not yet experienced the letters to read them at your earliest convenience. Anyone who has read them should take the time to reread them, with an eye to appreciate the detail, depth, and care that clearly went into this portion of Tolkien's subcreative efforts. Finally, I will be pointing out specific topics that I believe are in need of further scholarly consideration, in the hopes that some of you will take this opportunity to think deeply about these letters and their connections to Tolkien's larger body of work, as well as how they reflect real-world events, both within the Tolkien family and in the wider world more generally. I look forward to reading your scholarship in the future.

You might be wondering how Tolkien was able to keep up the ruse for over two decades – surely his children became suspicious as they became older. Indeed, Priscilla admitted that when she was about ten-years old she realized the true nature of the letters, but held her tongue and went along with the charade for several more years. As she explained in a 1976 interview, "There was a friendly conspiracy of silence in the family and the older ones kept quiet because they enjoyed it all so much themselves" (Scull and Hammond 2017b, 423). Baillie Tolkien recounted how as a child Christopher had "already begun to have his suspicions – no doubt encouraged by the challenge to his belief in Father Christmas posed by schoolmates – when he came upon a drawing lying on his father's desk when his father had been called to the telephone," a drawing of the Earth in space alongside Mars, Saturn, the moon, and assorted stars (B. Tolkien 2022; image is reproduced there).

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Father Christmas letters are taken from the Centenary Edition (2020). For some details I will describe the year in which a particular piece of mythology is first mentioned in the letter rather than a page in order to aid readers with different editions.

Tolkien knew that children were generally “capable, of course, of *literary belief*, when the story-maker’s art is good enough to produce it,” also called a “willing suspension of disbelief” as we see here with his children (*OFS* 52; emphasis original). But in his Middle-earth tales Tolkien aimed for something deeper, to become what he termed a “sub-creator” with the ability to craft “a Secondary World which your mind can enter” (*OFS* 52). Aspects of sub-creation (what is also termed worldbuilding) in *FC* have been described by Dimitra Fimi (2017), Kris Swank (2013), and John D. Rateliff (2011), among others, although there is certainly room for additional minds and hands to further consider the worldbuilding aspects of *FC*. For the sake of this talk I will refer to what Mark Wolf terms the “four realms” of a well-crafted Secondary World in his seminal study *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012, 35-6):

- 1) Nominal – the naming of things (which can include the invention of original languages);
- 2) Cultural – customs, cultures, institutions, and artifacts affiliated with the characters in the tale;
- 3) Natural – aspects of the physical world (including species, lands, climate, and celestial bodies) that the characters observe and engage with;
- 4) Ontological – the laws of nature by which the sub-created world operates (including what we might term *magic*).

It is instructional to point out aspects of Father Christmas’s world that fit each of these criteria.

Given Tolkien’s well-known prowess in philology and language creation, it is not surprising to learn that names are carefully chosen for characters in *FC*. North Polar Bear (often simply called “PB”) reveals in a 1929 letter that his true name is Karhu, a word which is Finnish for “bear”; similarly, the names for his mischievous nephews Paksu and Valkotukka are Finnish for “fat” and “white-hair” (Scull and Hammond 2017b, 421-2). While the letters were originally penned by Father Christmas himself, in a shaky handwriting befitting his advanced age of about two millennia, in 1924 Polar Bear began adding commentary using thick letters reportedly due to his “fat paw” (*FC* 20). PB later begins writing in “angular and rune-like” characters in his native “Arktic” tongue (Hammond and Scull 2000, 69). In 1936 a third unique handwriting began to appear, as Father Christmas promoted one of his elves, Ilbereth, to the job of Secretary. Hammond and Scull (2000, 69) describe Ilbereth’s penmanship as “a flowing ‘secretarial’ hand,” while Tolkien himself terms it “a bit thin and slanting – he has a very slender hand – and his drawing is a bit scratchy” (*FC* 157-8). It should be noted that Ilbereth’s handwriting isn’t a direct copy of the so-called “Secretary hand” of the late 15<sup>th</sup> – mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, but could have taken some inspiration from it (James 2020). I leave it to

others to conduct a closer examination of the various handwriting styles in the letters. There is also work still left to do on the various alphabets and linguistic styles apparent in the letters, especially in comparing these three characters (Father Christmas, Polar Bear, and Ilbereth). In a 1988 *Mythlore* article Paul Nolan Hyde argues that Ilbereth's elvish script (seen in the 1937 letter) is a "simplified Sindarin Tengwar" (24); he also analyzes Polar Bear's Goblin alphabet (1932 and 1936 letters). Interestingly, Hyde considers PB's sometimes phonetic spelling as indicative of a non-native speaker (again, PB's native language being "Arktic" [Hyde 1988, 26]). Our understanding of the philology and linguistics of the North Pole (and their relationship to Tolkien's other invented languages and scripts) could certainly benefit from further scholarly analysis.

The Cultural realm of the *FC* mythology is rich indeed. Tolkien writes about an ever-increasing set of holiday traditions as the letters progress, including opening season parties (held around December 1), Boxing Day parties, and even summer events, including games and sports. Trees are decorated (as is Father Christmas's house), and characters (and their distant relatives) engage in dancing, setting off fireworks (including rockets and sparklers), and lighting bonfires. While connections can certainly be made to his Middle-earth writings (especially the fireworks), more interesting connections certainly exist to the customs of Nordic cultures. Additional bits of North Pole culture that deserve further exploration by interested scholars include Father Christmas's travel route on Christmas Eve, described in detail twice (1927 and expanded to include North America in 1929) and the facts that goblins love toy trains and hate the color green (1932), that polar bear cubs and cave bear cubs do not get along (1934), and that Red Gnomes are the historical enemies of goblins (1932).

As is to be expected of Tolkien, the natural world (Natural realm) experienced by Father Christmas and his companions is richly described, with details both supporting and contradicting aspects of our Primary World (as the storyline demands). The most obvious concern the North Pole itself. The northern rotational axis of our planet is located in the Arctic Ocean; shifting sea ice flows around this point, breaking up and reforming. For this reason, you can't put a physical monument there and call it the "North Pole." This did not, however, prevent Robert Peary from purposefully posing his sledge team companions with their national flags on an ice floe at the claimed location of the North Pole.<sup>3</sup> Certainly popular media encouraged the general populace to picture the North Pole as literally that: marked by a stick or obelisk-like monument. Tolkien feeds into this popular perception in his letters from the start, with stamps (e.g., 1920 and 1924) and larger illustrations (e.g., 1927) featuring a thin white pole next to his

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<sup>3</sup> Peary's claim to have reached the North Pole has been debated since his time, although modern evidence tends to support it (Leary 1989).

original house (Tolkien Estate 2022). In 1925 the pole is broken (thanks to the mischief of Polar Bear) and is temporarily fixed with red tape (Tolkien Estate 2022). It would be interesting to see further research on how widespread this conception of the North Pole might be in popular children’s literature of the time. For example, in A.A. Milne’s 1926 classic *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Christopher Robin leads the animals of the Hundred Acre Wood on an “expedition” to the North Pole. Fortunately, before long Pooh pulls a pole out of the ground and hands it to Roo to pull himself out of the river he had fallen into; Christopher Robin proclaims the rod to be the North Pole and erects a sign to celebrate the important discovery (Milne 2022).



Left: Robert Peary’s sledge party with national flags at the (claimed) North Pole, April 1909. Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons. Right: Cover of the October 13, 1909 *Puck* magazine, by Frank A. Nankivell, celebrating the removal of the North Pole from the “Undiscovered Club.” Note that both poles are depicted as literal pole-like structures (apparently made of snow/ice). Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons.



Pooh discovers the North Pole. Illustration by Ernest Howard Shepard (1926).  
Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons.

Father Christmas' letters often describe the weather at the North Pole, apparently in response to the children's questions. Some years are very snowy (so much snow that it literally buries his house) while others are surprisingly warm. 1927 is referred to as "so bitter" that PB freezes his nose by sticking it onto the North Pole (*FC* 41). It is interesting to note that the weeks before Christmas were bitterly cold in England in 1927, with Oxford reaching as low as -5 to -8 C at night (Met Office). On the other hand, 1937 is said to be "much too warm at the North Pole" (*FC* 160), so much so that it formed a large lake around the North Pole, turning it into an island (Tolkien Estate 2022). While I have some scientific quibbles with the accompanying sketch (which shows the sun too low in the sky for the stated date of midsummer and the orientation is said to be looking south despite the fact that every point is technically south of the North Pole), Tolkien's letters do include a reasonable understanding of the seasonal sunlight cycle at the North Pole. For locations above the Arctic Circle (66.5 N), there are some 'sunless' days, roughly between September 22 and March 22. However, while the sun is absent from the sky for six months, for much of this time it is not completely dark, because of astronomical twilight (defined as the sun being less than 18 degrees below the horizon). Complete 24-hour-a-day darkness only occurs outside of astronomical twilight, at the North Pole about November 13-January 29 (Rao 2010). In the 1927 letter Father Christmas tells the children that it has been "very dark here since

winter began” but makes the separate statement that he hasn’t “seen the Sun, of course, for three months” (*FC* 42). As might be expected of Tolkien (especially if you have read my previous work), there is an impressive collection of accurate astronomy in the letters (especially concerning the aurora borealis, the northern lights), but that is a topic for a separate paper.

While there isn’t much flora at the North Pole, the fauna is quite diverse. In addition to the polar bears, we are introduced to a panoply of diverse characters, including the Snow Man and his relatives (1926), the Man in the Moon (1927), Great Seal (1929), Olaf the Norwegian woodcutter (1929), Father Christmas’ Grandfather Yule and Green Brother (1930),<sup>4</sup> cave bears (1932), goblins (1932), Bellman the chimney inspector (1934), and even penguins who had traveled up from Antarctica (1940). But most of all, we have elves: Snow Elves, who wear white and are difficult to see against the snow (1929), and Red and Green Elves, separated by their clothing. A number of them act as messengers, for example delivering the letters. In 1936 many elves go to live with Father Christmas at the great Cliff House and train for work in the “packing business” (*FC* 145), while Ilbereth becomes Father Christmas’ secretary. Red Gnomes (1932) are described separately from Elves, and seem to act as guards. As previously noted, they are also the sworn enemies of goblins. Elves engage in many holiday traditions (parties, tobogganing, crackers, sparklers, rockets) which largely reflect activities the Tolkien children would have been familiar with. While there may not appear to be many obvious similarities between the elves of Middle-earth and those of the North Pole, the linguistic similarities noted by Hyde (and the fact that Ilbereth’s name sounds suspiciously similar to that of Elbereth, one of the epithets of Varda) suggest that a detailed and close analysis of both populations might yield sweet intellectual fruit.

The evolution of the character of Father Christmas’ gardener, the original Snow Man (1926), demonstrates the perhaps unexpected depth in the mythology. Of course, this means, in turn, that there is much more that could be said in a scholarly fashion concerning this character. In the 1927 letter, Polar Bear is “snowballing the Snow Man” (rolling him around in the snow perhaps in an effort to make him larger by adding more snow) and pushes him over the cliff (*FC* 42). The Snow Man falls onto the sleigh, causing much damage, especially to himself. Polar Bear uses “some of what was left of him to paint my white picture. We shall have to make ourselves a new gardener when we are less busy” (*FC* 42). The insinuation here is that he is literally a snow man. However, this plot is retconned in 1930, when Father Christmas clearly notes that the Snowmen are “the only sort of people that live near – not of course men *made* of snow, though my gardener

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<sup>4</sup> Grandfather Yule and the Green Brother are fascinating characters that may draw upon seasonal mythology. See Kapelle (2007) and Swank (2013) for more discussion; there is clearly much more to say about their mythological underpinnings.



who is the oldest of all the snowmen sometimes draws a picture of a made snowman instead of writing his name” (*FC* 73). In an excellent paper included in *Tolkien and Diversity*, Nicholas Birns (2023, 161) notes an “early trace” of the indigenous people the Lossoth, the “Snowmen of the Forochel” (Appendix A of *LOTR*), in *FC*. Additional work should be done on both the Lossoth and the Snowmen.

Finally, we turn to the Ontological realm, where the laws of nature (including those of magic) are spelled out. Clearly Christmas is considered a magical time of the year by people who celebrate it, especially children, not the least reason being the apparent ability of Santa Claus – Father Christmas – to deliver toys to an astronomical number of children in a single 24-hour period. His ability to accomplish this herculean task is explained within the letters. For example, he uses seven pairs of special flying reindeer (not the “12 pair of deer, as you will see in some books” [*FC* 103]), noting that “14 is such a nice number” (*FC* 103) – as in the number of the Valar – although Father Christmas adds that “at Christmas, especially if I am hurried, I add my 2 special white ones in front” (*FC* 103). Father Christmas assures the children that his “magic is strongest” at Christmas and therefore he can “do about a thousand stockings a minute, if I have it all planned out beforehand” (*FC* 63). But there are other magical aspects of the North Pole and its inhabitants. As early as the 1924 letters (one each sent to John and Michael) Polar Bear directs the boys to pull on the enclosed “magic wishing cracker” in order to get their desired presents (*FC* 25). In one of the final letters, addressed to Priscilla (1941), Polar Bear is described as “a very MAGICAL animal” which explains his ability to fight goblins without getting hurt (*FC* 198; emphasis original).

The evidence laid out thus far clearly demonstrates that the Father Christmas letters taken in total construct a Secondary World in both Tolkienian terms and the theoretical framework of Mark Wolf. But there is far more depth to the North Pole mythology, and more interesting connections to Tolkien’s other writings, than can be described through a rubric. Indeed, there is a complicated metatextuality apparent in the relationship between the Primary and Secondary Worlds in the letters (and within the world of the letters itself). For example, Tolkien not only develops several main characters with distinctive personalities, handwriting styles, tones, and dictions, but has them engage in playful banter within the text of a given letter, giving the impression of having characters reading over each other’s shoulders and picking up a pen to interject in the margins (or as a PS). As Paul Nolan Hyde (1988, 23) notes, in particular “much could be made of the interaction between Polar Bear and Ilbereth.” I posit that the most interesting example is a lengthy 1938 poem written for Priscilla mainly by Father Christmas, with additional lines and commentary by Polar Bear and Ilbereth. It is the timing that piques my interest, as the late 1930s was a time when Tolkien was working on

a number of his lays, including the *Lay of Leithian*, the *Sigurd and Gudrún* texts, and *The Fall of Arthur*.

While I have mentioned various illustrations in the letters in passing, I would be remiss if I did not urge readers to carefully pour over the copious hand drawn stamps, illustrations, marginalia, and illuminated initials (Tolkien Estate 2022). While Hammond and Scull analyze *some* of the artwork in detail in their *J.R.R. Tolkien Artist and Illustrator*,<sup>5</sup> there is still much to be said about this aspect of the work. Indeed, in a 1992 article Priscilla Tolkien (9) drew attention to the “different styles and materials” as well as the “varied sources of his inspiration” for the copious artwork contained in the letters. In an Escher-esque example of metatextuality, the 1932 letter contains a reference to a letter Tolkien himself apparently had penned to Polar Bear (probably at his children’s request) in which he had included drawings of bears. In his Christmas letter to the children Father Christmas pokes fun at Tolkien by calling his “scribble” similar to “old lecture-notes” while Polar Bear opines that Tolkien’s drawings of bears “aren’t good” (*FC* 108). Polar Bear channels his inner Tolkien and creates an alphabet from the goblin marks in the local caves, which he uses to write a short letter to the children. Clearly there is much here to unpack, which I will leave for other scholars to untangle.

While the letters have been largely viewed in isolation from Tolkien’s main Secondary World, Middle-earth, some scholars have been able to glean important insight through a careful study of the structure and content of the letters. Perhaps most famously John Rateliff used a change in the tone of the letters starting with 1932 (in particular, comparing Father Christmas’ detailed battles with goblins to the Battle of Five Armies) to argue for an early completion date for *The Hobbit* manuscript (2011, xviii). Kris Swank draws other connections between *The Hobbit* and the Father Christmas letters in a 2013 *Mythlore* article, and I believe there is much more to be said about the parallels and synergies between these two works.

We should not forget *The Lord of the Rings* as well, as there is an overlap in time between its composition and the writing of the later letters. One outline for the Mount Doom scenes included in *The Treason of Isengard* describes how “Frodo turns and looks North-west, sees the dust of battle. Faint sound of horn. This is Windbeam the Horn of Elendil blown only in extremity” (*Treason* 344). In his commentary Christopher Tolkien notes there is no other reference to the horn in the legendarium, but there is in the letters (*Treason* 349). Specifically, in the great

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<sup>5</sup> Most notably, Hammond and Scull (2000, 73-6) discuss detailed cave art found in the 1937 letter (*FC* 98-102; Tolkien Estate 2022) and trace the source back to popular writings of the day. In an updated discussion in their *Reader’s Guide Part 1*, they note Christopher’s confirmation that the cave art was derivative of images reproduced in a book his father owned, *Prehistory: A Study of Early Cultures in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin* (Scull and Hammond 2017b, 492).

goblin battle of 1941 Father Christmas blows three blasts on the “great horn Windbeam” for first time in over 400 years to summon reinforcements (*FC* 196). Unfortunately, there is a lack of continuity here, as Father Christmas blew his “golden trumpet” to summon his friends to aid him in the 1933 goblin attack (*FC* 121). Putting aside this apparent ‘oops,’ what connection is there to the great horn of Helm in *The Lord of the Rings* (*ROTK*, Appendix A, 347-8)? Certainly, there is a paper waiting to be written.

The central role played by Polar Bear in the letters brings to mind another interesting aspect of the North Pole mythology that spills over into other works, namely the importance of bears. Humphrey Carpenter describes the genesis of Frodo’s original name, Bingo, as due to the Bingo family of koala bears owned by the Tolkien children (Carpenter 2000, 189).<sup>6</sup> In the 1938 letter (addressed to “Priscilla and all others at your house” [*FC* 164]) Father Christmas directs Priscilla to “Give my love to your Bingos and all the other sixty (or more!), especially Raggles and Preddley and Tinker and Tailor and Jubilee and Snowball,” referring to her extensive collection of stuffed bears (*FC* 166). In *The History of The Hobbit*, John Rateliff (2011, 254) notes that bears are prominent in Tolkien’s children’s stories, inspired by his children’s various toy bears, and draws some comparison between Beorn (originally named Medwed) in *The Hobbit*, the various bears in the Father Christmas letters, and the three mischievous bears in *Mr. Bliss*.<sup>7</sup> In a blog post, Rateliff also draws connections between the description of the bear dances in Númenor (*NOME* 335), the “Bear-moot” in *The Hobbit* (Rateliff 2021), and two incidents of dancing bears in the Father Christmas letters (in 1932 and 1940, both reproduced in Tolkien Estate [2022]). Given the possible real world precedents – from the well-known abuse of bears to make them appear to dance for human amusement (Tünaydin 2013) to the painting *The Bear Dance* by William Holbrook Beard (c. 1870)<sup>8</sup> – there is clearly much more that can be learned about Tolkien’s use of bears in his writings.

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<sup>6</sup> A picture of a Bingo bear similar to those owned by the Tolkien children can be seen at [https://www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk/w/images/Bingo\\_Bear\\_Koala\\_\(Jungle\\_Toys\).jpg](https://www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk/w/images/Bingo_Bear_Koala_(Jungle_Toys).jpg)

<sup>7</sup> Rateliff (2011, 280) notes that Michael’s wife, Joan, had stated in a 1982 article in *The Sunday Times* that the bears in *Mr. Bliss* were inspired by the teddy bears owned by the three Tolkien sons.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, I do not recall who introduced this painting to me at Oxonmoot after my talk. The best I can do is thank them anonymously here.



*The Bear Dance*, oil painting by William Holbrook Beard (c. 1870). Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons.

The letters also offer us insight into Tolkien as a father. For example, in the 1928 letter (addressed to the “boys”) Father Christmas voices a hope that the three of them will “share the railway things and farm and animals often, and not think they are absolutely only for the one whose stocking they were in” (*FC* 53). Similarly, in the 1931 letter Father Christmas reminds the children that if they are disappointed by the number and type of gifts received that year that “all over the world there are a terrible number of poor and starving people” (*FC* 81). In the same letter he further directs them to “be happy this Christmas and not quarrel” (*FC* 81). Not only does Tolkien (through the guise of Father Christmas) try to get his children to play nicely with each other, but he explains the substitution of toys received versus ones asked for, apparently hoping that Father Christmas’ opinion will mean more to the children than that of their father. Specifically, in 1923 John receives Lott’s Bricks instead of Picabrix, Father Christmas explaining that the former are “prettier and stronger *and tidier*” than the latter, engaging in wordplay to explain that they are “called that because there are lots more for you to have next year if you let me know in good time” (*FC* 15; emphasis mine). An internet search for pictures of the two kinds of construction toys verifies that Lott’s Bricks were simpler and more colorful, being made of artificial stone, and held together by

balance and friction. No tools were needed to assemble them.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Picabrix<sup>10</sup> were wooden blocks of different shapes with holes drilled into them and were assembled with short wooden dowels. The set came with wooden hammers for driving in the connecting dowels and metal pliers for pulling them apart. One can easily understand Tolkien's preference for Lott's Bricks as a father of multiple young sons who might just turn the tools on their brothers rather than the blocks. Other letters make mention of the boys' interest in toys trains, as well as Priscilla's favorite authors. Therefore, it would be quite interesting to see a scholar or two write on common British toys and children's books of the 1920s-1940s as reflected in the Father Christmas letters.

Of course, the letters also have much to tell us much about their author. For example, in early December 1937 Tolkien becomes severely ill with the flu (Scull and Hammond 2017a, 221); by the 18<sup>th</sup> he has developed "pink eye and laryngitis," could barely see, and was under advisement not to write (Scull and Hammond 2017a, 223). However, in a letter to Stanley Unwin dated the 16<sup>th</sup> Tolkien notes that the "Father Christmas' 1937 letter is unwritten yet" (*Letters* 26). Given these constraints, one might forgive Father Christmas if he had sent a short note that year, under the guise that Polar Bear had once again caused some great disruption, promising to write a longer letter at the New Year. But instead, Tolkien pens a lengthy and complicated letter interlacing comments by Father Christmas, Polar Bear, and Ilbereth, accompanied by a detailed set of sketches comprising a diary of one year at the North Pole (Tolkien Estate 2022). To drive home Tolkien's need to not disappoint his two youngest children, a note on the envelope very pointedly proclaims "To be delivered direct - by Christmas Eve" by Father Christmas with an added "Haste" by Ilbereth (*FC* 157). In his usual self-referential way, Tolkien has Father Christmas ask the children to "Tell your father I am sorry about his eyes and throat" (*FC* 157). There are certainly many more interesting nuggets to explore in the letters, awaiting the careful eyes of some scholar(s) to explore.

For example, in his preface to *The Hobbit*, Christopher Tolkien recalled that in 1937 he had written to Father Christmas and "gave *The Hobbit* a vigorous puff, asking him if he knew of it, and proposing it to him as an idea for Christmas presents" (2007, vi). One can only imagine his father's amusement at reading the letter. In turn, Father Christmas wrote to the children that year and playfully admitted that he "was going to send 'Hobbits' – I am sending away *loads*... but I thought you would have lots, so I am sending another Oxford fairy-story" (*FC* 158; emphasis original). Scull and Hammond's *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion & Guide: Chronology* is particularly useful in pointing out examples of important events in

<sup>9</sup> See <https://eehe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2007.025.jpg> .

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/antique-1920s-era-wooden-picabrix-1694969748>

the Tolkien family's lives that are reflected in the letters. For example, the 1925 letter features Father Christmas' detailed tale of having to move into a new house after Polar Bear accidentally damages his original home. Scull and Hammond note that the Tolkien family was busy packing at that time as they would move to 22 Northmoor Road, Oxford, on January 7, 1926 (2017a, 143-4). The 1929 letter ends with a wish that the children "will like your new house" (*FC* 66), a reference to the Tolkien's January 14, 1930, move next door to 20 Northmoor Rd. (Scull and Hammond 2017a, 162). It must have been reassuring for children to receive such messages from Father Christmas during such stressful times. I must admit that it tugged at my heartstrings when I read Priscilla's statement that Father Christmas perhaps "represented the grandfather figure we did not have in real life," being the children of two orphans. (P. Tolkien 1992, 9).

Finally, the Father Christmas letters often acknowledge the horrors of the real world, but in a child-appropriate way. Recall that the 1931 letter admonished the children to appreciate what they were receiving that year because of the large number of people without sufficient food to eat. He continues that he "(and my Green Brother) have had to do some collecting of food and clothes, and toys too, for the children whose fathers and mothers and friends cannot give them anything, sometimes not even dinner" (*FC* 81). The next year Father Christmas describes the paucity of some toy train supplies as being caused by the goblin war, but also offered that "I am not able to carry quite as much toy-cargo as usual this year, as I am taking a good deal of *food* and *clothes* (*useful* stuff): there are far too many people in your land, and others, who are hungry and cold this winter" (*FC* 107-8; emphasis original). Hopefully the modern reader recognizes the reference to not only the Great Depression (1929-1939) but the Soviet famine (1930-1933; impacting grain-producing regions of Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan USSR famine [Cameron 2016]), events that significantly impacted economies around the world.

But the most significant real-world event reflected in the two-plus decades of letters is World War II, Scull and Hammond (2017b, 423) noting that "the tone of the letters became sombre" after 1938. In 1939 Father Christmas reflected that "things are very difficult this year owing to this horrible war. Many of my messengers have never come back" (*FC* 180). The next year Father Christmas shares that "We are having rather a difficult time this year. This horrible war is reducing all our stocks, and in so many countries children are living far from their homes" (*FC* 188), while in 1941 he voices discouragement that the "number of children who keep up with me seems to be getting smaller: I expect it is because of this horrible war... at present so terribly many people have lost their homes: or have left them; half the world seems in the wrong place" (*FC* 192). Father Christmas' mood turns even darker in 1942, noting "there is so much waste and smashing going on that it makes me rather sad, and anxious too. Deliveries too are more difficult

than ever this year with damaged houses and houseless people and all the dreadful events going on in your countries” (*FC* 200). Finally, in the last letter he shares with Priscilla that his “messengers tell me that people call it ‘grim’ this year. I think they mean miserable: and so it is, I fear, in very many places” (*FC* 205). While these remarks certainly reflect the sad reality of the situation, the letters as a whole are not without hope. For example, in 1940 nearly fifty penguins travel to the North Pole in support of Father Christmas after hearing rumors that “PB and all the Polar Cubs had been blown up, and that I had been captured by Goblins” (*FC* 190), a clear celebration of the importance of allies in times of war. When the goblins attack again in 1941, Polar Bear is named a war hero, as he literally crushes their army (Tolkien Estate 2022). Such stories would have been uplifting to a young girl with two brothers serving in the military (and perhaps a father with two sons in uniform).

Priscilla Tolkien (1992, 8-9) reflects that she could “remember my own willing suspension of disbelief and the sadness I felt when the time came for the stocking to be laid out for the last time,” noting a similar sadness in Father Christmas’ last letter (1943). Yet again there is still a glimmer of hope, even in this obvious ‘good-bye’: “I shall not forget you. We always keep the old numbers of our old friends, and their letters; and later on we hope to come back when they are grown up and have houses of their own and children” (*FC* 205). While Father Christmas as such may not have visited the Tolkien grandchildren, Michael’s daughter Joanna did receive whimsical letters from her famous grandfather when she was young. Several years before her death she gave photocopies of them to Elwyn Jenkins, then president of the English Academy of Southern Africa, under the condition that he never publish them. He has described them as “playful and affectionate, illustrated with his typical drawings,” including a poem honoring Joanna being crowned “Queen of the May” accompanied by a picture of her “dancing around the maypole, a coronet of flowers in her hair” (Jenkins 2018).<sup>11</sup>

This revelation leads me to ask what other treasures remain to be discovered, relative to the Father Christmas letters and any other derivative works such as Joanna’s letters? While we know that the 1921 and 1922 letters seem to be lost forever, there are hints of other letters that might still exist, perhaps buried in some archive. For example, a November 1929 letter from Polar Bear to the “boys” references his paw being “better”: this suggests the existence of an unpublished letter in which the boys learned of his injury in the first place (*FC* 56). Scull and Hammond reference an unpublished December 13, 1940 letter from Polar Bear to Christopher and Priscilla with a comment by Father Christmas (Scull and Hammond 2017a, 261). This was just after Michael Tolkien had been injured in an Army vehicle accident and just before the family travelled to visit Michael at the Worcester Royal Infirmary (Scull and Hammond 2017a, 262). One can only

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<sup>11</sup> Many thanks to Jonatan Lyssens for bringing this article to my attention.

imagine the words of comfort Father Christmas and Polar Bear might have offered to the young girl. There is also the very real possibility that many of the children's letters to Father Christmas might still exist. For example, in his 1937 letter Father Christmas makes the tantalizing remark "I believe it is 17 years since I started to write to you. I wonder if you have still got all my letters? I have not been able to keep quite all yours, but I have got some from every year" (*FC* 154). Recall that Christopher Tolkien references one of his letters to Father Christmas in his preface to *The Hobbit* (penned in 1987), suggesting that he had access to it after his father's death.

With the passing of all four Tolkien children into the West, perhaps it is now time to release such letters (if still extant) so that we can even more deeply appreciate the wisdom of Father Christmas and his creator. For as Tolkien himself noted "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make" (*OFS* 65). As the *Letters from Father Christmas* confirm, no one was better at turning keen, clear reason into fantastic fantasy than one John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.

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