Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 19
Issue 3 *"J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets" in honor of Richard C. West*

Article 8

2024

Remembering and Forgetting: National Identity Construction in Tolkien's Middle-earth

Sara Brown
Signum University, sara.brown@signumu.org

In his essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," J. R. R. Tolkien comments on our connection to our own history and the part that memory plays in this. As humans caught within, and wholly subject to, the passing of time, he says, we are "soaked in a sense of exile," our minds occupied with "thoughts of peace" and equally occupied with "thoughts of its loss."[1] In addition to playing its part in connecting us to our past, memory also plays a significant role in how the peoples of various nations see themselves and understand their place in the world. Andreas Huyssen comments that

> [t]he past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable…The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naive epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience. It is this tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory.[2]

A 'tenuous fissure' indeed, as memory is itself ephemeral and subject to the pressures of the present day. Memory may be shaped to fit the needs of those who seek to mold a national identity in the shape and form that will achieve a desired result. For this to happen, memory's antithesis, forgetting, may be equally important to identity formation, as nations seek to put behind them past events that are painful to recall.

Memory as a theme in Tolkien's work is one that has been explored in some depth by previous scholars. For example, in *Fantasies of Time and Death*, Anna Vaninskaya examines memory alongside nostalgia, exploring Tolkien's work through the concept of *sehnsucht*, a painful desire or yearning for someone or something that is always just out of reach.[3] Also focusing on the idea of yearning and nostalgia, particularly with regard to the Elves, Megan J. Robinson uses a Christian lens to discuss the concept of memory in conjunction with the ever-present anxiety of the passing of time, and asks why both Tolkien and C. S. Lewis employ fantasy as a medium to "explore what it means to live in time, to remember and expect."[4] William Stoddard considers the function of memory within Tolkien's legendarium, foregrounding Tolkien's use of elegiac poetry to capture and preserve remembrance of past deeds.[5] This poetry, as Tom Shippey notes in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, is used "to express and to resist the sadness of oblivion. It has the same function as the spears that the Riders plant in memory of the fallen, as the mounds that they raise over them, as the flowers that grow on the mounds."[6]

Amongst other influences, Tolkien drew inspiration from poetic forms, such as lays, alliterative poetry, and epic poetry, that are rooted in specific cultures, and which resonate with particular periods in history. His sources of inspiration serve to underpin the feeling of historicity in his work. For example, Verlyn Flieger has noted Tolkien's familiarity with and use of the lais of Marie de France, observing that "Marie is an unlikely inspiration for the

[1] Tolkien, J. R. R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 110.
[2] Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (Routledge, 1995), 2.
[3] Vaninskaya, A. *Fantasies of Time and Death*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Compare to the classical myth of Tantalus as well as Orpheus and Eurydice.
[4] Robinson, Megan J. "So Old and So New: Memory and Expectation in the Fantastic Works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien" *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016* Vol. 7, (2010): Article 18, 7.
[5] Stoddard, William H. "Simbelmynë: Mortality and Memory in Middle-earth" *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* Vol. 29: No. 1, (2010), Article 10.
[6] Shippey, T. A. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (HarperCollins, 2000), 97.

Beowulf-loving, Eddic-imitative Tolkien we are more familiar with" but that the date inscribed on Tolkien's own copy of the 1900 Warnke edition of the *Lais der Marie de France* – September 1920 - "is within the range of what Christopher calls the "considerably later [than 1917]" ink manuscript of "The Tale of Tinúviel."[7] Enumerating the plot points, stylistic features, and tone that Tolkien shares with Marie in his 'Tale of Tinúviel' and, later and to a lesser extent, the 'Lay of Leithian,' Flieger argues persuasively for the significant influence of the work of Marie de France on Tolkien's early writing.

Further enhancing this sense of historicity, the connections between Tolkien's work and literature of the European medieval tradition can be seen in his incorporation of certain modes of writing and poetic constructions that can be traced back to that period. For instance, there are explicit connections between Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium and medieval poems such as *Sir Orfeo*, with which Tolkien was familiar. In 1944, he produced a booklet containing the text of the poem that he had amended and edited; in addition, his own translation of the poem from Middle English into Modern was published in 1975 as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo.*[8] In *The Road to Middle-earth,* Shippey considers the idea that "for the elves, their fusion or kindling point would seem to be some twenty or thirty lines from the center of the medieval poem *of Sir Orfeo,*"[9] explaining that Tolkien's writing is influenced by several aspects of the medieval lay. Shippey repeats this idea in *Author of the Century*, asserting that "Tolkien drew his immediate inspiration for the Wood-elves of *The Hobbit* from…a single passage from the Middle English Romance *Sir Orfeo*."[10] What is, perhaps, more explicit still than these connections, is the fact that Tolkien was familiar enough with the form and construction of the medieval lay that he wrote a number of his own, such as those published in *The Lays of Beleriand*.

The importance of Tolkien's familiarity with these modes of writing, and the ways in which we can read their influences on his own work, lies in the sense that the stories set within his Middle-earth legendarium belong to a real yet far distant past in our own world. This feeling of verisimilitude is enhanced by the framing of the narratives as being 'translations' of a far older work, by characters observing that they are part of a greater story, and by the fact that the various peoples of Middle-earth each have a perception of their own, individual cultural history – sometimes recorded through writing, sometimes through artefacts kept in local repositories (such as the one in Michel Delving, where Bilbo Baggins temporarily allowed the mithril coat that Thorin Oakenshield gave him to be displayed), and sometimes passed down through songs or poetry. This enables the maintenance of cultural distinctiveness through shared memory and collective acts of remembering. It is important in fostering the cultural distinctiveness that is evident throughout Tolkien's texts.

The themes of memory and nostalgia therefore have great significance throughout Tolkien's writing; indeed, they are vital to the ways in which the various peoples and cultures of Middle-earth construct their sense of identity. Framing this idea of collective memory through a New Historicist lens offers the possibility that of equal importance and interest is the

[7] Flieger, Verlyn. "A Lost Tale, a Found Influence: Earendel and Tinúviel" in *Mythlore* 40.2 (2022), 100. On Tolkien's love of *Beowulf,* see Christopher Vaccaro's essay, and on the influence of Marie de France on Tolkien's work, see also Kristine Larsen's essay, both in this special issue of *The Journal of Tolkien Research.*
[8] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (George Allen and Unwin, 1975). For additional detail on Tolkien's life-long engagement with the Middle English *Pearl*, see Jane Beal's essay in this special issue of *The Journal of Tolkien Research*.
[9] Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (Houghton Mifflin; Expanded, Subsequent edition, 2003), 63.
[10] Shippey, *Author of the Century*, 34.

idea of doing the opposite: deliberately 'forgetting' the past so as to reframe it in a way that sits more comfortably with how a nation might desire to see itself.

Both Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* are affected by 20th-century upheavals; Britain, as will be explained later, emerges from a second, highly-damaging war within a thirty-year time span to find that its world-standing, its cultural norms, and its social strata were changed to an extent that returning to a status quo was utterly impossible. Nostalgia thus becomes a luxury as Britain must find a new way to exert its uniqueness as a nation. At the same time, those like Tolkien, born before these fundamental changes, must navigate a landscape that is less comfortingly recognizable than before and choose what to hold on to, and what to leave behind. Both remembering and forgetting can therefore play a vital role in how a nation perceives and outwardly presents its identity. This essay, then, asks whether we can read Tolkien's incorporation of memory as a significant theme within his legendarium as a meaningful determiner of national identity formation in his secondary world of Middle-earth.

ELIAS LÖNNROT AND THE KALEVALA: TOLKIEN'S CONNECTIONS WITH FINNISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

In Middle-earth, the various peoples, or nations, form and maintain a consciousness of their identity via folktales, songs, archives, and memorials, preserving that identity by constructing shared memory. In employing this form of national identity building, Tolkien is following the traditions of the medieval period in Europe, in which epic poems were a means of preserving culture, sharing a moral code, and offering solace in times of hardship. One example of an epic poem with medieval roots that influenced Tolkien came to him from Elias Lönnrot (1809 – 1884), a philologist and collector of traditional poetry from the Finnish oral tradition, who helped to compile the *Kalevala* – a deliberate use of traditional stories in the Finnish language to help construct a Finnish national identity.[11]

Since the twelfth century, Finland had been ruled first by Sweden and then, from 1809, by Russia, only gaining independence in 1917. As a result, the language of educated Finns, and the language of government and business, was Swedish, with the Finnish language reduced to a 'common speech' that had no power in society. The change to Russian occupation brought with it several challenges, not least the problem of language. There was also a growing desire to create their own sense of national identity, informed by a national sense of Finnish language and culture. Despite the dominance of Swedish since the twelfth century, the Finnish language, and its rich oral tradition, although reduced to mostly background in Finnish society, had never truly disappeared. During the last century of foreign rule, the stories of the *Kalevala*, assembled by (amongst others) Elias Lönnrot, became a symbol of Finnish identity. Lönnrot traveled around Karelia, committing to written form the poems and songs of the peoples of the area. He had been at university with two men who would later become equally instrumental in establishing Finland's national identity: Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806 -1881), who was a leader in the Finnish Fennomen national movement, and Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804 -1877), who became Finland's national poet.

The *Kalevala* has been described as a Finnish national epic, although this was refuted by Tolkien in his essay 'On the *Kalevala,'* given as a lecture first in November 1914 at Corpus

[11] For a thorough overview on this point, see Petty, Anne C. "Identifying England's Lönnrot" in *Tolkien Studies* Vol 1 (West Virginia University Press, 2004), 70-73.

Christi College, Oxford, then (with some emendations) in February 1915 at Exeter College.[12] Tolkien was unequivocal in his belief that it was not an epic at all, noting that

> One repeatedly hears the 'Land of Heroes' described as the 'national Finnish Epic': as if a nation besides if possible a national bank, theatre, and government ought also automatically to possess a national epic. Finland does not. The *Kalevala* is certainly not one. It is a mass of conceivably epic material: but, and I think this is the main point, it would lose nearly all that which is its greatest delight if it were ever to be epically handled."[13]

Tolkien's argument here, though, seems to be more about poetic genre than about the idea of the *Kalevala* being part of the Finnish national culture. He does acknowledge the part played by the *Kalevala*, and other collections such as *Kanteletar* (published 1840-1841) as a repository of Finnish memory, that is the oral traditions and cultural histories of a people captured within the poems and stories and passed down through the generations:

> …from what we know of the Finns they have always been fond of ballads; and those ballads have been handed on and sung day after day with unending zest from father to son and son to grandson down to the present day when, as the ballads now bewail, "The songs are songs of bygone ages/ hidden words of ancient wisdom/, songs which all the children sing not/ all beyond men's comprehension/ in these ages of unfortune/ when the race is near the ending."[14]

In constructing the *Kalevala,* knitting together its narratives into a coherent whole that told the stories of Finnish heroes, Lönnrot was following the way in which epic poems were used in the medieval period in Europe as a means of preserving culture, sharing a moral code, and offering solace in times of hardship. These poems, usually transcribed or translated in monastic scriptoria, were often passed down through generations and enabled the sharing of memory via storytelling. In many ways, this early literature, rooted as it was in both the religious and the secular aspects of medieval life, was as much a part of the identity of the various European peoples as popular culture is today. The stories and songs of the medieval period may point us towards the beginnings of a sense of 'nationalism' and national identity in this time.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SHARED MEMORY IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The concept of national identity is itself contested as there are many and varied definitions. In addition, national identity will also change over time, as a response to both national and international events. Even the idea of 'nation,' and what constitutes such an entity, requires unpacking. One useful definition is offered by Peter Hoppenbrouwers in his essay "The Dynamics of National Identity in the Later Middle Ages," in which he describes a nation as "a people living in some well-defined territory that shares an awareness of a common past as well as expectations about a common future."[15] He notes that there should be differentiation between 'nation' and 'ethnic group,' defining the latter as "a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members," and reminds us that "'people' has a more general, and for that reason also more ambiguous,

[12] Tolkien, J. R. R., and Verlyn Flieger. ""The Story of Kullervo" and Essays on Kalevala." *Tolkien Studies* 7 (West Virginia University Press, 2010): 211-278 (213).
[13] *Ibid*, 247.
[14] *Ibid*, 249.
[15] Hoppenbrouwers, Peter. "The Dynamics of National Identity In The Later Middle Ages" in *Networks, Regions and Nations: Shaping Identities in the Low Countries, 1300-1650* (Brill, 2010) 19-41 (19).

meaning than either nation or ethnic group, because 'people' can refer to both the citizens of a nation-state, the members of a nation and the members of an ethnic community."[16] In other words, due to cultural influences and regional differences, an understanding of national identity can vary even within a nation. In England in the medieval period, transcultural regions, such as the Welsh Marches and the Scottish Borders, had their own stories rooted in the land and their history, yet still came under the banner of 'English.'

Some scholars have argued that, despite these regional differences, there seems to have been a keen interest during the Middle Ages in the question of what it meant to be English. Thomas H. Crofts and Robert Allen Rouse note that the work of Thorlac Turville-Petre in the 1990s "established medieval English nationalism as a vibrant field of interest, and [this] has led to the proliferation of studies of the development of medieval Englishness."[17] In his 1994 essay "*Havelock* and the History of the Nation," Turville-Petre observes that "the establishment and exploration of a sense of a national identity is a major preoccupation of English writers of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.[18] Through the text of the thirteenth-century Middle English romance *Havelock the Dane*, also known as the *Lay of Havelok the Dane*, Turville-Petre claims that the use of the English vernacular, as opposed to Latin or Anglo-Norman, is evidence of an exploration of 'Englishness' by writers in the generation before Chaucer. Crofts and Rouse point out that this claim has its critics amongst scholars, asking whether one can actually "read the beginnings of English 'nationalism' […] in such pre-modern texts" and noting that it is unlikely that there was any idea of a growing sense of nationalism, or national sentiment, in this period.[19] The fact that so many scholars have written on this subject, though, shows that it is a topic of significance in medieval studies.[20]

Of course, alongside this tentative formation of a national identity comes the idea of shared memory, a means by which a national identity may be formed. As Jean-Philippe Genet remarks, "[m]emory is an individual experience evoking the workings of the subject's psychology and intellect, but it is powered by products of society: specific knowledge and signs and collective or individual experiences dependent on the media making individuals aware of them."[21] Memory was already a vital component of medieval life in England, based, as it was, on Christian biblical narrative that was regarded as historical truth. The perceived temporary nature of life made it imperative that records were kept but, in addition to those written by

[16] Hoppenbrouwers "The Dynamics of National Identity," 19.
[17] Crofts, Thomas H. and Rouse, Robert Allen "Middle English Popular Romance and National Identity" in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance* ed. Raluca Radulescu & Cory James Rushton (Boydell & Brewer, 2023) 79-95 (79).
[18] Turville-Petre, Thorlac. "*Havelock* and the History of the Nation" in R*eadings in Medieval English Romance* ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994) 121-34 (121).
[19] See Crofts and Rouse, "Middle English Popular Romance and National Identity," 79-81.
[20] See, for example, Calkin, Siobhain Bly. *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 7–10; Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Heng, Geraldine *The Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 6–8; Lavezzo, Kathy *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), vii–xxxiv; Pearsall, Derek "The idea of Englishness in the fifteenth century," in *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. by Helen Cooney (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 15–27; Rouse, Robert Allen *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance: Studies in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), 70–5; and Turville-Petre, Thorlac. "Afterword: the Brutus prologue to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 340–6.
[21] Genet, Jean-Philippe. "Memory Of The State Or Memory Of The Kingdom? A Comparative Approach To The Construction Of Memory In France And England" in *Memory in the Middle Ages: Approaches from Southwestern Europe* ed. Flocel Sabaté (Arc Humanities Press, 2020), 209-228 (209).

monks for church purposes, documents such as the Paston Letters, a collection of correspondence from 1422 to 1509 between members of the Paston family and their acquaintances, show how the memories and recollections of people of this time are testimony to ordinary lives that are connected via shared events.[22] Shared memory could also be gender-based; different social ties, the relationship with authority, even the spaces that they inhabited, would inform the ways in which memories were held, recounted, and recalled.[23]

None of this explains why, writing in the twentieth century, Tolkien was so convinced that England had no shared cultural memory in the form of its own mythology, or why this engendered in him a profound sense of loss. In his 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien lamented that:

> I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own. (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff.[24]

What Tolkien refers to in this letter as "an illusion of historicity" therefore underpins his creative efforts with the Middle-earth legendarium.[25] Tolkien seems to have recognized that, however much interest in the formation of a national identity had been present in the medieval period, historical events and cross-cultural influences had added great difficulties to such an aim. Roman, Saxon, Viking, and Norman invasions had all brought cultural exchange and new languages to Britain. Trade ties with many European countries, as well as further afield, also promoted cross-cultural pollination of stories, languages, and artifacts, which were then embedded in the various regions to a lesser or greater degree.

Tolkien's initial aim for his Middle-earth legendarium was, therefore, an attempt to counter this paucity of English identity-affirming mythology through a secondary world-building that purported to be not a creation of his own imagination, but a reconstruction of languages, histories, and cultures that had resided in some long-distant past. Thus would a national identity for England take shape via the identity formation seen in his texts as the various peoples of Middle-earth formed their shared memories and passed them down through successive Ages (the Elves) or generations (the mortal peoples). It should be emphasized, though, that this has led to a misconception that Tolkien wanted to create a 'mythology for England,' a phrase he never used himself, and for which we must turn to Humphrey Carpenter's biography.[26] As Dimitra Fimi has argued, Tolkien moved away from the initial narrative framing of his work that would "make the mythology 'belong' to England, since the underlying idea was that time travelling through dreams accessed the collective unconscious of modern

[22] These letters are mostly kept in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library but excerpts, as well as scholarly commentary, may be found at https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/pastonletters_01.shtml.
[23] For a fascinating insight into such gender-based memory formation, see Kane, Bronach C. *Popular Memory and Gender in Medieval England; Men, Women, and Testimony in the Church Courts, c. 1200-1500* (Boydell Press, 2019).
[24] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien Revised and Expanded Edition* Humphrey Carpenter (ed.) (HarperCollins Publishers, 2023), 203.
[25] *Ibid*, 202.
[26] See Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 59; 89-90. For a useful overview of this issue, see Shelton, Luke. "Why Calling Tolkien's Work "A Mythology for England" is Wrong and Misleading" (2022), found at https://luke-shelton.com/2022/02/12/why-calling-tolkiens-work-a-mythology-for-england-is-wrong-and-misleading/.

Englishmen's ancestors…and the link of the legendarium with England practically disappeared."[27] Fimi explains the reasons for this shift:

> Tolkien's nationalism had waned, for one thing…in *The Book of Lost Tales* the emphasis was on England's Anglo-Saxon past, in contrast with 'Britain' and the 'Celtic' tradition of Wales and Ireland…eventually Tolkien's project ended up being a 'mythology for Britain' rather than 'a mythology for England'. The Anglo-Saxonism movement also practically disappeared after World War I. The moment of English nationalism… had passed and in the inter-war period Englishness came to be associated with the simple ways of the English countryside, rather than with England's glorified Anglo-Saxon ancestors.[28]

With this caveat, that *The Lord of the Rings* is not intended as a mythology for England, there is still space to consider how Tolkien was ensuring that his secondary world contained cultural and historical distinctiveness that would allow for the formation of differing identities for its different peoples.

Notably, in his letter to Milton Waldman Tolkien refers to history and historicity from the beginning of his explanation of what he had set out to achieve. The idea of these narratives – from cosmogonical myth, through the history of the Elves in The Silmarillion, past the bridging story of The Hobbit, and finally to the mortal perspective of The Lord of the Rings – is to offer the reader a recounting of legend presented as shared memory via the conceit of the author being no more than a translator of these works. Flieger notes that "*The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien's earliest foray into feigned mythology, began with an imagined history "as told to" the mariner Eriol/Ælfwine,"[29] and this narrative framing was intended to underpin this idea of his tales being rooted in a dim and distant (yet actual) past. These tales, as Flieger reminds us, are told and/or preserved by "a variety of storytellers and transmitters— from ancient authorities like Pengoloð to poets like Dírhavel to collectors like Bilbo to scribes like Findegil to translators like Aragorn,"[30] thus enhancing the sense of the stories being collective memory.

History, shared memory, and the formation of national identity are therefore brought from the primary world into the secondary world. Tolkien recognized and understood the part they would play in establishing the verisimilitude and sense of historicity necessary for the kind of world-building he was determined to achieve. An awareness of the temporary nature of life appears repeatedly in Tolkien's letters and fiction and informs his ideas about the role played by memory in the formation of national identity. Tolkien's writing focuses not only on moving a plot forward, but on establishing a past for each of his nations, each of which is given painstaking histories and genealogies. He rarely introduces or ends a story without an explication of the history of the region and its people; at times, as Tolkien remarks in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, these narratives are lengthy:

> The legends, histories, and lore to be found in the sources [outside of these appendices] are very extensive. Only selections from them, in most places much abridged, are here presented. Their principal purpose is to illustrate the War of the Ring and its origins, and to fill up some of the gaps in the main story.[31]

---

[27] Fimi, Dimitra. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129.
[28] *Ibid*.
[29] Flieger "A Lost Tale," 98.
[30] *Ibid*.
[31] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 'Appendix A,' 1009.

Yet, after writing his novel of over 1,000 pages, he still felt that the narrative had 'gaps,' apparently because of its primary concentration on present events (within the context of the story). As he commented in a letter to Hugh Brogan in September 1954: "If you want my opinion, a part of the 'fascination' [of *The Lord of the Rings*] consists in the vistas of yet more legend and history, to which this work does not contain a full clue."[32] Thanks to the later publication of *The Silmarillion*, *The Unfinished Tales*, *The History of Middle-earth* series, and more recently *The Nature of Middle-earth*, we now have far more of a clue regarding the histories of cultures, races, and nation-building to be found in his legendarium, and how the retaining of memory plays its part in preserving those histories.

TOLKIEN, MEMORY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

One of the ways in which Tolkien indicates the importance of memory is in his frequent use of poetry as a device of historical recall. For example, the events of the First Age are often remembered via songs and poems, naming the heroes of that time and recounting their deeds, so that Frodo and Sam, crossing into Mordor, can discuss Beren and Lúthien's struggle against Morgoth. The Rohirrim, too, sing their songs of past heroes such as Éorl the Young and, in this way, Middle-earth's heroes could hope to be remembered and honored many centuries after their deaths. This idea is evoked when Sam says: "what a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we?' … 'I wish I could hear it told. Do you think they'll say: Now comes the story of Nine-fingered Frodo and the ring of Doom? And then everyone will hush, like we did, when in Rivendell they told us the tale of Beren One-hand and the Great Jewel. I wish I could hear it! And I wonder how it will go on after our part."[33] His wish is, of course, granted when the minstrel sings exactly this tale at the fields of Cormallen and thus ensures that this story will be passed on in just the same way as the deeds of Beren and Lúthien.

This is the second time that Sam recalls the story of Beren and Lúthien, the first being in the chapter "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol" when Sam realizes that, as Frodo is carrying the Phial of Galadriel, in which is captured the light of Eärendil, they are both a part of that story:

> Beren, now, he never thought that he was going to get the Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it – and the Silmaril went on and came to Eärendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got – you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on.[34]

The first reference to this tale comes in chapter 11 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Resting a while on their journey, the hobbits listen as Aragorn tells them tales of the "histories and legends of long ago, of Elves and Men and the good and evil deeds of the Elder Days."[35] Merry asks for the lay that tells the story of Gil-Galad but, not wishing to tell that tale when the Black Riders are near, Aragorn instead tells them a part of the tale of Tinúviel. It is notable that he chants rather than speaks the tale; this is traditional for a lay, although here the tale is rendered as a song and does not follow the verse form of a traditional lay. This song references what would eventually be published as 'The Lay of Leithian'. Interestingly, what Christopher Tolkien refers to as the 'B-text' of the lay is prefaced in *The Lays of Beleriand* by the title 'The

[32] Tolkien, *Letters*, 279.
[33] Tolkien, *LotR* Bk 6: Ch IV, 929.
[34] Tolkien, *LotR*, Bk 4: Ch VIII, 696-697.
[35] *Ibid*, Bk 1: Ch XI, 186.

GEST of BEREN son of BARAHIR and LÚTHIEN the FAY called TINÚVIEL the NIGHTINGALE or the LAY OF LEITHIAN Release from Bondage'. Christopher notes here that "The 'Gest of Beren and Lúthien' means a narrative in verse, telling of the deeds of Beren and Lúthien"[36] – a gest, or geste, being a medieval French form of epic poem known as a *chanson de geste*, the most famous of which being, arguably, the 11th century *Chanson de Roland*.[37]

One other important point about the remembrance of early events is that, as William Stoddard notes, "there is more than song to preserve those ancient memories. Middle-earth has living witnesses to its own ancient history: the Elves, the Ents, and Tom Bombadil."[38] Additionally, we learn in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, even those Elves whose fëa pass into the Halls of Mandos are then reincarnated fully grown, with all memories intact.[39] In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Elrond tells the Council of the war of the Last Alliance against Sauron, Frodo is surprised as "I thought that the fall of Gil-Galad was a long age ago." Elrond's response is that:

> "my memory reaches back even to the Elder Days. Eärendil was my sire, who was born in Gondolin before its fall; and my mother was Elwing, daughter of Dior, son of Lúthien of Doriath. I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories." [40]

This demonstrates that even the ancient past can be living memory when a world has those within it who possess this kind of longevity. Of course, as Stoddard observes, "[w]ith such witnesses at hand, the accuracy of the songs, and thus the recall of history, is less likely to drift over time. New songs are written — for example, Bilbo writes his own account of the voyage of Eärendil — but their hearers may include someone who knows the true tale, or even lived through it, and can protest at changes."[41] In fact, acting as repositories of living memory seems to be a key role for Tolkien's Elves. Elvish narrative poetry and songs focus exclusively on historical events rather than fiction and, in this way, they serve the vital function of preserving memories. This seems to fit with the way in which the Elves interact with their world: in his 1956 letter to Michael Straight, Tolkien makes the point that "they desired some 'power' over things as they are (which is quite distinct from art), to make their particular will to preservation effective: to arrest change, and keep things always fresh and fair."[42] Capturing their own history in songs and poetry would, indeed, keep things always fresh and fair.

Underlying much of this focus on recording these national histories is a fear of their disappearance. An early representation of Tolkien's fear of cultural loss appears in his incorporation of the Atlantis myth in *The Silmarillion*. In *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology*, Verlyn Flieger proposes that Tolkien's need to write multiple versions of

[36] Tolkien, *The Lays of Beleriand*, 188.
[37] For some useful scholarship on Tolkien's story of Beren and Lúthien see Moore, Clare. "A Song of Greater Power: Tolkien's Construction of Lúthien Tinúviel" in *Mallorn: Journal of the Tolkien Society* (2021), 6-16; Beal, Jane. "Orphic Powers in J. R. R. Tolkien's Legend of Beren and Lúthien" in *Journal of Tolkien Research* 1 (2014), 1-25; and West, Richard C. "Real-world myth in a secondary world: Mythological aspects in the story of Beren and Lúthien" in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, (Routledge, 2003), 259-267.
[38] Stoddard, "Simbelmynë: Mortality and Memory in Middle-earth," 153.
[39] Tolkien, *The Nature of Middle-earth* Carl F. Hostetter (ed) (HarperCollins Publishers, 2021), 15.
[40] Tolkien, *LotR* Bk 2: Ch II, 237.
[41] Stoddard, "Simbelmynë: Mortality and Memory in Middle-earth," 153.
[42] Tolkien, *Letters*, 342.

an Atlantis story arose from his apprehension about myths becoming increasingly changed over time.[43] In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien describes the fall of his Atlantis, Númenor, in detail:

> In an hour unlooked for by Men this doom befell, on the nine and thirtieth day since the passing of the fleets. Then suddenly fire burst from the Meneltarma, and there came a mighty wind and a tumult of the earth, and the sky reeled, and the hills slid, and Númenor went down into the sea, with all its children and its wives and its maidens and its ladies proud; and all its gardens and its halls and its towers, its tombs and its riches, and its jewels and its webs and its things painted and carven, and its laughter and its mirth and its music, its wisdom and its lore: they vanished for ever.[44]

In this passage, Tolkien shows a concern for the people that are lost as well as for the loss of their culture and the material objects that might have left evidence of that culture. In addition, Tolkien tells us that the "King and the mortal warriors that had set foot upon the land of Aman were buried under falling hills: there it is said that they lie imprisoned in the Caves of the Forgotten."[45] This moment of obliteration is not only of a people but also of nearly all vestiges of their history and folklore, and this is not the only example, as we can see from Faramir's words in *The Two Towers*:

> "We in the House of Denethor know much ancient lore by long tradition, and there are moreover in our treasuries many things preserved: books and tablets writ on withered parchments, yea, and on stone, and on leaves of silver and of gold, in divers characters. Some none can now read; and for the rest, few ever unlock them. I can read a little in them, for I have had teaching."[46]

Ancient Gondorians recorded their history and legends, but the stories have been nearly lost - not physically, but through neglect. Faramir reveals that Gandalf "got leave of Denethor, how I do not know, to look at the secrets of our treasury, and I learned a little of him, when he would teach (and that was seldom)."[47] Faramir's acknowledgment that he is able to read some of the texts, mostly due to the teachings of Gandalf, shows that the loss of their contents is not inevitable.

It is unclear in these passages whether the Gondorians must ask permission to view the documents, or if Faramir simply is surprised that Gandalf is allowed access because Gandalf is a foreigner. That the documents have restricted access, and few ever see them, suggests that no formal system exists to educate Gondorians about the history and lore inscribed on the scrolls. Since Gandalf has much learning that, evidently, he is not always willing to share, the fate of much of Gondor's knowledge seems tied to Gandalf's fate. After learning that Gandalf has fallen in Moria, Faramir focuses less on the loss of Gandalf's friendship than on the loss of the information that only Gandalf knew, lamenting that "[a]n evil fate seems to have pursued your fellowship. It is hard indeed to believe that one of so great wisdom, and of power – for many wonderful things he did among us – could perish, and so much lore be taken from the world."[48] Of course, Gandalf has not actually died; his return allows Tolkien to avoid imagining Middle-

[43] Flieger, *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (Kent State University Press, 2005), 125.
[44] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 279.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] Tolkien *LotR* Bk4: Ch V, 655.
[47] *Ibid*, 656.
[48] *Ibid*, 655.

earth without any surviving memory of the stories that only Gandalf seems to know – at least for now.

Hobbits do not fare much better in remembering their own history. They have some written records of the modern history of Middle-earth, mostly because Bilbo and Frodo write down their experiences of the war but seem to know little of their earlier history. Articulating the similarities between hobbits and humans in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien admits that "what exactly our relationship is can no longer be discovered. The beginning of hobbits lies far back in the Elder Days that are now lost and forgotten."[49] Discussing the history of the Middle Ages, Patrick J. Geary suggests that record-keeping (and record-losing) is often purposeful, remarking that "[w]hat we think we know about the early Middle Ages is largely determined by what people of the early eleventh century wished themselves and their contemporaries to know about the past."[50] Because not every record could be maintained, medieval archives underwent a pruning process, and any records not deemed useful were discarded. Certainly, many records were lost despite efforts to preserve them, but a system to select and maintain records existed nonetheless. In contrast the hobbits lose knowledge of their history and culture through neglect.[51] Treebeard is therefore puzzled upon meeting Merry and Pippin, asking "'What are you, I wonder? I cannot place you. You do not seem to come in the old lists that I learned when I was young.'"[52] With the exception, perhaps, of the Elves, each Middle-earth nation's records focus primarily on local history, and so the ones who do not maintain accounts of their own histories eventually witness the disappearance of important pieces of their national memory. National history that does not take account of local or regional history will almost certainly ignore or overlook issues of individual cultural importance; this almost inevitably leads to future tension, even, potentially, conflict.[53]

John D. Rateliff relates such loss of cultural memory in Middle-earth to that which Tolkien lamented in English culture, commenting that "Tolkien's medieval studies predisposed him to notice these losses, as he wrote scholarly essays on the *Beowulf*-poet, the Gawain-poet, and the equally anonymous author of the *Ancrene Wisse*, brilliant writers whose names are forever lost to us."[54] In addition, as Anna Smol points out in her essay in this collection, Tolkien was engaging with the heroic poem "The Battle of Maldon" from his days as an undergraduate, right through to his retirement, understanding it as "the nexus that expands to encompass some of his important thinking…on heroism, tradition, history, and poetic style."[55] Through his studies, Tolkien was aware that individuals, as well as entire groups, often do not survive in modern memory. In writing their stories, he preserves their (fictive) memories and does not allow their lives to cease to matter. Yet all the details embedded in Tolkien's description of record-keeping in Middle-earth remind the reader that, despite this copious documentation of

[49] Tolkien, *LotR* 'Prologue' 2.
[50] Geary, Patrick J. *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton University Press; Revised ed, 1996), 177.
[51] Tolkien, *LotR* 'Prologue,' 2.
[52] *Ibid*, Bk 3: Ch IV, 464.
[53] For a fascinating primary-world example of such potential conflict, see Bringa, Tone R. "Nationality categories, national identification and identity formation in 'multinational' Bosnia" in *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 11 no. 1 & 2 (1993): 80-89. Bringa gives a thorough explanation of why the attempt to cantonize, or even falsely carve out a multi-ethnic nation for, Bosnia-Hercegovina in the 1990s was such an abject failure.
[54] Rateliff, John D. '"And All the Days of Her Life Are Forgotten": *The Lord of the Rings* and Mythic Prehistory' in Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (eds.) *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder* (Marquette University Press, 2006), 67-100 (80).
[55] Smol, Anna. 'Tolkien, "The Battle of Maldon", and "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth"' *Journal of Tolkien Research*, 1.

the histories of Middle-earth nations, memories of traditions and events are incomplete, some having been lost entirely or remembered only by select groups.

Tolkien addresses the idea of the insufficiency of memory in the form of physical documentation to preserve history. While he clearly values the material traces of the past, he also recognizes that they represent the end of things that once were, and that objects and documents are unlikely to exist forever without damage or loss. In the case of the Númenóreans, he therefore creates a second form of preservation of their culture, a way for his characters to maintain a sort of remembrance of the past via inherited memory. In her essay "Do the Atlantis Story and Abandon Eriol-Saga," Verlyn Flieger discusses Tolkien's integration of the Atlantis myth in both *The Lost Road* and "The Notion Club Papers." Flieger notes that, in an outline of *The Lost Road,* Tolkien planned for the father and son characters to time-travel to different historical periods, ending up in the time of the Númenórean flood.[56] She points out that this time-travel story is unique in its mode of transportation across the centuries, as "[t]he vehicle for their travel would be no Wellsian time-machine, but instead their ancestrally transmitted memories of a past they could not have experienced in their own personae."[57]

Tolkien later wrote an almost entirely new time-travel story, 'The Notion Club Papers,' carrying over only the "concept of inherited memory leading to the destruction of Atlantis/Númenor;"[58] however, he did not simply use inherited memory as an intriguing plot device. In his 1964 letter to Christopher Bretherton, Tolkien detailed his 'Atlantis-haunting': "In sleep I had the dreadful dream of the ineluctable Wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands."[59] As can be seen in his 1955 letter to Auden, Tolkien seems to have believed that this preoccupation with Atlantis was transmitted to him by his parents:

> I have what some might call an Atlantis complex. Possibly inherited, though my parents died too young to transfer such things by words. Inherited from me (I suppose) by only one of my children ... 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 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.[60]

Tolkien's recurring dream of a flood overwhelming a land reflects his anxiety about part or all of his own culture disappearing. The idea of inherited memory permits him to conceive of a way around the potential for cultural annihilation that he so feared. If individuals could pass on actual memories of events important to a nation, then the pressure on written records and artifacts to preserve the identity of a culture would be alleviated.

In the end, the lack of care with records in the Shire and the inattention to cultural inheritance in Gondor do not condemn their nations, as Plato puts it in in his dialog *Timaeus,* to "begin again like children, in complete ignorance of what happened in [their] past."[61] In *The*

---

[56] Flieger, "Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga" in *Tolkien Studies* Vol 1 (West Virginia University Press 2004), 43-68 (45).
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Ibid*, 46.
[59] Tolkien, *Letters*, 486-487.
[60] Tolkien, *Letters*, 311.
[61] Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato: Timaeus* (trans. David Horan) (found at https://www.platonicfoundation.org/platos-timaeus/).

Lord of the Rings, Tolkien bestows the gift of inherited memory on Faramir, who has a recurring dream-memory of the Númenórean flood. Though the Gondorians rarely read their scrolls and cannot remember some of the language, the flood narrative will not be forgotten because Faramir holds the memory of it for his nation. As Tolkien reveals in his 1956 letter to a Mr. Thompson, "[w]hen Faramir speaks of his private vision of the Great Wave, he speaks for me. That vision and dream has been ever with me."[62] Faramir remembers the Great Wave for his people, but he also remembers it for the author.[63]

Memory retention as a means of both constructing and maintaining histories is undoubtedly significant; however, the converse is also true in that nations may need to selectively 'forget' events if they are to move forward after traumatic events. Forgetting may also be key to the formation of a sense, or a renewed sense, of community. As Benedict Anderson explains, a nation is a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings."[64] Sometimes, though, certain events can reveal fissures in a collective sense of identity, and a community may, however subconsciously, need to omit or even excise part of that shared history. In his 1882 essay, "What is a Nation?" Ernest Renan explicates the role of forgetting in forming a nation's identity, pointing out that the details of a nation's history that are left out are often no less important than the details remembered, but that unflattering events are frequently suppressed. "Forgetfulness," he wrote, "and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality."[65]

In "DissemiNation," Homi Bhabha states Renan's idea in another way, suggesting that "[b]eing obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification."[66] Anderson concurs with Renan's argument, adding that the peoples of various nations must, over time, undergo "a deep reshaping of the imagination of which the state was barely conscious, and over which it had, and still has, only exiguous control."[67] Citizens are "obliged to forget" the negative aspects of their history to sustain an image of a nation with which they will want to identify, and so the act of forgetting becomes a crucial part of their national memory.

---

[62] Tolkien, *Letters*, 337.

[63] There is a wealth of scholarship that focuses on Tolkien's Great Wave dream. See, for example, Organ, Michael. "Tolkien's Japonisme: Prints, Dragons, and a Great Wave" in *Tolkien Studies* Vol.10 (West Virginia University Press, 2013) no. 1, 105-122; Swank, Kris. "Tolkien and the Sea: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 1996," edited by Richard Cranshaw and Shaun Gunner. *Mythlore: A Journal of JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 40.2 (2022), 262-266; Fontenot, Megan N. "The Art of Eternal Disaster: Tolkien's Apocalypse and the Road to Healing" in *Tolkien Studies* Vol.16 (West Virginia University Press, 2019), no. 1, 91-109; and Rosegrant, John. "From the ineluctable wave to the realization of imagined wonder: Tolkien's transformation of psychic pain into art" in *Mythlore: A Journal of JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 35 (2017), no. 2, 133-151.

[64] Anderson, Benedict. "Imagined Communities" in *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader* Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman (eds.) (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 48-60 (7).

[65] Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" (trans. M. Thom.) in Homi Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

[66] Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation" in *Nation and Narration* Homi Bhabha (ed.) (New York: Routledge 2013), 31

[67] Anderson, "Imagined Communities," 201.

At several points in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien acknowledges that nations' constructed histories often omit significant details to perpetuate a more positive self-image. During the Council meeting in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Elrond recounts the story of the Ring being taken by Isildur.[68] Boromir's response is one of surprise, as this part of the story has not survived in the lore of Gondor. Elrond then offers his own account of Gondorian history, stating that "the race of Númenor has decayed, and the span of their years has lessened."[69] Unwilling to accept that others might not perceive his homeland as being as great as he has been taught, Boromir passionately defends his nation against Elrond's depiction, declaring:

> Believe not that in the land of Gondor the blood of Númenor is spent, nor all its pride and dignity forgotten. By our valour the wild folk of the East are still restrained, and the terror of Morgul kept at bay; and thus alone are peace and freedom maintained in the lands behind us.[70]

He views the Gondorians as valiant warriors, not as moral and physical weaklings; he is unwilling to see them differently as this goes against all he desires to believe about his home. As a consequence of the 'forgetting' that has successfully embedded itself in Gondorian culture, Boromir is in a state of ignorance about his own country's history; in fact, he is the recipient of a history passed down through a filter. Through characters like Boromir, Tolkien admits that people have a limited perspective of the nature of their own nation and, as Renan and Bhabha suggest, often forget the negative defining moments in their nation's histories.

In general, forgetting is considered something to be avoided or repaired, but sometimes nations purposefully erase pieces of their past. In a detailed examination of national memory loss, Tolkien portrays hobbits as having a selective memory of their history. In many ways, their existence in the Shire seems idyllic. Tolkien subtly undermines this vision of the Shire by admitting that it remains idyllic in part because of the hobbits' ignorance of the larger world, as "they heeded less and less the world outside where dark things moved, until they came to think that peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all sensible folk."[71] Tolkien adds that along with the presence of outside evils, hobbits have lost sight of "the Guardians, and of the labours of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire."[72] Hobbits construct their collective identity as one of abundance, joviality, safety, and anti-modernity; they are able to do this primarily due to their good fortune in stumbling upon fertile land in ancient days, and because they benefit from the toiling of anonymous 'Guardians' that keep the dark at bay. Without this assistance, the hobbits would likely have had to confront the evils of Middle-earth with much more regularity; certainly, the advent of the War of the Ring demonstrates their vulnerability.

Tolkien's depiction of post-war national 'forgetting,' however, suggests an alternative to the perception of forgetting as pathological. Memory loss plays a critical role in the healing of the Shire. Initially, the hobbits, particularly Sam, lament the war's damages to the landscape. Sam estimates that "this hurt would take long to heal, and only his great-grandchildren, he thought, would see the Shire as it ought to be."[73] Miraculously, Sam recalls a box of dust Galadriel had given him and sprinkles it on newly planted seeds all over the Shire. The hobbits are thus soon able to return to their former way of life, with little sign of having survived a war.

[68] Tolkien, *LotR* Bk 2: Ch II, 237.
[69] *Ibid*, 238.
[70] *Ibid*, 239.
[71] Tolkien, 'Prologue to *LotR*,' 5.
[72] *Ibid*.
[73] Tolkien, *LotR* Bk 6: Ch IX, 999.

For the post-war Shire, Tolkien uses fantasy as a vehicle to imagine forgetting as something positive, literally capable of wiping out the effects of conflict. The swift healing of the Shire allows the hobbits to avoid the long-term suffering nations normally face after war. By the spring, the Shire brims with new life, and the land is wiped clean of the effects of the turmoil it has experienced. Tolkien tells us that:

> Not only was there wonderful sunshine and delicious rain, in due times and perfect measure, but there seemed something more: an air of richness and growth, and a gleam of a beauty beyond that of mortal summers that flicker and pass upon this Middle-earth."[74]

In this respect, the resolution of the Scouring of the Shire seems to act as a form of wish fulfillment for Tolkien, permitting him to imagine what it would be like not to have to struggle through years of post war rebuilding, something with which he was all too familiar. His own active service in the First World War had been traumatic enough, especially with the loss of two of his school friends from the TCBS.[75] Just a generation later, Britain was having to restore and restructure itself after another ruinous war.

The Second World War was an all-consuming experience for the people of Britain. Large numbers of both men and women were drafted into either the armed forces or the Home Guard, and industry shifted almost entirely to the provision of necessities for war. Jobs previously done almost exclusively by men were taken over by women, many of whom did not wish to revert to their traditional domestic role as the men returned.[76] Post-war austerity measures, imposed to meet the enormous war debt, a national fuel shortage and one of the worst winters on record in 1947 meant that food rationing continued to create hardship until it finally ended on the 4th of July 1954. During the inter-war years, the 1919 Housing Act had been set up to ensure that Britain could provide homes and, as David Lloyd George promised, "make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in."[77] The reality of the situation in the immediate post-war period was that there were simply insufficient houses for those who needed them. The outbreak of the Second World War effectively put a stop to any further house building and, as the war drew to a close, Britain faced its worst housing shortage of the twentieth century. Bomb damage had only worsened the already poor condition of social housing projects that had existed prior to the outbreak of war, necessitating wide-spread clearances of slum areas in various cities.[78] Rebuilding took longer than the clearances, leaving many families struggling to find suitable accommodation and, by the end of 1945, it was estimated that "there was an immediate need for over a million homes"[79] in England and Wales. The war had dealt a devastating blow to British society, social structure, and sense of security. Rebuilding would be a slow and difficult process.

---

[74] Tolkien, *LotR* Bk 6: Ch IX, 1000.
[75] For more details on Tolkien's war service, Janet Brennan Croft's excellent monograph *War and the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Praeger, 2004) juxtaposes Tolkien's war experiences with the resonances found in his Middle-earth legendarium. See also Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).
[76] See Brook, Sir Norman. "Notebook: War Cabinet Minutes 6th July 1945" National Archives (Cat ref: CAB/195/3), 2-3.
[77] The Times newspaper, 25 November 1918.
[78] Willink, Henry U. (Minister for Health) "Memorandum to the Cabinet 6th October 1945" *National Archives* (Cat. Ref: CAB/129/3).
[79] Willink, "Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet Wednesday 18th July 1945" *National Archives* (Cat. Ref: CAB/65/53/15).

Unlike the experience of post-war Britain, the Shire seems able to rebuild relatively easily. Thanks to the small box of gray dust gifted to Sam by Galadriel, as well as Sam's skill and care, the almost magical re-growth of the trees and other plant life in the Shire hastens both the hobbits' healing and their forgetting. They do not memorialize the war, choosing to name a new row simply, the New Row, rather than the previously contemplated Battle Gardens. While the rest of Middle-earth begins annually celebrating the heroism of Frodo and the victory over Sauron, Tolkien writes that "[t]here is no record of the Shire-folk commemorating either March 25 [the date of Sauron's death] or September 22 [Frodo's birthday]."[80] The hobbits do not just move on after the war; they deliberately remove reminders of the war.

However, the absence of thoughtful examination may not allow for genuine healing. This is not the first time that the hobbits' collective memory, along with the elements of their culture that identifies and connects them, has been compromised, either through selective forgetting or through neglect of their own histories. This has clearly been of some concern to Gandalf who, in explaining why he chose Bilbo for the Quest of Erebor, reveals that:

> [the hobbits] had begun to forget: forget their own beginnings and legends, forget what little they had known about the greatness of the world. It was not yet gone, but it was getting buried: the memory of the high and the perilous. But you cannot teach that sort of thing to a whole people quickly. There was no time. And anyway you must begin at some point, with some one person. I dare say he was 'chosen' and I was only chosen to choose him; but I picked out Bilbo.[81]

The hobbits' prior ignorance of the conflicts occurring outside of their borders and their lack of experience with national defense has made them vulnerable to attack; it therefore follows that their rapid forgetting of the results of their ignorance might not turn out well for them. The hobbits do not entirely forget the war – their historians at least superficially recall the Battle of Bywater by memorializing the names of all the hobbits who fought in it. Yet, at a deeper level, forgetting enables the survival of the nation and its people. The Shire's regeneration depends on the hobbits' ability to leave the war behind and focus on rebuilding and replanting.

The experience of war and the rapid industrial progression that occurred during his youth made Tolkien especially sensitive to potential for loss, and his writing is filled with the sentiment of heroic memory, nostalgia, and longing. All the mortal races of Middle-earth love to tell of their ancestors and of the great deeds of the past and their cultures are based on the sense that the dead can live on in memory. The flowers of simbelmynë, growing on the burial mounds of the kings of Rohan, offer a symbol for this kind of immortality, in which the deeds of the past may be captured in tales and songs that pass from generation to generation. The memories of the Elves offer the closest thing to immortality that humans can hope for; and the thought of this ever-living memory might seem a comfort, indeed a consolation, to a man like Tolkien who faced so much loss in his early life.

Tolkien's preoccupation with preservation, defense, and memory is palpable in his legendarium, yet he allows the living memories of Gandalf and of the Eldar to pass out of Middle-earth as they depart into the West, perhaps signaling a time of change. Tolkien did not aim only to preserve; he also desired transformation, specifically in the reformulation of England's identity as an entity valuable for its own sake, not for its world power. The damage

[80] Tolkien, *LotR* 'Appendix D,' 1084-5.
[81] Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), 331.

the Shire sustains reflect not only his experience of war but also of modernity. In the Foreword, Tolkien states that his portrayal of the post-war Shire, for instance, has its roots in a much earlier period of his life in which he saw the identity of his country undergoing changes for the worse:

> It has indeed some basis in experience, though slender (for the economic situation was entirely different), and much further back. The country in which I lived in childhood was being shabbily destroyed before I was ten, in days when motor-cars were rare objects (I had never seen one) and men were still building suburban railways.[82]

With the anxiety of the post-war years having an inevitable impact on the thoughts of one who had seen front line action himself a generation earlier, and who now perceived the upheaval of social change and the need for rebuilding the nation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Tolkien turned to examples of how shared memory could bring a nation together. The work of people such as Elias Lönnrot showed him how national identity could be forged via culture and story, rather than through violence. Tolkien wanted to imagine a way for nations to preserve their unique characters without needing to expand or take over other nations, and a close reading of his Middle-earth texts offers valuable insight into the ways in which Tolkien was exploring this idea through his secondary world.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Benedict. "Imagined Communities." In *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader*. Edited by Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman. Rutgers University Press 2005, 48-60.

Beal, Jane. 'Orphic Powers in J. R. R. Tolkien's Legend of Beren and Lúthien' in *Journal of Tolkien Research* 1, (2014): 1-25.

Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation." In *Nation and Narration*. Edited by Homi Bhabha. Routledge, 2013.

Brennan Croft, Janet. *War and the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Praeger, 2004.

Bringa, Tone R. "Nationality categories, national identification and identity formation in 'multinational' Bosnia." In *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 11, no. 1 & 2 (1993): 80-89.

Brook, Sir Norman. "Notebook: War Cabinet Minutes 6th July 1945." In National Archives (Cat ref: CAB/195/3).

Calkin, Siobhain Bly. *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Medieval Identity Machines*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Crofts, Thomas H. and Rouse, Robert Allen. "Middle English Popular Romance and National Identity." In *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*. Edited by Raluca Radulescu & Cory James Rushton. Boydell & Brewer, 2023: 79-95.

[82] Tolkien, 'Foreword to *LotR*', xv.

Fimi, Dimitra. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Flieger, Verlyn. "Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga" in *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol 1. West Virginia University Press, 2004: 43-68.

- *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology*. Kent State University Press, 2005.
- "A Lost Tale, a Found Influence: Earendel and Tinúviel." In *Mythlore: A Journal of JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 40.2. (2022): 91-104.
- 'Tolkien's Great Tales' in *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol. 20.1. West Virginia University Press, 2023: 29-46.

Fontenot, Megan N. "The Art of Eternal Disaster: Tolkien's Apocalypse and the Road to Healing." In *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol.16: 1 West Virginia University Press, 2019: 91-109.

Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*. London: HarperCollins, 2004.

Geary, Patrick J. *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium*. Princeton University Press; Revised ed, 1996.

Genet, Jean-Philippe. "Memory Of The State Or Memory Of The Kingdom? A Comparative Approach to The Construction Of Memory In France And England." In *Memory in the Middle Ages: Approaches from Southwestern Europe*. Edited by Flocel Sabaté. Arc Humanities Press, 2020: 209-228.

Heng, Geraldine. *The Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Hoppenbrouwers, Peter. "The Dynamics of National Identity in The Later Middle Ages." In *Networks, Regions and Nations: Shaping Identities in the Low Countries, 1300-1650*. Brill, 2010: 19-41

Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. Routledge, 1995.

Kane, Bronach C. *Popular Memory and Gender in Medieval England; Men, Women, and Testimony in the Church Courts, c. 1200-1500*. Boydell Press, 2019.

Lavezzo, Kathy. (ed), *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2004.

Marie de France. *Lais of Marie de France*. Edited and translated by Clair M. Waters. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2018.

Moore, Clare. "A Song of Greater Power: Tolkien's Construction of Lúthien Tinúviel." In *Mallorn: Journal of the Tolkien Society* (2021): 6-16.

Organ, Michael. "Tolkien's Japonisme: Prints, Dragons, and a Great Wave." In *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol.10:1. West Virginia University Press, 2013: 105-122

Pearsall, Derek. "The idea of Englishness in the fifteenth century." In *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*. Edited by Helen Cooney. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001: 15–27.

Petty, Anne C. “Identifying England’s Lönnrot.” In *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol 1. West Virginia University Press, 2004: 69-84.

Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato: Timaeus*. Translated by David Horan. Found at https://www.platonicfoundation.org/platos-timaeus/.

Rateliff, John D. ““And All the Days of Her Life Are Forgotten”: *The Lord of the Rings* and Mythic Prehistory.” In *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*. Edited by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull. Marquette University Press, 2006: 67-100.

Renan, Ernest. “What is a Nation?” (Translated by M. Thom). In *Nation and Narration*. Edited by Homi Bhabha. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Robinson, Megan J. “So Old and So New: Memory and Expectation in the Fantastic Works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.” In *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*. Vol. 7, no. 1 (2010) Article 18.

Rosegrant, John. “From the ineluctable wave to the realization of imagined wonder: Tolkien's transformation of psychic pain into art.” In *Mythlore: A Journal of JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 35: 2 (2017): 133-151.

Rouse, Robert Allen. *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance: Studies in Medieval Romance*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2005.

Shelton, Luke. “Why Calling Tolkien’s Work “A Mythology for England” is Wrong and Misleading.” (2022). Found at https://luke-shelton.com/2022/02/12/why-calling-tolkiens-work-a-mythology-for-england-is-wrong-and-misleading/.

Shippey, T. A. *The Road to Middle-earth rev. ed.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Singleton Fred. *A Short History of Finland (2nd ed)*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Smol, Anna. “Tolkien, “The Battle of Maldon”, and “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth”” in *Journal of Tolkien Research Special Collection: Tolkien and the Medieval Poets* (forthcoming).

Stoddard, William H. “Simbelmynë: Mortality and Memory in Middle-earth.” In *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*. Vol. 29: no. 1 (2010): Article 10.

Swank, Kris. “Tolkien and the Sea: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 1996. Edited by Richard Cranshaw and Shaun Gunner. In *Mythlore: A Journal of JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 40.2 (2022): 262-266.

The Times (London) “David Lloyd George speech at Wolverhampton, Nov. 23, 1918.” Nov. 25, 1918. (text found at https://www.expressandstar.com/news/politics/2018/11/23/a-fit-country-for-heroes-100-years-since-lloyd-georges-legendary-wolverhampton-speech/).

Tolkien, J. R. R. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*. George Allen and Unwin, 1975.
- *The Lays of Beleriand*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1985.
- *The Lord of the Rings*. London: HarperCollins, 1995.
- *The Silmarillion*. London: HarperCollins, 1998.

- "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." In *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: HarperCollins, 2006.
- *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*. London: HarperCollins, 2010.
- *The Nature of Middle-earth*. Edited by Carl F. Hostetter. HarperCollins Publishers, 2021.
- *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien Revised and Expanded Edition*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter. HarperCollins Publishers, 2023.

Tolkien, J. R. R & Flieger, Verlyn. ""The Story of Kullervo" and Essays on *Kalevala*." In *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol. 7. West Virginia University Press, 2010: 211-278.

Turville-Petre, Thorlac. "*Havelock* and the History of the Nation." In R*eadings in Medieval English Romance*. Edited by Carol M. Meale. Brewer, 1994: 121-34.
- "Afterword: the Brutus prologue to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." In *Imagining a Medieval English Nation.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004: 340-6.

Vaninskaya, Anna. *Fantasies of Time and Death*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

West, Richard C. "Real-world myth in a secondary world: Mythological aspects in the story of Beren and Lúthien." In *Tolkien the Medievalist*. Edited by Jane Chance. Routledge, 2003: 259-267.
- ""And She Named Her Own Name": Being True to One's Word in Tolkien's Middle-earth." In *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* Vol. 2. West Virginia University Press, 2005: 1-10.

Willink, Henry U. (Minister for Health) "Memorandum to the Cabinet, 6th October 1945." In *National Archives* (Cat. Ref: CAB/129/3).
- "Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Wednesday 18th July 1945." In *National Archives* (Cat. Ref: CAB/65/53/15).