AN INTERVIEW WITH TOLKIEN

HENRY RESNICK

DATE: March 2, 1966

R: Professor Tolkien, thank you very much for letting me call. I appreciate this opportunity. I'd like to start by asking you some rather basic questions. First of all, nobody over here is exactly sure how to pronounce your name.

T: It is pronounced Tolkien as if it were spelled with two E's.

R: Also, I wondered if you can tell me some facts of your present life. Are you now teaching at Oxford?

T: I am retired. The retiring age in Oxford now is 66.

R: You are 74; is that correct?

T: That's right, so I am retired for a great many years.

R: Well, then, what is your position there now -- a resident fellow?

T: No. I remain here a fellow of my college as a kind of honor; I am entitled emeritus professor.

R: You do live all year round at Oxford?

T: Oh yes, I live here.

R: Do you have a family, Professor Tolkien?

T: I do, but they are now all grown up. I have four children; the eldest is 48, and the youngest 36.

R: Now I'd like to proceed with the phenomenon of the explosion; that's what the editor on the Saturday Evening Post called it. I guess you're familiar with some of the statistics; the sales of the paperback editions are extremely wide, and there is a constant demand for the books. What is your reaction to this, if I may use the word, "explosion"?

T: Well, I think it's been building up, you know; I think it's an error to say that it was really related to the Ace Books edition -- I think that simply the Ace Books were very wisely advised to bring it out at the right time, whereas the other people did not.

R: You mean the Ballantine edition?

T: It's Houghton Mifflin of Boston, really, but I think it was building up steadily, you know, and the book was really making its own way. There was a very large fan mail long before this so-called explosion.

R: Was this large fan mail from America as well as England?

T: Yes, it has gone on for years.

R: In America the books have become so widely available to people who might not have

been able to afford to buy them in the hard cover edition that they have actually become something like a fad. It isn't exactly a fad, because it doesn't involve any of the fanatic frenzy that fads usually have; however, it could be called an "underground fad"--there are certain groups of bright young people who enjoy reading and who have taken these books under their wings, made a sort of cult out of them. I don't know if you're aware of some of the things that are going on, but you know, of course, of the Tolkien Society here.

T: Yes I do. I shouldn't call it a fad; I wouldn't call it underground. I'd call it a game.

R: A game?

T: Yes, because there is a whole lot of stuff that amuses people -- alphabets, history, etc.

R: Then I take it you approve of the game?

T: I don't mind it, as long as it doesn't become obsessive. It doesn't obsess me.

R: Have you noticed any similar widespread game-playing in England?

T: No, I don't think things catch on like that here quite so much.

R: I wonder if you have any suggestions about why it has caught on so widely in America; could it be anything other than the paperback edition, which came along logically?

T: Why I've even had letters from children who have saved up, you know, who have gone to some work to get the hardback edition. I think it is, if you really want to know my opinion, a partly reactionary influence. I think it's part of the fun after so much rather more dreary stuff, isn't it?

R: What sort of dreary stuff are you referring to?

R: I should say The Lord of the Flies, wouldn't you?

R: Many people I've spoken with have told me they enjoy the sheer fun of being in Middle-Earth.

T: It's meant to please; it doesn't horrify.

R: The game seems to be going further afield, however. For example, there are at least two men presently working on doctoral theses at universities, and I have myself read a master's thesis on The Lord of the Rings.

T: That's gone on for some time. I have had endless requests for help over there for some years.

R: I see. Do you approve of this sort of very intense research?

T: I do not while I am alive anyhow. I do not know why they should research without any reference to me; after all, I hold the key.

R: Have you seen any of these theses?

T: Yes, and they are very bad, most of them; they are nearly all either psychological analyses or they try to go into sources, and I think most of them rather vain efforts.

R: Some high school teachers have decided to teach the books. Do you feel that they should be taught in high school or anywhere else?

T: No. I am rather against that; I think that a lot of damage is really done to literature in making it a...method of education, but I'm not sure about that.

R: I think that some of your readers would certainly agree with you; they view the books as a pleasant escape and don't want to "tear them apart". That seems to be the common phrase.

T: Yes, I know. I think very often in the letters I get the influence of teachers who

test me for sources, allegory, and all that kind of thing.

R: We're all aware of your opinion about allegory, and most of your readers have told me that they won't even consider the possibility. I wonder if you can tell, Sir, why the books have such a strong appeal for younger people. It seems to be mainly the younger college and the more mature high school people who have taken to them so.

T: Well, it wasn't, of course, so before; I suppose that was a matter of expense. In England my fan mail is very largely adult, even without professorial letters.

R: But in America it is largely young people -- although there are people now in their thirties who read the books when they first came out, of course.

T: Yes, well I don't know about that.

R: I'd like to ask a few questions about you personally. How often do you read a newspaper?

T: Every day.

R: Do you read more than one?

T: Yes, I think we have three. Why?

R: As a matter of fact, a very perceptive girl at Radcliffe College suggested to me that there might be a correlation between liking The Lord of the Rings and not liking to read newspapers. I found that she was right, that many of your readers, although they are certainly not badly informed, tend to view the real world with a certain amount of dismay. They try to get away from it when they can.

T: No, I'm not one of those chaps. No. Neither am I obsessed by my own work. I read newspapers...they're there, and I read them when I'm interested. I take a strong interest in what is going on, both in the university and in the country and in the world

R: I know that you're very busy working on the Silmarillion and that you have many other things occupying you, but do you have time for "extra-curricular" hobbies of any kind?

T: I am still a professor and expert in my subject and I'm still producing articles on it, and so one...

R: Are you writing any books on philology now?

T: When the Ace Books swept me away, I was just about to produce one, but it has been delayed -- two translations of medieval works, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the other poem called the Pearl.

R: When do you expect to be finished with those?

T: In going to the press I don't know. I suppose that now it's so delayed that I doubt it might come out this year. I doubt it.

R: You said in your introduction to the Ballantine edition that one of your intentions in writing the books was to "deeply move" your readers, also to produce excitement. I wonder what parts of the trilogy move you most.

T: Well, I don't know because I take a very external view of it now. I don't remember writing a lot of it. One of the things I remember moving me most in quite different ways was the sound of the horns in the morning when the Nazgul sat in the gate of Rohan of Minas Tirith. Another one which I think is the most moving point in the story for me is when Gollum repents and tries to caress Frodo and he is interfered with by Sam. The tragedy is that the good people so often upset the not-so-good people when they try to repent and it's a tragic moment.

R: You also named excitement as one of your goals. Do you remember one passage in the book, or any single moment, that you find most exciting?

T: No, I don't. I thought I made a steady driving climax, that things mount in excitement. nd one of the problems in writing the book was to go one better.

R: You also said in the introduction to the Ballantine edition that you were aware of certain defects in retrospect. Would you care to name those?

T: Well, I did name one. I said that one of my chief feelings was that it was too short.

R: I think most of your readers would agree with you on that

T: I think some of the appendices might well be cut down, however

R: Could you name two or three of your favorite books? Do you have favorite books, either at the moment, or books that have endured over your span of reading?

T: No, I don't think so. I think I was born with what you might call an inventive mind, and the books that have remained in my mind remain as those things which I acquired and don't really seem much like the book itself. For instance, I now find that I can't stand George McDonald's books at any price at all. I find that now I can't take him. The same with most books that I've read. I suppose as a boy She interested me as much as anything -- like the Greek shard of Amynatas, which was the kind of machine by which everything got moving.

R: Do you read the work of Charles Williams these days?

T: No.

R: Have you ever enjoyed his books?

T: I've read a good many, but I don't like them.

R: The one thesis that I've read on The Lord of the Rings attributes a very deep influence on you to Williams and MacDonald.

T: Well, that's quite wrong. Williams had no influence on me at all; I didn't even know him very well. I'll tell you one thing on that point, one of the things I remember Lewis's saying to me -- of course, Lewis was very influenced as you may know -- was, "Confound you, nobody can influence you anyhow. I have tried but it's no good."

R: Why did he say that?

T: After someone had criticized me I just went on my own sweet way and took no notice of it.

R: Have you been a loner and a rebel?

T: No, I've been isolated, not a rebel. Williams had no conceivable influence on me; I disliked his whole Arthurian business with great intensity and considered it rather nonsense.

R: I'd like to move on to a few questions that were put to me by readers of yours whom I've interviewed. First, from Dick Plotz; he asked me how did Middle-earth develop? Now, I guess you could talk for hours on that and maybe you won't even want to answer it, but...

T: It's only an old-fashioned word for "world". That's all. Look in the dictionary. It isn't another planet.

R: I think what Dick was getting at was how does an imagination do something like this?

T: It takes a long time. It began a long way back, and it slowly boiled up. Of course you go on producing and adding to it, but it never gets quite finished...but you see an an imaginary country.

R: Could you possibly estimate how long it took you or when you started -- when you conceived Middle-earth, say the seed to the reality?

T: No, I don't know. It was during the war, during the first war, when I was just growing up. You asked me what books move me; mostly mythology moves me and also upsets me because most mythology is distasteful to people. But it seems to me that we miss something by not having a mythology which we can bring up to our own grade of assessment. That's what I always wanted to do -- mythological things like Greek or Norse myths; I tried to improve on them and modernize them -- to modernize them is to make them credible.

R: I wonder, though, if you can name anything that might be the actual seed of Middle-earth. Could you narrow it down? You have mentioned, of course, the philological origins; was it Elvish that began the entire thing?

T: The seed is linguistic, of course. I'm a linguist and everything is linguistic -- that's why I take such pains with names. The real seed was starting when I was quite a child by inventing languages, largely to try to capture the esthetic mode of the languages I was learning, and I eventually made the discovery that language can't exist in a void and if you invent a language yourself you can't cut it in half. It has to come alive -- so really the languages came first and the country after.

R: I have another question from a girl in Boston, Massachusetts, who used to go into her garden and imagine that she was in Middle-earth; she asks what is east of Rhun and south of Harad?

T: Rhun is the Elvish word for 'east'. Asia, China, Japan, and all the things which people in the west regard as far away. And south of Harad is Africa, the hot countries.

R: That makes Middle-earth Europe, doesn't it?

T: Yes, of course -- Northwestern Europe where I was born -- well, I wasn't born there actually; but where my imagination comes from.

R: Where were you born?

T: I was actually born in Bloomfontein, South Africa.

R: W. H. Auden once said that some people have the northern thing and some people have the southern thing, but you have the northern thing. How did you get the northern thing?

T: Oh, well, my parents both came from Birmingham in England. I happened to be born there by accident. But it had this effect; my earliest memories are of Africa, but it was alien to me, and when I came home, therefore, I had for the countryside of England both the native feeling and the personal wonder of somebody who comes to it. I came to the English countryside when I was about 3½ or 4 -- it seemed to me wonderful. If you really want to know what Middle-earth is based on, it's my wonder and delight in the earth as it is, particularly the natural earth...and I also was born with a great love of trees.

R: Has the study of trees been a hobby of yours?

T: Yes it has.

R: This is from a young man at Harvard: Do you think that trying to carry over the values from the books to the real world is an 'evasion of responsibility'? To elaborate he made the point that Galadriel would be wasted in our world. I think the implication of his question is that somehow the ideals of the trilogy are beautiful to see from afar but might not be too effective in a real world.

T: Well, no, it <u>is</u> the real world; while you're inside the book it does exist -- that's the whole point of literature, isn't it?

R: Excuse the poor phrasing. In <u>our</u> world.

T: As a matter of fact, insofar as...without harping or preaching on the side of various rather old-fashioned things like humility, valor, and so on...and courage, you can carry those over and I think it has rather an effect on people -- young folks are ready in their attitudes to rather be changed. But I didn't intend these things, because I didn't write it for children. That's why I don't like George MacDonald very much; he's a horrible old grandmother. That's a very find woman figure, of course, really -- the Queen is rather a mother.

R: Another reader has asked what is the likelihood of more books in addition to the Silmarillion?

T: All this kind of stuff -- Ace Books, correspondence, fan mail -- all this interferes

you know. That's why I answer some of them very briefly or not at all. I'm an old man now, and I've got a short working day. I cannot go on working until two, as I used to.

R: Do you have any idea when the Silmarillion might be in print?

T: Not at all. Most of it is written, of course, but when I offered it to the publishers first and they turned it down they were too high and mighty. But now The Lord of the Rings has been a success they want it and of course now it has to be made to fit The Lord of the Rings. I am hoping to get it out in the course of next year. Because of the market and the interest I shall probably try to publish it bit by bit.

R: Do you expect to publish it simultaneously in England and America?

T: Yes. My publishers have always been Allen and Unwin and Houghton Mifflin in Boston. Joughton Mifflin will take the things right away. They're only too much desirous to get on with it.

R: I have a question, to backtrack a little bit. I gather that the Fourth Age is really our own, that we are in the Fourth Age.

T: It isn't necessarily quite that. It's the beginning of what you might call history. What you have is an imaginary period in which mythology was still actually existing in the real world. Let's say you would have...abstract figures -- not abstract figures, but myths incarnate; but once that's gone, scattered, dispersed, all you get is the history of human beings -- the play of good and evil in history.

R: We're in the age of the domination of men?

T: That's later on. That can apply to many ages. This is the beginning of history, when there are no more devils or angels to be seen walking about.

R: I wonder how you view the current world. Do you think that man is meeting up to the promise that he might have had at the end of The Lord of the Rings, or at the beginning of history?

T: Oh, but he wouldn't. I did write a continuation story, taking place about one hundred years after the end of The Lord of the Rings. Of course he'll go bad because he's sick of peace.

R: What is the name of that story?

T: Well, I haven't finished writing it because I didn't want to go on with it; it's called 'The New Shadow'. The people cannot bear peace for one hundred years. After a hundred years of peace and prosperity people would all be going into every kind of madness.

R: I gather, then, that you think that war is an inevitable fact of history?

T: Not necessarily war, but there are other evils just as bad. War is only the outbreak of these. My view of current affairs is not as depressed as some people's. I should say that I'm a bit frightened that the Greeks hadn't got something in the saying that those whom the gods wish to destroy they first drive mad.

R: Is there a parallel in our modern world?

T: It's like the tower of Babel, isn't it? All noise and confusion.

R: Then you think we're either mad or on the brink of it?

T: Yes, but I think that a little history cures you -- the only thing is that the press of numbers makes everything bigger. I should have thought that living at the end of the 16th century would have been just as bad -- but there weren't as many people around.

R: I noticed in the index that the company of the ring leaves Rivendell at dusk, December 25th, 3018. I'd also like to quote a passage: 'I tried to save the Shire and it has been saved, but not for me. It must be so, Sam, when things are in danger. Someone has to give them up, lose them so that others may keep them.' Also the element

of Frodo's concept of pity, which was dictated, of course, by Gandalf, but in which Frodo believes very much -- his pity for Gollum. All these things struck me as a parallel to Christ. How do you feel about the idea that people might identify Frodo with Christ?

T: Well, you know, there've been saviors before; it is a very common thing. There've been heroes and patriots who have given up for their countries. You don't have to be Christian to believe that domebody has to die in order to save something. As a matter of fact, December 25th occurred strictly by accident, and I let it in to show that this was not a christian myth anyhow. It was a purely unimportant date, and I thought, Well, there it is, just an accident.

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And, at a meeting of the Tolkien Society of America...

Last year Henry S Resnik was commissioned by the Saturday Evening Post to write an article about Tolkien and his fans. A number of you were contacted by him for information, and his article finally appeared in the July 2nd. 1966 issue. As part of his preparations for writing the article he spoke with Professor Tolkien on the telephone on March 2nd for about a half hour. A transcript of this conversation begins on the next page. Unfortunately it is not complete, for as Mr. Resnik explained to me in the covering letter on the manuscript,

> "It is very edited. There are several deletions -- passages that I simply couldn't make out from the static filled tape (we had a bad connection). Also a long elision at the end that consisted mainly of thanks from me. We actually talked for half an hour."

A few days after the issue with the article appeared Mr. Resnik gave a talk about his experiences at a meeting of the Tolkien Society of America. This talk consisted of introductory remarks, an annotated reading of excerpts of his interview, and a long question-and-answer/discussion session. I am including below his introductory remarks, plus a few excerpts from his reading in order to include some of his comments. Finally, I have appended the discussion because of some of the interesting points raised. Since then there has been one more TSA meeting, and I have it on tape. Time does not permit the transcription of the more interesting highlights, so that will have to wait until next issue.

ERM

I don't want to repeat what I wrote in the article. I don't know if you've all read the article or not. It's in the SEP, the July 2nd issue. They have John Steinbeck on the cover, well, for publicity reasons. My article is obviously the most important one in the magazine.

I'm not here, incidentally, to publicise the Post. I think they do fairly well for themselves. I'm here as a friend of friends of Tolkien, and a friend, sort of, of Tolkien. The only thing I have on you is this interview. You could have done it too, if you had shelled out $140. I didn't pay for it, obviously. The Post did.

Let me tell you how I went about it for it has a note of sort of Hobbit quiet charm to it. I was warned by everyone that I was not to interrupt Mr. Tolkien's work. I was not, for example to go to England and take any of his time. I would not have heeded that warning at all if the Post had been willing to send me to England. But it was their idea for me to telephone him. I wrote him in advance, naturally, and I told him that since everyone told me I was to take as little of his time as possible I wanted to have tea with him, and that I would have tea with him over the telephone. He was going to take a break, I assumed, at 4 O'clock, so I told him that I liked tea and I'd have it at eleven O'clock. He wrote back, very pleased, and anyway, on the appointed Sunday the call went through.

I wasn't drinking tea, as a matter of fact. I had to rent a special kind of recorder and I won't tell you about that! I kept changing those discs and was quite busy enough just trying to think.

First of all he pronounces his name tul-KEEN and that settles something which I've been debating with people. Of all the Tolkien sort of things to debate, the pronunciation of his name. His American publisher pronounces it TUL-kin, and I took him as the leading authority, but apparantly Tolkien knows.

I don't know if you're aware," I said, "of some of the things that are going on. You know of course of the Tolkien Society here." "Yes I do," he answered. "I wouldn't call it a fad. I wouldn't call it underground." I had. I had called it a sort of quiet underground fad, since obviously you're not raving maniacs like the Baker Street Irregulars.

"Do you approve of the scholarly sort of very intense research into your works?" "I do not while I'm alive anyway." "You do not?" I had this way of repeating things in this sort of horrified, shocked and amused way. "I do not know why they should research without any reference to me. After all, I hold the key." "Have you seen any of these efforts?" "Yes, and they're very bad, most of them. They're really all either psychological analasys or they try to go into sources which I think most of them rather vain efforts." I, sort of mumbling, "Vain efforts."