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The Hen that Laid the Eggs: Tolkien and the Officers Training Corps [expanded]

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J.R.R. Tolkien, like many young men of his class and education, participated in a program designed by the British government to provide likely candidates with preliminary training that would enable them to be quickly and efficiently moved into officer positions in the military when and if the country went to war. This program was known as the Officers Training Corps, and Tolkien was involved with the OTC, and possibly with the preceding, more loosely organized Cadet Corps program, while at King Edward’s School. Because of this program, Tolkien and many of his fellow junior officers in the Great War were already familiar with the procedures of drill and camp and with basic tactics of war games in all kinds of weather. The atmosphere of the training camps of World War I would not have taken them entirely by surprise, but would have been somewhat reminiscent of the great summer encampments of OTC units from around the country—though of course now with a far more serious purpose.

The OTC continued training cadets throughout the war; in the rather chilling words of one of the historians of the program, it was the “hen that was prepared to go on laying eggs until Germany should call for a change of diet” (Haig-Brown 73).

While this is of great interest as an element in Tolkien’s biography, this long-term familiarity, beginning in his school days, with military life under canvas also lends an easy verisimilitude to his depictions of life on the open road.

1 This revises and expands my 2011 paper in Tolkien Studies, adding sections on Tolkien’s experiences with horses and his WWII civilian work in particular; see bibliography for original publication. Guest of Honor presentation at MiddleMoot 2023, Hawkeye Community College, Waterloo, Iowa, 14 October 2023.

2 The Officer Training Corps is still in existence at the university level, and is somewhat less closely affiliated with the military than the United States’s similar Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs, as a majority of members do not currently go into military service and they cannot be mobilized for active duty (“University Officers’ Training Corps”). At present, its mission is “To develop the leadership potential of selected university students through enjoyable and challenging training in order to communicate the values, ethos and career opportunities of the British Army” (“University Officer Training Corps”). The UOTC has admitted women since 1948 (Ryan 176). Also note that Officers has been punctuated in a variety of ways over the years; the organization now avoids that problem by using the word Officer instead. The Junior Division of the Officer Training Corps became the Junior Training Corps, and in 1948, was reformed as the Combined Cadet Force still in operation today (“Combined Cadet Force”).

3 Alan Haig-Brown was Assistant Master and Commander of Lancing College Officers’ Training Corps, London; killed in action in France 25 March 1918. Like both Christopher and Simon Tolkien, he attended Dragon School; like J.R.R. Tolkien he started his academic career in Classics; he published a book of poetry in addition to his history of the OTC. But perhaps he was best known for playing two seasons with Tottenham Hotspur, about which he also wrote a book. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Haig-Brown_(footballer)
and in military encampments in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It may also hint at some background assumptions we can make about the importance of military preparedness, and the consequences of lack of preparedness, among the free peoples of Middle-earth in the Third Age.

The Officer Training Corps idea rested on a basic supposition that was rarely questioned at the time in England. That is, that the young men attending the public schools, the best and the brightest of their generation, with great expectations waiting to be unlocked by dint of their education and connections, should at the same time be preparing to lead other young men, and to serve and perhaps die for their country if called on. This supports an underlying cultural model valuing preparedness, assuming that preparedness is never wasted, and emphasizing that watchfulness and preparedness are the responsibility of good government and its citizens.\(^4\)

As it was in Tolkien’s England, so it is in Middle-earth. As Nan C. Scott explains, in Arda’s history we see a constantly repeating pattern of “wars and cycles of Watchful Peace, failures of vigilance, and once again wars,” and “to survive in Middle-earth, ceaseless vigilance and some means of defense are necessary” (24).

**Cadet training**

In the pre-Great War period, many British public schools had already long had individual Cadet Corps which provided students with some early training in drill, shooting, and sometimes riding. Volunteer units had been in existence at the universities since the time of the British Civil War (Ryan 174) and had grown rapidly in “the frantic post-Crimean War period” (Teagarden 91). All of these units were independently organized and “largely reflected the personality and energy of their commanding officers”—so clearly there was a great deal of variation in the quality of training (91).

But in 1908, in an effort to remedy the serious problems of officer shortages that had plagued the British in the South African War, a proposal was made by Sir Edward Ward, a member of Lord Richard Burdon Haldane’s Army Council,\(^5\) to reform this loose system. The aim was to organize all the volunteer

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\(^4\) Indeed, the genre of sensationalist “invasion literature” preaching civilian and military preparedness at this time was so popular that P.G. Wodehouse satirized it in his comic novel *The Swoop! A Tale of the Great Invasion* in 1909; England is invaded by seven different enemies and eventually saved by a Boy Scout (*The Swoop!*).

\(^5\) The Haldane Reforms were a series of far-ranging reforms of the British Army made from 1906 to 1912, and named after the Secretary of State for War, Richard Burdon Haldane. Those reforms enabled Britain to send some 120,000 men to France in fifteen days in August 1914.
and cadet corps into a centrally administered, standardized program that could provide a steady supply of young men who could be quickly moved through formal military training channels when the need arose.

Participants could train for two levels of certificates which would enable them to enter the armed forces at a certain rank with minimal additional training, or translate into a certain number of points on the admission test to one of the military academies (Teagarden 92, Worthington 92). This had the distinct advantage of relocating a large portion of the potential officer’s training to his leisure time at school or university. This both decreased interference with his civilian career and reduced the need for duplicate training later (Teagarden 93, Worthington 91). The OTC had two divisions: the Senior Division, associated with the Universities and the Inns of Court, and the Junior Division, formed at the public schools (Haig-Brown 18-21).

King Edward’s School had had a Cadet Corps for a brief time in the 1860s, but after it dissolved they did not form one again until 1907—just in time to be caught up in the 1908 Haldane Reforms and become an official OTC unit (Hutton 149, Trott 89-90, Garth, Tolkien and the Great War [Great War] 22-23).

Some 30,000 officers passed through all of the OTC programs during the course of the Great War alone (Ryan 175). Over 1400 Old Edwardians served in the war (Trott 89).

Tolkien’s training
Why did Tolkien join the OTC? In 1908, Tolkien was 16 years old and had been attending King Edward’s School in Birmingham since 1900, with a short break in 1902-1903, and he was living in the lodging-house where he met Edith Bratt. There might have been a financial incentive—while the school received a sum of money from the Army for providing instructors and physical resources, each individual cadet was also paid for purchasing and maintaining his kit and attending summer camp, with bonuses for qualifications achieved (Haig-Brown 21, Teagarden 94, Ryan 175).

It might have been the romantic inspiration of popular stories of schoolboys gone on to brilliant military or intelligence careers, like Rudyard Kipling’s 1897 Stalky and Co. Perhaps his attendance at an inspection and

Haldane was Secretary of State for War from 1905 to 1912. Following the outbreak of the First World War, Haldane was falsely accused of pro-German sympathies and was dismissed from the government in mid-1915. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Haldane,_1st_Viscount_Haldane

William Joseph Slim, later Field-Marshal during WWII among other titles, was a classmate of Tolkien’s at King Edward’s School and went through the same KES OTC program, also entering WWI as a second lieutenant—and was coincidentally also the son of a fervently Catholic mother (Shippey “Encyclopedia” 4; Lewin 4, 8).

We can be fairly certain Tolkien read at least Kim before 1913 (Scull & Hammond RG.1054), and it’s quite likely he was familiar with much of Kipling’s work. Shippey speculates he knew
address by Field Marshall Earl Roberts at King Edward’s School in April 1907 was an inspiration, if he had not already joined the Cadet Corps by that time (Scull & Hammond, C.14).

It could simply be that Tolkien was an inveterate joiner, and several of his rugby teammates and other friends were already members (Garth, Great War 23).

Many public schools did have a distinctly militaristic culture; on the eve of the Great War, several years later, some 79% of the public schools had OTC units, and membership at those schools approached 100% (Otley 330). It seems unlikely, though, that Tolkien ever seriously considered a military career; he planned on an academic career after the war and had arranged matters so he could delay his enlistment until he had finished his degree (Garth, Great War 43-44, Carpenter 72).

Whatever the reason Tolkien signed up, he would have joined his fellow cadets for a few hours several days a week during the school year to exercise, march in drill, hear lectures, practice shooting and care of their weapons, learn semaphore and Morse code, play in the band, read and draw maps, stand parade for inspection, and sometimes even practice night maneuvers. Much of this is similar to the training Tolkien later underwent during the war (Haig-Brown 21, Mais 12, Ryan 93-94). Several times a year there might also be joint training and exercises with another junior division school, or the opportunity to provide a guard of honor for a royal visitor to their school or town (Scull & Hammond C.18).

From some contemporary accounts it sounds like most boys who joined before the war broke out looked on the usual round of drill and practice sessions during the year as rather boring. They were only to be endured for the sake of the splendor and excitement of the annual two weeks of summer encampment, when contingents from schools all over the country met (e.g. Mais 8-9). There was a holiday air at these encampments—it was like a Boy Scout Jamboree.

The participants travelled up by train, lived in spartan tents, went on long marches, trained with real soldiers, got a chance to examine the latest military equipment, fought happily in mock battles, held nightly sing-alongs, ate in mess-tents, and so on (Mais 9-10). As one historian puts it, “the best officers are those who have been through all things experienced under canvas by the men whom

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Puck of Pook’s Hill and Rewards and Fairies, at least (Road 351). Even if he didn’t read Stalky, it was clearly part of the Edwardian leaf-mould that Jared Lobdell considers a precursor of “Tolkienian fantasy.”

8 See Mais 16-31 for detailed (if fictionalized) accounts of several war game exercises against other schools, and Scull & Hammond C.18-25 passim for specific exercises in which Tolkien participated.

9 Many Cadet Corps had been meeting at a Public Schools Camp each summer since 1889; the Junior Division of the OTC continued this tradition (Haig-Brown 1). Ironically, the cadets at the 1889 camp were inspected by the visiting Kaiser Wilhelm II (11).
they will someday command.” OTC training was designed to teach the young man, by direct experience of these conditions himself, “that his first and foremost duty is the care for the well-being of his men” (Haig-Brown 41, 88-89).

Tolkien attended the OTC encampments in 1909 at Salisbury Plain and 1910 at Aldershot. In 1909, in an excess of high spirits, he managed to cut his hand quite badly on a pen-knife stuck in a tent-pole (Scull & Hammond C.18). The 1910 camp was memorable for a visit to a depot of military airplanes and airships (C.24), and for an excess of punning among the attending members of the King Edwards School Debating Club (C.25).

It is worth noting that World War I was declared during the 1914 summer camp, which was attended by some 10,000 boys (Haig-Brown 12). One day camp was as normal, though rumors were flying; the next, the regular officers and men, the horses and cooks and equipment, had all decamped (71-72). Though Tolkien did not attend this particular camp, one might detect a sort of kinship between these young men and Merry Brandybuck’s feelings of loneliness and bewilderment at the camp of the Rohirrim at Dunharrow. There the young hobbit was overwhelmed by the “great concourse of men,” the “ordered rows of tents and booths, and lines of picketed horses, and great store of arms, and piled spears bristling like thickets of new-planted trees” (The Lord of the Rings [LotR] V.3.776). In Merry’s experiences, we feel the confusion and sense of loss of a young cadet, suddenly caught up in real war, and subject, willy-nilly, to the unquestionable decisions of kings.

The high point of the OTC for Tolkien may have been being chosen for the contingent of eight cadets from King Edward’s School that attended the 1911 coronation and royal progress of George V, an event he always remembered with pride (Letters 391, #306n). Much as Ioreth and her fellow citizens of Gondor burst with pride at the pomp and splendor of Aragorn’s coronation! The cadets joined troops lining the coronation parade route and the royal procession passed directly in front of them on its return from Westminster Abbey on June 22. On the next day, the cadets lined the route for the departure of the Royal Progress from Buckingham Palace. Then in July, the full cadet contingent travelled to Windsor Great Park for a review of the entire OTC by the new king—some 18,000 young men and boys and nearly 500 horses (Scull & Hammond C.31-32; Garth, Great War 23; Teagarden 96).

**King Edward’s Horse**

Tolkien apparently found the King Edward’s School OTC congenial enough in those pre-war days that he joined King Edward’s Horse a few months later, shortly after starting his first year at Oxford in November 1911 (Scull & Hammond C.36; Croft, War 149; Garth, “Tolkien, Exeter College” 37). The KEH was a fairly new army regiment for colonial volunteers (such as Tolkien, who was
born in the Orange Free State), with an emphasis on cavalry training. At the time of Tolkien’s membership it was considered a part of the Imperial Yeomanry, a name bearing echoes of the Assize of Arms of 1252, which required yeomen—small landowners and others at a certain level of income—to train with and maintain various weapons.

But Tolkien resigned after little more than a year in February 1913, at about the time he was determining to devote himself anew to his studies for Edith’s sake. Shortly after this time, the KEH was made a Special Reserve unit, meaning it could be mobilized and called up, as indeed it was mobilized for the defense of London, and some squadrons were eventually sent overseas (“King Edward’s Horse”).

There’s some bad information floating around suggesting that Tolkien was an expert breaker-in of horses because of this experience. Some of this can be traced to remarks attributed to Michael and Priscilla Tolkien at an event at Priscilla’s house at OxonMoot 1974. Reportedly one of them said that “Tolkien was in the cavalry himself—The King Edward Horse—he was keen on horses, and had a very great affinity for them. He turned out to be an unofficial breaker-in, since it seemed that as soon as he had satisfactorily broken a new horse it was taken from him and he was given another” (Clark 9).

But a 1993 article by Helen Armstrong reports that in 1990, Priscilla Tolkien told her something a bit different: “her father loved horses, and that he had indeed learned to ride while he was in the army, not as a cavalryman, but as part of his basic officer training. He had had little opportunity to ride since then” (31). Armstrong assesses the realism of the portrayal of horses and ponies in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings and speculates that Tolkien probably “learned to ride as a young man, with little previous knowledge of horses,” and had “personal riding experience in a variety of conditions, but not the more extreme ones,” but adds “his life showed no sign of leisure-riding” (31).

Personally, I believe Tolkien may have also gained some familiarity with working horses at his Aunt Jane Neave’s Phoenix Farm, which she ran from 1911 to 1922, thus overlapping with his time in King Edward’s Horse. Ronald and Hilary visited there on many occasions, and it’s the location where Tolkien wrote the earliest version of the Earendil poem. The farm was unmechanized until about 1920, and pictures show horses pulling ploughs and wagons, and ponies for riding (Morton and Hayes plates V, VII).

In Tolkien and the Great War, John Garth repeats the information from the 1974 OxonMoot report, adding that many of the horses in cavalry units were borrowed from local hunts, meaning they were already pretty well trained. Tolkien’s two weeks at the annual King Edward’s Horse regiment camp in 1912 would have given him an intensive course in working with military horses, though not under battle conditions (Garth, Great War 24-25). But Garth later qualified his
statements, admitting he “should have hedged a little,” because the 1974 report was certainly wrong about Tolkien being in the cavalry per se and thus not entirely reliable (“Tolkien and Horses”). As Shippey and Bourne point out, Tolkien did not “ride to hounds”(5)—so while he liked horses and had a good understanding of them, they were not a major part of his everyday life or his actual wartime experience.

There’s also a much-embellished tale going around about Tolkien on horseback at the Somme, winding up behind enemy lines and galloping away from a German mounted cavalry troop, but in Garth’s words, it’s “quite implausible” and not recorded in any of our primary sources (“Tolkien and Horses”).

In any case, even this limited amount of senior-level training stood Tolkien in good stead when he eventually began formal officer training with the Oxford OTC in 1914 and joined the Lancashire Fusiliers in 1915. Because of his experiences with the King Edward’s School Officers Training Corps and King Edward’s Horse, Tolkien had already had several years of intermittent exposure to para-military life, and was to some extent familiar with what might be required of him and how well he might expect to meet his obligations. I’ll skip over Tolkien’s actual war experiences here, as we are focusing on his civilian service.

**Civilian service in WWII**

By the time of the second World War, Tolkien was considered “permanently reserved” and not eligible to be called up for active duty. But he continued his personal commitment to civilian preparedness, first undergoing cryptological training (though he was never called upon to use it), then serving as an air warden (Croft, *War* 155-8), and occasionally having refugees billeted in his home. He also served by facilitating the Oxford education of naval and air force cadets and prisoners of war in German camps.

Tolkien’s connection to wartime code-breaking is another one of those stories around which false information has accumulated, see, for example, *The Telegraph’s* 2009 sensationalist “JRR Tolkien trained as British spy” for an article full of assumptions and inaccuracies. The facts are these: in January 1939, Tolkien was approached about cryptological work by the Government Code & Cypher School and had three days of testing and training in March of that year (*Letters* 436, note to letter #35) in Scandinavian languages and Spanish. In September he was still anticipating being called up, but by December 1939 was aware that he was no longer on their list (Scull & Hammond C.846).¹⁰ And that was the end of it.

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¹⁰ See Flieger on the significance of the change from Paddington to Bletchley between versions of “On Fairy-stories” and its connection with this series of events.
But we DO know that as of January 1941, Tolkien was acting as an Air Raid Warden in Oxford. His training in the Air Raid Precautions program would likely have begun in 1940 (Scull & Hammond C.251). Scull and Hammond report that he saw action in this capacity on May 4th, 1941, when he responded to the scene of a crashed aircraft and witnessed “great acts of heroism by local people who brave[d] the fire before official help arrive[d]” (C.264).

His letters from this period include occasional mentions of staying overnight for shifts at the local Air Raid Warden Area HQ. On May 10th, 1945, Tolkien hosted an “A.R.P. R.I.P. sherry party” for his fellow Oxford air wardens at his home (Scull & Hammond C.309) to celebrate the program being officially demobilized.

But what did Air Wardens do? A primary duty was enforcing the blackout and making sure that curtains and shutters were being used effectively. They reported bombings, managed air raid sirens, and helped people get to shelters. They issued and checked gas masks, cleared the areas around unexploded bombs, and helped people find temporary accommodations. They were trained in first responder-level first aid. Wardens were equipped with an armband, a helmet, and a gas mask, and had other equipment available to them at the area headquarters.

At its core, the job was about observation and communication, so that more official help could be directed and used efficiently.

A principal responsibility of the Air Raid Warden was to know their people and community well—who might need extra help, who might be able and willing to help, where the fire hydrants and danger spots were, where to find telephones and doctors, where the shelters were. A warden’s sector would have about 500 residents.

Both men and women could serve, though some roles were reserved for men, and at the peak of the program there were about 1.5 million people involved in some capacity (“Air Raid Precautions,” Air Raid Precautions Handbook).

One other way in which Tolkien put his specialized civilian skills to use in World War II was in organizing an English syllabus for naval and air cadets at Oxford starting in 1943, a project in which C.S. Lewis was also involved. They also both worked on a course of study and exams for English POWs in German camps (Johnson 49-56). In an April 1943 letter Tolkien complained to Lewis that not one of the 22 cadets passed a vocabulary test given at their first class meeting (Letters 59, #48).

Tolkien was primarily an administrator for the cadet program but did step in to teach from time to time during the first year of the program, and then regularly the next year. At least two classes of cadets cycled through before he passed administration of the program on to a colleague in March 1944 (Scull & Hammond C.283), though he continued to be involved. He also consulted with a Polish military officer about translations of technical vocabulary (C.281).
Civilian defense training in Middle-earth
So now let’s move on to civilian defense in Tolkien’s fictional works. I want to concentrate on *The Hobbit*, written during a time of watchful peace between the two world wars, and *The Lord of the Rings*, written in large part during World War II, though certainly there’s a lot of material to be found elsewhere in the legendarium.

We see very little in the way of formal group training programs for civilians (as opposed to members of standing armies) as a part of general preparedness in Third Age Middle-earth, aside from one (perhaps not too surprising) example.

It might reasonably be inferred that something of the sort takes place in Rohan, and quite probably Gondor as well; Éowyn speaks of being a “shieldmaiden” as if it is an official title, and boasts she can “ride and wield blade” as well as any man (*LotR* V.2.784), and young Bergil son of Beregond, one of the lads who stayed in Gondor, at the age of ten already claims to have had some instruction in basic wrestling skills (V.1.769).

But the clearest example of cadet corps-type military preparedness occurs in the Shire itself, Tolkien’s stand-in for pre-war Edwardian England. Given the peaceful nature of the Shire, it may seem odd that the Hobbits would ever have had formal military preparation programs, and there’s certainly no mention of anything like this in *The Hobbit*.

Yet the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* makes a point of mentioning that the Hobbits were “doughty at bay, and at need could still handle arms [and] shot well with the bow” (Prologue.6). The Thain of the Took’s was “captain of the Shire-muster and the Hobbitry-in arms,” though these institutions had fallen into disuse (9) and the hobbits had not sent troops to aid the King since the Battle of Fornost in T.A. 1975: “To the last battle at Fornost with the Witch-lord of Angmar they sent some bowmen to the aid of the king, or so they maintained, though no tales of Men record it” (4). At that time they still might have remembered the dangers of their Wandering Days, the darkening of their original home hear Mirkwood, and the treacherous passage over the mountains and into Eriador.

One might safely postulate that the Shire-muster and Hobbitry-in-arms, when active, could be thought of as roughly equivalent to the medieval English yeoman’s obligation to own, maintain, and train with a longbow and other weapons depending upon income. Young men rotating through the Shirrifs and Bounders would likely have gotten at least some minimal training in handling weapons and civilian defense as part of their duties, even if those duties mainly involved straying cattle.
If the Shire-muster and Hobbitry-in-arms originally referred to different concepts, they had become pretty much the same thing by the time of the events of *The Lord of the Rings*; but one might speculate that the Shire-muster called all citizens competent to bear arms together, while the Hobbitry-in-arms might once have been more like a formal reserve force, capable of sending a troop to the aid of the King in time of need.

Whatever the history of civilian preparedness in the Shire, by Bilbo and Frodo’s time the outermost ring of defense of the Shire had been taken over by the Rangers, the Dúnedain of the North. The well-intentioned protection of the Rangers, unknown though it was to the hobbits, had encouraged a sense of safety within their borders and a subsequent relaxation of vigilance and civil defense skills.

Because of this sense of shelter and protection, as Nan C. Scott points out, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin “are so overwhelmingly innocent that they actually set out for Rivendell unarmed” and are “surprised and uncomfortable” when Tom Bombadil, even though he is perhaps the arch-pacifist of Middle-earth, arms them with daggers from the Barrow-wight’s hoard (23).

There are many examples of the dangers of lapsed vigilance in Middle-earth—Sauron rebuilding Barad-dûr in secrecy or forging the Rings before the Elves are aware of what he is doing, for example, or on the other side, Saruman’s lack of attention to his neighbors the Ents.

But one of the most clear-cut critiques can be found in *The Hobbit*, in Smaug’s two attacks on the Lonely Mountain and Lake-town. Some two hundred years previous to Bilbo’s adventure, the King Under the Mountain and the town of Dale had been utterly routed by Smaug’s completely unexpected assault. The few survivors had been scattered and the mountain and town abandoned to the dragon (*The Hobbit [H]* I.32).

In spite of this unambiguous lesson and the daily reminder of the “rotting piles of a greater town” presumably destroyed at the same time (X.205), the guards of Lake-town “were not keeping very careful watch, for it was so long since there had been any real need” and were “drinking and laughing by a fire in their hut” when Bilbo and Thorin walked in and surprised them (X.207-8).

The inhabitants of Lake-town suffer from what Karen Cerulo has termed “optimistic bias” (qtd. in Ehrenreich 10), a dangerous tendency to simply expect the best possible outcome at all times, shown by how they interpret the light on the distant Mountain as the King returning to forging gold (*H* XIV.259). But Bard, well known for “foreboding gloomy things […] from floods to poisoned fish” (XIV.258), has a more realistic outlook and sees it for what it is: the dragon’s fire. Without his clear-headedness in ordering the bridges cut, the water buckets filled, and the townsmen armed (XIV.259), the disaster would have been far worse.
As it was, a lack of belief in the dragon till too late meant they had no back-up plan, no well-rehearsed skills and tactics, no tested escape route, and no safe store of supplies outside of the town itself. Tolkien, as a student of history and a veteran, perhaps had good reason to emphasize Lake-town’s folly in letting their guard lapse.

Like so much in *The Lord of the Rings*, the issues of civil defense preparedness and “failed watchfulness” (Scott 24) come to a head in “The Scouring of the Shire,” that deceptively anti-climactic but all-important chapter. Saruman has more strategic imagination than Sauron, whose fatal flaw keeps his attention focused entirely on obvious direct attacks, both offensively and defensively (Lloyd 5). Though Saruman has, up till now, generally attacked the strongest and best prepared positions of his enemy (like the Hornburg), he has also cleverly gone after less-fortified targets. But after his release from imprisonment in Orthanc, with the chance to do “some mischief [...] in a small mean way” (*LotR* VI.6.962), he deliberately strikes at the weakest and least-watched place in the West while its protectors are busy elsewhere.

The Shire, weakened by lack of training and leadership, is easy prey for Sharkey and his gang. It is certainly a reminder that Éowyn was right: “It takes but one foe to breed a war, not two [...] And those who have not swords can still die upon them” (VI.5.958).

The formal training of the Hobbitry-in-arms had suffered neglect and they lacked a command system that could have quickly identified and neutralized the threat posed by the incoming ruffians. But the hobbits were able to act together quickly and cooperatively when Merry and Pippin filled the command vacuum. There seemed to still be an underlying, not-entirely-forgotten recognition that the skills and discipline developed for the hunt and “quiet games of the aiming and throwing sort” (*H* VIII.169) might at times be useful for civil defense—as they indeed turned out to be.

As the Scouring of the Shire reminds Tolkien’s readers, evil does exist in the world and it may be necessary to defend against it. As Merry says, you can’t save your corner of the world just by being “shocked and sad” (*LotR* VI.8.1006). In “The New Shadow,” the beginning of an abandoned sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, old Borlas says “Peace makes things slack” (*Peoples of Middle-earth* 417).

Yet thankfully we don’t see a militarization of the Shire after these events of national trauma, like a standing army or a demand to build a wall or the individual hoarding of personal weapons. There are simply a few sobering reminders, in the memorial stone at the Battle Pit and the list of participants learned by heart by Shire-historians (VI.8.1016). Fortunately, hobbits remain hobbits: “unwearying fond of good things” yet “curiously tough,” and of the attitude that “peace and plenty” are “the right of all sensible folk” (Prologue.5). It’s wise, Tolkien says, to be vigilant and prepared, and keep an eye out for
ruffians, but in the meantime don’t neglect to enjoy the good things you’re protecting. A round of proper 1420 for us all!

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