

Obituary

HUMPHREY CARPENTER (1946-2005)

Humphrey William Bouverie Carpenter died of heart failure at his home in Oxford on 4 January 2005. A prolific and versatile writer, broadcaster and musician, he was only 58 years old.

Born on 29 April 1946 in Oxford, he was the only child of the Right Reverend Harry Carpenter, the Warden of Keble College (who was appointed the Bishop of Oxford in 1955, and who, in November of the following year, refused to sanction a church marriage between C. S. Lewis and the American divorcee, Joy Davidman), and Urith Monica Trevelyan, a graduate of Somerville College, Oxford. He was educated at the Dragon School in North Oxford, Marlborough College in Wiltshire, and at Keble College, Oxford, where he read English. He worked full-time as a radio producer and broadcaster for the BBC from 1968-74, after which time he worked free-lance, both as a broadcaster and as a writer. He married Mari Prichard, the daughter of the Welsh writer Caradog Prichard, in 1973. His first book, *A Thames Companion* (1975), was co-authored with his wife. From then on he published a large number of books, ranging from children's stories (including the dozen-plus volumes of the very successful Mr. Majeika series about a kindly wizard schoolteacher) and reference books like *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (1984), also co-authored with his wife, on to, most significantly, a series of biographies, including *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (1977); *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends* (1978) which won the Somerset Maugham Award from the Society of Authors; and *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (1981), which was nominated for the Whitbread Award for biography. In 1984 he received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. His *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (1988) was honored with the Duff Cooper Prize. Later biographies aroused some controversy with their various revelations, including *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (1992), which garnered a Royal Philharmonic Society Award; *Robert Runcie: The Reluctant Archbishop* (1996); and *Dennis Potter: A Biography* (1999). His *Spike Milligan: The Biography* (2003) was especially successful, and the history of the publishing house John Murray that he was working on at the time of his death was reported to be in the final stages of revision. In his early fifties he was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, and his health worsened progressively. He is survived by his wife and two daughters.

Carpenter's involvement with Tolkien is a long and complex story, one of shifting views over a period of many years. He quietly withdrew from Tolkien scholarship soon after his edition of *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* was published in 1981, and by the mid-1980s he had begun distancing himself from the Tolkien field with often contentious public remarks. With his passing it is time to begin to assess his changing perspectives on Tolkien and on his own Tolkien-related work, as evidenced by comments in his lectures, interviews and published writings.

Carpenter first read *The Lord of the Rings* around the age of ten, a few years after it had been published, checking out all three volumes together from the library and reading them in four days. Around 1964, when he was eighteen, he reread it, considering this to be "his first real reading of the book" (Noad 13).

His personal connection with Tolkien began in the spring of 1967 when, through his parents, he called on Tolkien and obtained his permission to script an authorized stage-version of *The Hobbit* to be performed by the preparatory school boys at New College School in Oxford. His friend Paul Drayton wrote the musical settings to Tolkien's verses. His recollections of this meeting with Tolkien comprise the first section of his Tolkien biography. Several months later, in December, Tolkien attended the final performance of the stage-play. According to Drayton, Tolkien "seemed reasonably content with what he saw and heard" (Drayton and Carpenter 16), while according to Carpenter, who was playing double bass in the orchestra and closely watching Tolkien, who was sitting near the front, "he had a broad smile on his face whenever the narration and dialogue stuck to his own words, which was replaced by a frown the moment there was the slightest departure from the book" (Carpenter 2001).

Carpenter had no further contact with Tolkien until four years later, when, as a radio producer, he tried to get Tolkien to do a radio interview. The two had dinners and exchanged letters, but never managed to do the interview. Then Tolkien died in September 1973, and in the following year Carpenter produced for BBC Radio Oxford a program on Tolkien's life, "The Road Goes Ever On," put together by Ann Bonsor, who recorded a number of interviews with Tolkien's friends and family members. This program sparked Carpenter's interest in doing a biography of Tolkien. According to Charles E. Noad, Carpenter "wrote to Allen & Unwin with the suggestion that he write Tolkien's life. He felt that he had the right background—he had a degree in English, and he had known Tolkien. He had expected a 'No', but to his surprise, Rayner Unwin replied that if the Tolkien family were agreeable, he could go ahead" (Noad 14). As Carpenter recounted years later, "with the Tolkien family, I went to them one by one and said, 'Look, I don't know much

about writing biography, but I did know your father a little, and I know Oxford, I know the milieu in which he operated, and I think if you don't get somebody who has those advantages, you'll probably find a worse biographer coming along" (Carpenter 1995 271).

He began to work on the book in January 1975, and he spent the next several months reading through all of Tolkien's papers, sorting them and making abundant notes. When he described this work in an after-dinner speech at the Annual General Meeting of the Tolkien Society in London, held on 22 February 1976, he had already completed the first draft of the biography: "It's been a totally absorbing project. Physically absorbing because I have been able to devote my entire working time to it; which has meant, on the whole, 8 to 10 hours a day, 5 or 6 or even occasionally 7 days a week" (Anon. 1977 39-40). He continued: "I realized when I embarked on the project that I would have to sift through literally thousands of letters. I mean thousands. A number of very closely-written diaries, and a pile of manuscripts, which took up so much space that it requires more than 100 box-files to store it" (Anon. 1977 41).

Carpenter's notes for the book were prodigious—large files of transcriptions, clippings, summaries and evaluations of Tolkien's manuscripts, together with a huge chronology of Tolkien's life typed on large index cards. He later recalled the slow process of learning to do research economically: "When I did the Tolkien book my notes were enormous. I copied down endless extracts from letters, discovering eventually that ninety percent of these extracts would never be of any use to me anyway . . . By the time I came to do Auden, I'd learned to recognize what seemed to me the kind of quotation I would want to use eventually. . . . One learns to know what one is looking for" (Ross 1984 101).

When it came to the actual writing of the book, which Carpenter began only after finishing his research, he started with the feeling that Tolkien had been

this rather comic Oxford academic—the stereotype absent-minded professor—who would be lecturing on *Beowulf* with a parcel of fish from the fishmongers sticking out of his pocket. And the first draft of the book was written very much in that mode, treating him as slightly slapstick. At least it began that way. But as the book went on, I realized he wasn't like this at all. He had had a very strange childhood. His mother had died early (his father was already dead) and he was brought up by a Roman Catholic priest—an unlikely parent-figure. Consequently he acquired certain uptight Pauline moral values. And my caricature of the Oxford academic clashed with his [sic, for "this"?], and I never resolved it properly. The first

draft of that life was a long and sprawling thing, and was deemed unacceptable by the Tolkien family . . . I went away and rewrote it, and it was then deemed acceptable. What I'd actually done was castrated the book, cut out everything which was likely to be contentious. I've therefore always been displeased with it ever since. (Carpenter 1995 270)

Some years earlier he had given a more general account:

The Tolkien life was an authorized biography. In a sense it's marvelous: you have a free run of the papers, and everyone feels they ought to help you. On the other hand, you incur obligations, as I've already said. You really have to toe the party line. Not that there's anything in the Tolkien book which was censored by the family, but I think I could have been more detached, and perhaps more objective, if I hadn't felt under some obligation to his family. (Ross 1985 106)

J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography was published in May 1977. Carpenter's extensive research produced an excellent book that has stood well the test of time, remaining both readable and unusually accurate more than a quarter of a century after it was written, despite many advances in Tolkien scholarship, as well as the publication of many primary Tolkien texts previously unknown to the public. Carpenter's careful consideration of all of these texts may have been subsumed within his biographical account, but his informed knowledge made for a lasting and dependable biography.

After publication, Rayner Unwin, then Carpenter's publisher, suggested that he write a book on the Inklings. Carpenter found this perfectly agreeable—he had in one sense already done all of the research, and it was in another sense a chance to be paid twice for the same work. He wrote *The Inklings* in three weeks, typing it two-fingered, as he did with astonishing speed, on his favored IBM Selectric. *The Inklings* was published in October 1978, by which time he was ready to move away from Tolkien. But, soon afterwards, when the opportunity came up to edit a volume of Tolkien's letters, he took the job. He made the initial selection for the book from the huge mass of letters, after which Christopher Tolkien provided comments. The initial compilation proved too large from the publishing point of view, and cuts were made for reasons of length.

Carpenter would later muse upon his involvement with writing biographies, claiming that “the biographies, for me, have always been an exercise in self-education” (Carpenter 1995 277). He also felt that “there's got to be some sort of personal relevance. With Tolkien, the personal agenda was my own childhood. I'd lived in the same culture as him, in

an Oxford academic family. I wanted to portray that milieu, about which I had very mixed feelings” (Carpenter 1995 278).

His personal agenda in writing *The Inklings* was, by his own account, rather different:

I became an atheist at 21, when I started to experience the world, but later, when I was happily married, I felt there ought to be an afterlife, because life was good and should go on. And just then I was writing about C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, in *The Inklings*, and I found their theology very persuasive, so that book is about almost regaining my faith. But I hadn’t become quite sure. And then by chance I was asked to write a Past Masters book on Jesus—not really a biography, but a study of the texts. So I spent six months reading New Testament theology, and came out of it a complete unbeliever—though with certain questions in my mind which I couldn’t resolve. (Carpenter 1995 278-9).

His approach to biography was also somewhat more imaginative than that of more traditional biographers:

I’m one of those biographers (and there are many of them) who, I think, are very close to novelists in their approach to the material. I try not to let my imagination as such run riot, but I do write imaginatively. I do that consciously, and I have sometimes gone away from the area of strict fact when it seemed to me worthwhile doing so. In my Tolkien biography, and then in *The Inklings*, I included two chapters of imaginary happenings: an imaginary day in Tolkien’s company and, in *The Inklings*, an imaginary conversation. I thought that actually expressed the general truths about these men much more succinctly than chapter after chapter of all sorts of lists of what they did in one week or another, and where they spent Christmas and so on. (Ross 1984 101).

Carpenter also found that working so closely with a subject could produce its own difficulties: “In my experience one has to be careful not to become irritated with one’s subject, having to live with him (so to speak) for so many months. I admit to having turned against Tolkien and Lewis at various stages in the books” (Ross 1985 106).

The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien, co-edited by Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, appeared in August 1981. Carpenter had always viewed his involvement with Tolkien as a stepping-stone towards doing other things, and as he withdrew from the field his attitudes

changed dramatically. His brief account of Tolkien in the epilogue to *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (1985) shows a loss of sympathy with Tolkien. To an interviewer he once admitted that when he was finished with a subject "my interest in the whole thing deflates to about a sixteenth of what it was. I mean, I feel I've done my job, and that's it, and this is my last word on X" (Anon. 2000 286). With this loss of interest there came also, as evidenced in *Secret Gardens*, a forgetfulness of the details of Tolkien's life and his writings, and an unfortunate tendency to look at Tolkien via armchair psychology. *The Lord of the Rings*, in Carpenter's interpretation, had become Tolkien's attempt to create an alternative religion.

In October 1987 he gave a lecture at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature entitled "Tolkien Reconsidered." He read aloud his account of Tolkien from *Secret Gardens*, extending it even further, adding a Freudian slant to his criticism of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, while also making snide remarks about the (supposed) pathetic and lonely members of the "Tolkien cult" who read no books other than *The Lord of the Rings*. Over the next few years he made similar disparaging remarks.

Carpenter's disillusionment with Tolkien reached its nadir in January 1992 with the BBC Radio 4 dramatization of his radio play, "In a Hole in the Ground, There Lived a Tolkien." The broadcast was done supposedly to honor of the centenary of Tolkien's birth, but the radio play itself was entirely without honor. Tolkien was portrayed with unceasing absurdity, as an irredeemably absent-minded professor who wanders around Leeds randomly shouting out strange terms like "smakkabagms." As a teacher surrounded by dull stodgy students, he was presented as an extremely ridiculous slapstick figure that occasionally vocalized asinine thoughts ("I *must* stop this day-dreaming. I must look after my wife and children and do my *job*. I am a grown man teaching English Language and Literature at the University of Leeds in the year of Our Lord 1924. I must stop behaving like a child!"). However intelligently Carpenter had written about Tolkien fifteen years earlier, he had by this time forgotten virtually everything about Tolkien he had ever known, save for a few representative phrases and some facts that could be woven together into a caricature. In fact, his view of Tolkien seems to have reverted to the original simple-minded caricature that, while writing the biography, Carpenter had discovered to be wrong. One detects in the radio play an almost willful blindness—if not an impish glee—behind it all.

Carpenter spurned the Tolkien Centenary Conference, held at Keble College in August of 1992. In fact, prior to the Conference, he donated the letters that Tolkien had written to him to the charity Oxfam, who (from their point of view, quite sensibly) displayed them in the window of their Oxford bookshop that month so that conference attendees would

not only be certain to observe them, but also they would thereby have the chance to bid upon them. Many conference attendees felt insulted. Afterwards, Carpenter's animosity seems to have been held in check, for he commented some years later about the difficulties he had encountered when "you may want to make statements about your subject later on, which may be less enthusiastic than the biography—I mean with Tolkien, I had to keep sort of a neutral tone with the biography, but by the time I'd finished it I had (in a sense) grown out of his writings, and this did pose problems in that I tended to make public statements which were critical of him, which upset his family, understandably. I've generally speaking not made them since . . . You can get into a quite awkward position if you've been given privileged access, and you've done your book, and then you go off as a sort of loose cannon and start saying other things" (Anon. 2000 286).

He stayed mostly silent about Tolkien for several years. Yet with the tremendous publicity surrounding the imminent release of the first of Peter Jackson's three films of *The Lord of the Rings*, Carpenter recycled his memories of meeting Tolkien for a short article in *The Sunday Times Magazine* of 25 November 2001. A couple of years later, in what I believe is his last article pertaining to Tolkien—a review of John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* published in *The Sunday Times* for 23 November 2003—he re-assessed his Tolkien biography as "an apprentice work," saying that it portrayed Tolkien "very much as he saw himself, and leaving out several difficult issues (Margaret Drabble, reviewing it, rightly castigated it as 'polite')." Polite the book may be, yet it still holds pride of place on the small shelf of books that are essential to every Tolkien scholar.

On a personal note, I met Humphrey Carpenter when I attended a summer program in Oxford in 1978, and we became friends. He was then beginning work on his Auden biography, and needed a research assistant based in the U.S. The work I did for him over the next few years was my first real taste of literary research, and once bitten, the desire to do similar work has never left me. Along with the Auden biography, I helped him with *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, particularly with the headnotes to the letters and the annotations. Humphrey and I were in very close contact for several years, until our interests diverged—rather, until his interest in Tolkien diminished, while mine grew—and our correspondence trailed off. He was without exception kind, helpful, generous, and gracious to me, even to the point—long after leaving Tolkienian things behind—of encouraging and assisting with the 1996 re-issue of *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* by E. A. Wyke-Smith, Tolkien's "source-book" for hobbits. He had a self-effacing sense of humor, a relish for gossip, and a special zeal for ferreting out the peculiarities of the human spirit in

relation to artistic creation. As a friend and mentor who nurtured and encouraged my own growing literary interests, my debt to him is large. It pleases me that I was able to express some of my gratitude to him, some years ago, in one of our last exchanges of letters.

Douglas A. Anderson

WORKS CITED

- [Anon.]. "Interview with Humphrey Carpenter." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1999*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Detroit: Gale Group, 2000): 279-288.
- [Anon.]. "Table Talk: A Transcript of the After-dinner Speeches at the 1976 Annual General Meeting of the Tolkien Society," *Mallorn* no.10 (1977): 34-43.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, in conversation with Lyndall Gordon, "Learning about Ourselves: Biography as Autobiography." In *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 267-279.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. "Our Brief Encounter," *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 25 November 2001.
- . "Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth by John Garth." *The Sunday Times*, 23 November 2003.
- Drayton, Paul, and Humphrey Carpenter, "A Preparatory School Approach." In *Music Drama in School*, ed. Malcolm John (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971): 1-19.
- Noad, Charles E. "'Tolkien Reconsidered': A Talk by Humphrey Carpenter Given at the Cheltenham Literary Festival," *Amon Hen*, no. 91 (May 1988): 12-14.
- Ross, Jean W., "CA Interview." *Contemporary Authors, New Revisions Series, Volume 13* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1984): 100-102.
- . "An Interview with Humphrey Carpenter." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1984*, ed. Jean W. Ross (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985): 103-108.

Tolkien also discussed parts of his novels with fellow Oxfordian and fantasy writer CS Lewis during their 'meetings'. He was trying to create a fantasy world so that he could explain how he had invented certain languages, and in doing so created 'Middle-earth'. However among his peers at Oxford his works were not well received as they were not considered 'scholarly'. It was after LOTR was published in paperback in the United States in 1965 that he developed his legendary cult following and also imitators. After Tolkien's death, his son Christopher published a series of works based on his father's extensive notes and unpublished manuscripts, including *The Silmarillion*. - IMDb Mini Biography By: Pedro Borges. Spouse (1). Humphrey Carpenter writes in his biography of Tolkien, 'Occasionally a strange dream came to trouble him: a great wave towering up and advancing ineluctably over the trees and green fields. The dream was to recur for many years. He came to think of it as 'my Atlantis complex'.' At Sarehole he had begun to learn Latin from his mother and to read books about dragons. But in 1900 Tolkien passed the exam to King Edward's grammar school. The family had to leave Sarehole to find an area with better bus services. Only four years later his mother died of exhaustion. Tolkien also enjoyed an active social life with his colleagues at the university. He became a founding member of the all-male club known as the Inklings, who met frequently to talk, drink beer at the local taverns, and discuss writing. Members included many authors, most famously C.S. Lewis, who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*. For many years, they convened at least once a week to read both their favorite literature and their own works in progress. This group became the first critical audience for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. *Fantasy and Fame*. From an early age, Tolkien pursued an acti Professor Tolkien spent his entire life writing and creating a new world, for generations to come. "My gentlehobbits, I give you this toast: To the Hobbits, May they outlast the Sarumans and see spring again in the trees." ...more. " ...And if after this we may not have any better idea why he wrote his books, then at least we should know a little more about the man who did write them." "...Certainly Tolkien himself would have agreed with this. It was one of his strongest-held opinions that the investigation of an author's life reveals very little of the workings of his mind." A few years ago I read *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends* by Humphrey Carpenter and I really enjoyed it. His writing continued to be published after his death, including *The Silmarillion* (1977) and *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-96). Co-author, J.R.R. Tolkien, Artist and Illustrator and others ; author, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography; See Article History. Alternative Title: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. In private, Tolkien amused himself by writing an elaborate series of fantasy tales, often dark and sorrowful, set in a world of his own creation. He made this "œlegendarium," which eventually became *The Silmarillion* , partly to provide a setting in which "œElvish" languages he had invented could exist. But his tales of Arda and Middle-earth also grew from a desire to tell stories, influenced by a love of myths and legends .

"From the familiar to the less well-known, from earliest times to the present day, and from around the world, this unique work explores the fascinating development of literature for children. It is an indispensable reference work not only for teachers librarians, and collectors, but for all parents and children." "The range of literature covered includes traditional narrative material such as legends and romances; fairy tales; chapbooks; genres such as school stories, adventure stories and science fiction; ABC and other learning books; children's magazines, comics, and story papers; picture books; teenage novels; and children's stories on radio, television, and film."-- Jacket. The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Georgiou, Constantine. Children and Their Literature. Children's Books and Their Creators. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. Warren, Alan. Roald Dahl. Much of his adult-oriented literature deals with war and its effects on human beings. Following is a list of other texts that focus on the mental and emotional toll of war: "I Will Fight No More Forever" (1877), by Chief Joseph. Original Title. The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature. ISBN. 0198602286 (ISBN13: 9780198602286). Start your review of The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature. Write a review. Apr 10, 2017 Christopher Newton rated it it was amazing. Shelves: childrens-lit, reference. It can be quite wrong on American books, like this entry on Freddy The Pig: "A pig in PICTURE BOOKS by the American writer Walter R. Brooks" I'm glad to see Brooks's greatest creation is in the book, but there's not a picture book to be found in the series of short comic novels for children. One of my favorite reference books - great for daydreaming about all the great children's books I'll never have time to read if I start now and don't stop. Much better on British than American books, though.