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The Hobbit Party (2014) by Jonathan Witt and Jay W. Richards

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The Hobbit Party: The Vision of Freedom That Tolkien Got and the West Forgot, by Jonathan Witt and Jay W. Richards. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2014. 232 pp. \$21.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9781586178239. [Also available as a Kindle ebook].

Ever since J.R.R. Tolkien went mainstream, roughly in the decade between 1991 and 2001, there have been many efforts to claim him for this group or that: as a Green Party ecologist, as an explicitly Christian writer (sometimes specifically Catholic, sometimes shading towards the evangelical, depending on who's making the argument), as a Chestertonian Distributist, and so forth. Now Jonathan Witt and Jay Richards seek to recruit Tolkien as a foot-soldier in the culture wars, to align him with the modern-day anti-tax, anti-government, property rights movement.

This approach has the advantage of not revisiting well-trod territory (a shortcoming of too many recent books on Tolkien). After all, there can have been few previous commentators on Tolkien for whom "The Scouring of the Shire" is the most important part of *The Lord of the Rings*, or who consider the pre-Sharky Shire as an ideal state because of its "low tax, limited government, and open market" (30). But this originality comes with a heavy price: one gets the sense, as chapter after chapter goes by, that Witt and Richards are less interested in exploring and explicating Tolkien's ideas than in making the case that Tolkien thought exactly what they think he should have thought. I can't think of a single case in which they discuss some idea Tolkien expressed which runs counter to their own sociopolitical agenda: all negative evidence that might challenge, or even qualify, their thesis is silently suppressed. For example, they cite Sam's thirteen children with approval, as support for their thesis that Tolkien would agree with them that we're suffering from an underpopulation crisis rather than overpopulation (141). But what are we to make, then, of the fact that Tolkien's two main heroes, Bilbo and Frodo, are lifelong bachelors who remain childless by choice? Similarly, Witt and Richards consider Bilbo's magnanimous gift to the Elvenking to offset his earlier burgling as evidence that we're "inside a narrative with a very high view of property rights" (50), yet they fail to mention the one figure in all of Middle-earth who most vigorously asserts his property rights: Fëanor, whose insistence on his "property rights" leads to murder, war, destruction, and damnation. At the very least, such obvious objections to their thesis, which are many, should have been taken into account and countered, or at least acknowledged, within their text.

To put it another way: Witt and Richards rightly say early on that Tolkien had a subtle mind (16). And yet, having recognized and highlighted this all-important fact, they proceed to treat him as if he were doctrinaire on every possible point. This is all the more regrettable since Witt and Richards are well-informed and

articulate; their extended discussions of Tolkien and the “Just War” theory, of Tolkien and the ecology movement (including demographics and localism) and the like, focus attention on important issues that haven’t gotten the attention they deserve, albeit here through a very narrow lens. In particular their discussion of Tolkien and Distributism (in which they argue that Tolkien could not have been a distributist) is illuminating, if not altogether convincing.

The most offputting feature of Witt and Richards’s book is their unconcealed contempt with those who think differently from themselves. For example, they’re dismissive of Jack Zipes, apparently on the grounds that he’s a “Marxist” and, hence, wrong (17, 56). Similarly, for them Western civilization is “sordid and polluted” (15); governments in Europe which seek to provide social services for their people are “mongrel state capitalisms” (16); England’s Labour Party has a “morally slipshod vision of property and society” (51), and so forth.

On the other hand, to their credit Witt and Richards raise interesting points and bring together quite a bit of previously scattered prior scholarship that is herein focused in a new way. They discuss rarely quoted essays which had appeared in a wide range of periodicals outside the main track of Tolkien-centric journals; bringing attention to these perspectives is a valuable service. Though theirs is a highly doctrinaire presentation, Witt and Richards do approach Tolkien’s work from a genuinely new direction, which gives their book value. They also on occasion make a telling point, such as when they describe Middle-earth as an imaginative portrait of our world, not a photograph (19), or when they describe Bombadil as “in a category with a single member: himself” (37), or say of the evil trolls that they were made of “innocent stone” (87), or of Wagner’s and Tolkien’s rings having a “family resemblance” (80).

As with any book, there are a few errors, most innocuous and not affecting their argument—for example, their statement (twice repeated: 19, 200) that T. A. Shippey held Tolkien’s old professorship at Oxford (in fact, he held Tolkien’s former chair at Leeds). Of greater concern is their statement that the Shire has no “currency.” We don’t know if hobbits had paper money or not (it seems unlikely), but they definitely had coinage: Bilbo is distressed to find he has left Bag-End without the things he’d normally have brought with him on a walk: “a hat, a walking-stick or any money” (*The Hobbit*, chapter 2). Bilbo also gives away “a few pennies” to the hobbit-children drawn by Gandalf’s arrival at Bag-End (*The Fellowship of the Rings*, chapter 1). The Shire and Bree evidently share a monetary system, since Barliman pays Merry eighteen silver pennies in recompense for his stolen ponies, while another twelve pence go to purchase Bill the Pony (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, chapter 11). Less significant, but more puzzling, is Witt and Richards’s statement that there’s no smithing in the Shire, that the hobbits lack metal-smithing technology (150, 152), when just four pages earlier they quote from Tolkien’s Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* about the

hobbits' use of implements such as the "forge-bellow" (146), which certainly implies smiths and smithies.

Conclusion

Certainly Tolkien in his latter years grumbled about the taxes he had to pay on royalties for *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters* 316, 340-341, 363, 416). He is on record as saying that he preferred anarchy to government as practiced by "Winston and his gang" (*Letters* 63-64), and warned in his Rotterdam speech "I look East, West, North, South, and I do not see Sauron; but I see that Saruman has many descendants" (Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 225). Yet with his devotion to the monarchy and his strong support for the class system he seems an uneasy fit with the modern American arch-conservative movement—for example, I find it hard to believe, as Witt and Richards do, that Tolkien would have embraced America's Founding Fathers as kindred spirits (104).

All in all, I think Witt and Richards's book is best thought of as advocacy, rather than criticism per se. The goal seems to be to claim Tolkien as an illustrious ancestor for their cause, yet the fit seems rather forced; there's more to Tolkien than appears in their schema. I think they'd have been more successful if their vision were more encompassing and their expression more temperate. For my own part, I prefer Tolkien's own depiction of Gandalf the Grey as "the wandering wizard . . . who used to tell such wonderful tales . . . about dragons and goblins and giants" (*The Hobbit*, chapter 1) over Witt and Richards's depiction of him: "a business consultant bringing together two parties to create a formal contract" (33). In the end, I think their reductive reading loses more than it gains.

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