



The Lord of the Rings: The Tale of a Text

By Pat Reynolds

*This paper was first read at the launch of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first appearance of *The Lord of the Rings*, organized by the Società Tolkieniana Italiana at European Parliament, Rome, on Monday 19th January.*

My paper is very largely based on a 'Note on the Text' written by Douglas Anderson for the one-volume deluxe "collectors" edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in 1987 (pages v-viii), and on the detailed commentary by Wayne Hammond in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography. The Tolkien Collector*, published by Wayne Hammond and his wife, Christina Scull, has been used extensively for more recent changes.

The Lord of the Rings is not a trilogy: by the time it was being prepared for publication in 1950, Tolkien was thinking of it as a duology: a book of two parts, the other being *The Silmarillion* - a work conceived of as being of equal size to *The Lord of the Rings* (Letter 126 to Milton Waldon, 10/3/1950). Already, by that time, the text had grown. In October 1937 Tolkien thought he had nothing more to say about hobbits, but by December 19th he had written the first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* (Letter 17 to Stanley Unwin, 15/10/1937; Letter 20 to C.A. Furth, 19/12/1937). His subsequent letters are full of hopes that he will finish it off early next year (Letter 47 to Stanley Unwin, 7/12/1942) - 'next year', of course, always being 'next year'. For stories tend to get out of hand, and this has taken an unpremeditated turn (Letter 17 to Stanley Unwin, 4/3/1938)

Tolkien's publisher, Stanley Unwin, was not convinced by the idea of publishing *The Silmarillion*, and wanted to publish just *The Lord of the Rings*. In 1952 the publishers estimated the price for a single volume would be at least £3 10s, and were looking into the possibility of publishing the work in two volumes, as well as for a cheaper printer. As we know, Allen and Unwin decided that three volumes was the best number: an economic, not a literary decision: Tolkien at this point was still thinking of his work as six books (Letter 136 to Stanley Unwin, 24/3/1953)

He was wondering who might want to read such a book, but cheered up on one point about the publication: At any rate the proof-reader, if it comes to that, will, I hope, have very little to do (Letter 109 to Stanley Unwin, 31/7/1947) However, Tolkien had not reckoned with a problem which had already occurred with *The Hobbit*: I use throughout he wrote the 'incorrect' plural dwarves. I am afraid it is just a piece of private bad grammar, rather shocking in a philologist; but I shall have to go on with it (Letter 17 to Stanley Unwin, 15/10/1937)

He did 'go on with it', and as a result, he comments on *The Fellowship of the Ring*: the printing is very good, as it ought to be from an almost faultless copy; except that the impertinent compositors have taken it upon themselves to correct, as they suppose, my spelling and grammar: altering throughout dwarves to dwarfs, elvish to elfish, further to farther, and worst of all elven- to elfin. I let off my irritation in a snorter to A. and U. [the publishing firm] which

produced a grovel (Letter 138 to Christopher Tolkien, 4/8/1953). This letter has recently come to light.

A further letter (to Katherine Farrer, 7/8/1954) refers to this incident:

I dug my toes in about natsturtians.. I have always said this. It seems to be a natural Anglicisation ... I consulted to college gardener to this effect: 'What do you call these things, gardener?'

*'I calls them tropaeolum, sir,'
'But, when you're just talking to dons?'
'I says nasturtians, sir.'
'Not nasturtium?'
'No, sir; that's watercress.'*

Tolkien noted I am still puzzled and dissatisfied with the procedure [of proof reading the third volume] - at any rate it makes my part much more laborious and greatly increases the chances of errors and discrepancies still appearing in the published volumes(Letter 166 to Allen & Unwin, 22/7/1955)

I can only hope that the Angerthas will come out all right in the wash! But I am rather anxious. Jarrolds appear to have adapted my suggestion and now propose to use the phonetic letter [nj] instead of my [ng]. But the Table in printable form that I sent in, & which reported (on 'phone) was being adopted, used [ng].

I hope that care will be taken to use [ng] or [nj] throughout. And also, please NOT to replace ng by [nj].. I am alarmed by the Reader's query of ng at the end of (p. 404) line 23. This reveals that, for all his eagle yet he has not understood the simple distinction that is being made; or so it would seem..... (Letter 166 to Allen & Unwin, 22/7/1955)

The difficulties induced by Tolkien's private grammar, albeit one often with good philological reasons, and phonetic tools not normally encountered in a novel were compounded by his use of invented names and the invented languages behind them, invented writing systems, and use of old words.

The first volume, eventually entitled '*The Lord of the Rings : The Fellowship of the Ring*' was published by George Allen and Unwin on 29th July 1954: 3,000 copies were printed. The Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston brought out the American edition some months after, on 21st October. 1,500 copies were published: the sheets were sent over from Allen and Unwin in London.

The second volume, '*The Lord of the Rings : The Two Towers*' came out on 11 November 1954 in London. 3,250 copies were printed. The American first edition came out on 21st April 1955. Perhaps *The Lord of the Rings* was not as enthusiastically received in America; in any case only 1,000 volumes were produced, again from imported sheets.

There was a great delay in publishing the third volume. This was largely because Tolkien was still writing the appendices, one of which, in the end, was not finished and could not be included. This was one of the most sought by readers: 'an index of names and strange words' - more than an index, it was to be a glossary with etymological information. The third volume '*The Lord of the Rings : Return of the King*' was finally published on 20th October 1955. The popularity of the book shows in the increased quantities printed - more than doubling to 7,000. The Houghton Mifflin

volume came out on 5th January 1956. The popularity of the books seems to have risen, since sheets for 5,000 volumes were imported and bound.

Tolkien had been surprised to get *The Fellowship of the Ring* returned swiftly from his publisher when he first submitted it in 1947, and he observed It may be a large book, but evidently it will be none too long in the reading for those who have the appetite (Letter 109 to Stanley Unwin, 31/7/1947) The appetite was, by the publishing standards of the day, huge. Before *The Return of the King* was printed, a reprint of *The Fellowship* was ordered. This is why early sets often have first impression of *The Return of the King*, but later impressions of the other volumes. Allen and Unwin had expected the printers, Jarrolds, to keep the moulds for plates, but they had not. Jarrolds suggested that the reprint should be photo-offset, but Allen and Unwin did not want the lower quality, so Jarrolds reset the book. Allen and Unwin appear not to have been informed that it would be re-set, and Tolkien did not proof the new text. Jarrolds did incorporate some corrections given to them, but introduced new errors, including the description of a Silmaril as a 'bride-piece' where Tolkien had written 'bride-price' (vol 1, page 206). Numerous reprints followed, without emendations to the text, but with minor typographical corrections.

The first edition text remained unrevised and unchanged for nearly a decade (Anderson, 1986) When Tolkien revised the text in 1965, he noted the new errors introduced by Jarrolds. I am not relishing the task of 're-editing' *The Lord of the Rings* he wrote Volume I has now been gone through and the number of necessary or desirable corrections is very small (Letter 109 to Rayner Unwin, 25/5/1965)

Tolkien was re-editing because in that year, Ace Books in the United States published an unauthorised edition. *The Fellowship* came out in May 1965, the other two volumes in July. 150,000 copies were printed of each volume! The main text was reset, and introduced new errors, but the appendices were reproduced photographically, and thus contained only the errors already there. Ace Books were exploiting a copyright loophole which meant they did not have to pay Tolkien or his publishers any royalties. Houghton Mifflin appears to have imported too many copies, and the notice they contain, 'Printed in Great Britain' meant that the texts were deemed to be in the public domain in the United States.

There was a campaign against Ace, who, as a result, agreed to pay royalties, and not to print any more copies. But, as a result of being advised that he had lost his copyright, even before the Ace edition was issued, Tolkien began to revise *The Lord of the Rings*, so that there could be an authorised paperback which would be a new edition, and more importantly, a new edition for which he would still own the copyright. This was published by Ballentine Books in October 1965. 125,000 copies of each volume were printed in the United States, and a further 10,000 in Canada. The text including the appendices was revised, Tolkien wrote a new introduction, extended the prologue and provided an index. This was a normal index, giving names and page numbers, rather than the previously envisioned etymological work. New errors, of course, occurred, including the Far Downs becoming the Fox Downs, and our old friends the nasturtiums once more blooming in the garden.

The Ballentine books arrived with Tolkien in January 1966, and he sent revisions and additions, which included giving the name of Merry's wife: 'Estella Bolger'. These were largely incorporated into the fourth impression of *The Return of the King*, which was issued in August 1966, incorporated, but not always in the right places! These revisions and additions did not, however, get taken into reprints and new editions in Britain.

A different revised text appeared, therefore, in Britain on the 3rd November 1966 - this is the 'Second Edition'; the revisions here were all in the right places, and it seems that everything Tolkien suggested was done (although, as he pointed out himself, a certain disorganisation in his notes meant that some corrections which he had sent to Ballentine, and incorporated, were not sent to Allen and Unwin).

The Second Edition appendices included a spate of new typographical errors which some scholars have taken to be Tolkien's revisions.

The Allen and Unwin second edition was photo-offset in a new American hardback edition by Houghton Mifflin on 27 February 1967. Initially, the copyright date was given as 1966 - the copyright date of the British edition of which it is a copy, but in later editions this was changed to 1965 so that it matched the date in the Ballentine Books editions. So, with American editions, one has to remember that something with the earlier copyright date of 1965 is a late edition! And one has, sometimes, to rely on that copyright date, because, after the first printing of this second edition, which has 1967 on the title page, the date of printing is never given.

Through 1966, Tolkien continued to revise the text: these revisions were mostly revisions to names and attempts to make them consistent. He was too late to get these changes incorporated in the US second edition, but they were included in the second impression of the Allen and Unwin second edition in 1967.

One specific revision is important: the recasting of page 203 of volume two, which concerns Gandalf's knowledge of the palentíri: the original text was We have not yet given thought to the fate of the palentíri of Gondor in its ruinous wars. By Men they were almost forgotten. Even in Gondor they were a secret known only to a few; in Arnor they were remembered only in a rhyme of lore among the Dúnadain this was replaced with It was not known to us that any of the palentíri had escaped the ruin of Gondor. Outside the Council it was not even remembered among Elves or Men that such things had ever been, save only in a Rhyme of Lore preserved among Aragorn's folk.. And in the *Return of the King* the somewhat clumsy thoughts of Merry were replaced: He wondered, too, if the old King knew he had been disobeyed and was angry. Perhaps not. There seemed to be some understanding between Dernhelm, and Elfhelm, the marshal who commanded the éored in which they were riding. He and all his men ignored Merry and presented not to hear if he spoke. He might have been just another bag that Dernhelm was carrying. Dernhelm was no comfort: he never spoke to anyone. Merry felt small, unwanted, and lonely is replaced with a more succinct text which did not highlight Dernhelm so much; The king was not well pleased, and Dernhelm was no comfort: he seldom spoke a word.

After Tolkien's death in 1973, Christopher, Tolkien's son and literary executor, continued the work of corrections, and sent a large set to Allen and Unwin which were included in the three-volume hardcover edition of 1974. These included the correction of the description of a Silmaril.

Christopher has continued to send in corrections, and Allen and Unwin were meticulous in seeing that these were taken into all the other editions. However, each time the text has been reset, for paperbacks, for example, more errors have crept in, which have sometimes been corrected in the later editions. Notable editions, all based on the second Allen and Unwin edition, included a printing on India paper in 1969, first issued in a slipcase, later in a box. Methuen Canada published a three-paperback version in 1971 which was a photographically reduced copy. The Folio Society, dedicated to publishing books of extremely high quality, issued in 1977

one of the most handsome editions I know, and the ones I turn to when I want to read the book at my leisure. A large print edition was issued by ISIS in 1990.

In the United States, the Ballentine Books edition retained the 1966 text, and the hardbacks retained the 1967 Allen and Unwin text. The fantasy author Peter Beagle contributed a new introduction to the paperback books, which is dated 1973. In 1986, a one-volume deluxe "collectors'" edition was prepared by Houghton Mifflin, which took the then current Allen and Unwin text, and incorporated those changes made for Ballentine Books which had never made their way into the Allen and Unwin revisions. This was, therefore, the most faithful to the author's intent, and in a typographical sense, the most near-to-perfect text of *The Lord of the Rings* ever to appear in print. The separate hardback volumes, however, continued to follow the earlier sequence of corrections.

Through the last ten years, corrections have continued, most notably the discovery that several lines had disappeared from the description of Theoden's hall. As an archaeologist, I had been puzzled by the description as I read it, since it seemed to depart somewhat from the excavated remains on which it was clearly based. New preliminaries have been introduced. In 1993 a new Ballentine Books edition appeared but this was not noted on the title page, instead it is treated as a new impression. The Silmaril is still the 'bride-price'. In 1994 HarperCollins, who had taken over the original publishers, issued a new edition, based on the 1987 'near perfect' Houghton Mifflin text, with still further amendments, and an authoritative redrawing of the maps. This edition was supervised by Christopher Tolkien, and Douglas Anderson (who had supervised the 1987 edition).

In 1994 an authorised edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was published in St Petersburg Russia by 'Wave Nine' publishers. There is no time today to do more than note that *The Lord of the Rings* has been translated into Russian, and numerous other languages. Those translations have been made from various, more or less error-free English editions, by more or less competent translators, with more or less competent typography.

All of which happens, of course, because people are reading Tolkien: editions, impressions and translations are put out because there is money to be made. Indeed, in the past 20 years, numerous editions have been issued in English where one suspects that the chief market is the completist, who simply has to own every textual variant, every cover, no matter how small the changes.

Tolkien himself wondered about his readers, in 1947: he wrote to his publishers As for who is to read it? The world seems to be becoming more and more divided into impenetrable factions (Letter 109 to Stanley Unwin, 31/7/1947). The recent successes of *The Lord of the Rings* in popularity contests run by bookshops and broadcasters have taken the literati by surprise. To put it bluntly, they think the wrong book won. What those critics have failed to appreciate is that *The Lord of the Rings* is a book which penetrates factions. It is a war story that is read by lovers of romantic fiction. It depicts the horrors of the twentieth century, it uses the language of myth. It is a galloping good read - it is, as we say in English, a page-turner, but it has great depths which can be reflected upon over many years. It grew from a mythology, for England, which might make it out of place in today's world, which is at once both a global culture, and a culture characterised by factions, micro-cultures and multiple identities, where national identity is continually being contested and questioned. But it is clearly not out of place for a great, and growing number of readers. Some critics would claim this is because those who cannot cope with the post-colonial,

postmodernist world are retreating to a vision of a patriarchal England where 'people like them' held sway. I think this is a gross miss-reading of the text, and worse, disrespectful of those readers, which is most surprising in those critics who also argue that everyone's voice deserves to be heard. Except, it would seem, when those voices say I like *The Lord of the Rings*. Well, I like this book. And I welcome all opinions of it; except when people say *The Lord of the Rings* is a trilogy!