

Chapter 1

TOLKIEN, ST. ANDREWS, AND DRAGONS

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In a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Company in the summer of 1955, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien stated:

I think the so-called “fairy-story” one of the highest forms of literature, and quite erroneously associated with children (as such). But my views on that I set out in a lecture delivered at St. Andrew’s [sic] (on the Andrew Lang foundation, eventually published in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* by Oxford University Press, as “On Fairy-Stories”). I think it is quite an important work, at least for anyone who thinks me worth considering at all.¹

“It was intimated that the Andrew Lang Lecture on ‘Fairy stories’ was delivered by Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, M.A., Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Oxford, in the United College Hall on Wednesday, 8th inst, at 5.30 p.m.”² So read the minutes of the meeting of the Senatus Academicus of the University of St. Andrews, held on 10 March 1939. Tolkien had originally been one of three prospective Andrew Lang lecturers recommended to the Senatus by the Faculty of Arts of the University in June 1938, the others being Professor Gilbert Murray of Oxford and the Right Honourable Lord

Hugh Macmillan.³ Letters of invitation were duly issued by the Secretary to the University to Murray and Macmillan in the first instance, but both indicated that they were unable to undertake the lecture due to the number of their engagements. It was on 8 October 1938, therefore, that the University approached Tolkien, requesting that he deliver the Andrew Lang Lecture in the University of St. Andrews on the following terms: "The Lecturer is supposed to deliver at least one Lecture during his tenure of office, the subject to be 'Andrew Lang and his Work' or one or other of the many subjects on which he wrote. The amount of the stipend is small, being only £30."⁴ A number of letters were exchanged, at the end of which the University had managed to secure the date of 8 March 1939 for Tolkien to come to St. Andrews.⁵

The Andrew Lang lectureship had been established by Sir Peter Redford Scott Lang, Regius Professor of Mathematics in the University from 1879 to 1921. His will of November 1922 made provision for the founding of a lectureship in memory of Andrew Lang, to be delivered on those terms cited to Tolkien. The will gave examples of those subjects in which Lang had been proficient: "History of Scotland, History of St. Andrew, History and Literature of the Scottish Borders, Homer, Greek Literature, English Literature, Poetry, Ballads, Custom and Myth, Archaeology, Antiquities, Prince Charlie, Witchcraft, Joan of Arc, Natural Religions etc."⁶ Scott Lang's tribute to his friendship with Andrew Lang has enabled "the sifted memories and judgments of the man and his work by men to whom he had meant much through most of their own reading or writing lives" in the years since the acceptance of the original endowment of £750 by the University Court in December 1926.⁷ Tolkien's choice of "Fairy Stories" as his subject picked up on that aspect of Lang's work which had perhaps been most influential upon him from childhood, as "a reader and lover" of fairy stories but "not a student" of them as Andrew Lang was.⁸

The timing of the request from St. Andrews was fortuitous. Early in 1938 Tolkien was to have read a paper to the Lovelace Society, an undergraduate group at Worcester College, Oxford, on the subject of fairy stories, but the paper was not ready in time and he decided instead to read a then unpublished fantasy story, "Farmer Giles."⁹ So the invitation from Scotland provided a second opportunity for Tolkien to reflect

on and justify his own world of faërie, then developing from *The Hobbit* into *The Lord of the Rings*, the first chapters of which had already been completed. "He felt strongly that fairy stories are not necessarily for children and he decided to devote much of his lecture to the proof of this belief."¹⁰ In his *Letters*, Tolkien says that he was subject to the "contemporary delusions about 'fairy stories' and children. I had to think about it, however, before I gave an 'Andrew Lang' lecture at St. Andrews on fairy stories; and I must say I think the result was entirely beneficial to *The Lord of the Rings*, which was a practical demonstration of the views that I expressed."¹¹ The lecture was given at the end of the first third of his literary career and now forms part of "Tolkien's most influential contributions to scholarship and criticism."¹²

Commentators on Tolkien seem to agree with him as to the significance of the Andrew Lang Lecture as a critical analysis of the form to which he was to devote so much of his subsequent labors. Randel Helms states that in his 1936 lecture, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," as well as in his Andrew Lang Lecture: "Tolkien came gradually to terms with the form that had captured him; he described and evaluated it, slowly, carefully preparing himself and an audience for the book *The Hobbit* taught him how to write, the book he had already begun when he delivered the *Beowulf* lecture: *The Lord of the Rings*."¹³ William Green cites "On Fairy-Stories" as "important background for reading *The Hobbit*,"¹⁴ as "the resolution of a weighty midlife question," and as evidence that "[Tolkien] is reassuring himself that he has taken the right turn, that he will not be wasting his life if he devotes his best years to expanding the world of *The Hobbit*."¹⁵ Michael White's biography of Tolkien notes: "As well as this lecture being a piece of analysis of a literary form so close to Tolkien's heart, it served to focus his own thoughts about his new work."¹⁶ Brian Rosebury declares the lecture to be "a complex essay in implicit self-analysis and self exhortation from the most fruitful phase of his career."¹⁷ As for the effect of having taken time out to analyze what he was doing, Carpenter says that, after having delivered the lecture, "Tolkien returned with a new enthusiasm to the story whose purpose he had justified. That story had been begun as a mere 'sequel' to *The Hobbit*, at the instigation of his publisher, but now,

especially after the declaration of high purpose that he had made in the lecture, the Ring was as important to him as the Silmarils.”¹⁸

Sadly for the University of St. Andrews, in view of its significance, the text of Tolkien’s lecture was not secured for publication, as every other Lang Lecture delivered before 1960 had been. Those from 1927/28 to 1937/38 were eventually published as *Concerning Andrew Lang, being the Andrew Lang Lectures delivered before the University of St. Andrews, 1927–1937*, with an introduction by A. Blyth Webster and a preface by J. B. Salmond. There were no Andrew Lang lectures during the Second World War, and so the next lecture after Tolkien’s was delivered by Emeritus Professor Gilbert Murray in 1946/47, succeeded by Lord Macmillan of Aberfeldy in the following academic year. Their lectures, and most subsequent ones, have been printed in pamphlet form.¹⁹

There is a letter in the University of St. Andrews muniment collection that indicates that there had been an agreement with Oxford University Press to print the texts of the first ten lectures, which it had been hoped would have been done in time for the centenary of Lang’s birth in 1944. Tolkien’s was the eleventh lecture. However, the war intervened and the volume was not finally produced until 1949. It seems likely, in view of Tolkien’s reluctance to let his material be published without his extremely careful revision and amendment,²⁰ that he would have retained his text in order to rework it to his own satisfaction before allowing its publication. The lecture was, of course, first published as “On Fairy-Stories,” his contribution to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*,²¹ which predated the University’s publication of the first Andrew Lang Lectures by two years.

Further light is cast on the publication of the lecture in a letter from Tolkien, dated 17 December 1947, preserved among the papers of Principal T. Malcolm Knox (1900–1988) within the manuscript collection of the University of St. Andrews Library²² (see Figure 1). The document appears to be a cover letter for Tolkien’s gift to Knox of a copy of the *Charles Williams Essays*, his contribution to which he describes in the most typically self-deprecatory of terms. Wayne Hammond’s *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography* gives the date of publication of the *Essays* as December 1947,²³ so it can be assumed that Tolkien is enclosing a copy of the newly published work for Knox. Tolkien refers to his gift as “the

ms 37525/512

MERTON COLLEGE,
TELE. 2259. OXFORD.

17 December
1947.

My dear Knox,

Though I have little pride in it (at any rate my part) I feel it is only proper to present a copy of the enclosed 'hotel-potter' to you, begging you to accept it graciously, together with my very best wishes to you and your wife. At the least in memory of your kind hospitality, and (I suspect) your part in obtaining ^{for me} not only an undeserved licence, but a glimpse of St Andrews.

In the end I took your advice and just published the "lecture" in full (with all the little revisions and excisions) without reference to the University. I can only hope that It (and I) are well beloved to you. My very best wishes.

Yours sincerely
R. W. Tolkien

Figure 1: Letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to T. Malcolm Knox, Principal of the University of St. Andrews, 17 December 1947.

enclosed “hotch-potch.” The very same phrase is used to describe the collection by C. S. Lewis on page v of its preface.

Tolkien’s letter implies that he stayed with Professor and Mrs. Knox when he visited St. Andrews in 1939 to deliver the lecture and attributes to Knox his nomination as lecturer. Knox was indeed a member of the Faculty of Arts, which sent nominations to the Senatus in 1938. The two men had Oxford in common. Knox had studied as an undergraduate at Pembroke, returning, after a time in business, to a position as lecturer and fellow at Jesus College and lecturer at Queen’s College in Greek philosophy from 1931. Thence he moved to the professorship of moral philosophy in St. Andrews in 1936. Tolkien’s appointment as professor of Anglo-Saxon in 1925 included a professorial fellowship at Pembroke, Knox’s alma mater. In 1946 Tolkien moved to Merton as Merton Professor of English Language and Literature.

It is interesting to note that the accession record for the University of St. Andrews Library’s copy of *Essays* presented to Charles Williams indicates that the book was purchased on 13 February 1948 upon the recommendation of Professor Knox.²⁴ Knox presumably retained the copy Tolkien had sent, but he considered the volume a worthy addition to the university library and requested that it be added to stock.

In the final paragraph of the letter to Knox, Tolkien discusses the published version of the Andrew Lang Lecture: “In the end I took your advice and just published the “lecture” in full (with all too little revision and excision) without reference to the University. I can only hope that It (and I) are not hopelessly disgraced.” Here we see that Tolkien had been in touch with Knox between the delivery of the lecture and its rewriting for publication, although no trace of such correspondence can be found in the Knox papers. A comparison of extracts cited in local press coverage of the lecture with the text published in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* reveals some verbatim correspondence,²⁵ confirming Tolkien’s claim that he did not completely revise it. That he did not excise much but on the contrary incorporated a fair amount of new material into the published version is also confirmed by the 1947 text, which (apart from its considerable length) makes explicit reference to St. Andrews and to the delivery of the lecture there “in abbreviated form.”²⁶ When Tolkien revised “On Fairy-Stories” for inclusion in *Tree and Leaf* in 1964,

he omitted many of the contextual references to St. Andrews. However, his personal connection with the town was rekindled around that time, since in a letter of 1964 he notes that his eldest grandchild is “now at St. Andrews.”²⁷ This was Michael George David Reuel Tolkien, who graduated M.A. with honors of the first class in English language and literature on 1 July 1966.²⁸

On 8 March 2004 the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts within the School of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews held a symposium on Tolkien, incorporating an Andrew Lang Lecture by David Jeffrey. The date of this event was chosen to mark the 65th anniversary of the delivery of Tolkien’s Andrew Lang Lecture, of which the present volume is the record. In the context of that gathering, an exhibition was arranged of relevant materials from the Special Collections Department of the University of St. Andrews Library. The Library holds the extensive Andrew Lang Collection, from which selected items were put on show,²⁹ as well as the aforementioned letter from Tolkien to Knox and other related items. The aim was to demonstrate something of the expertise developed by Lang in the study of fairy tales, that aspect of his work which was picked up by Tolkien in his 1939 lecture first entitled simply “Fairy Stories.”

The early influence of Andrew Lang’s fairy stories³⁰ on Tolkien is explicitly documented in Tolkien’s own writings. He was encouraged to read by his mother, and those story books which appealed included Red Indian stories, the “Curdie” books of George MacDonald, stories of Merlin and Arthur, “but most of all he found delight in the Fairy Books of Andrew Lang, especially the *Red Fairy Book*.”³¹ In “On Fairy-Stories” he states:

[T]he Fairy Story Books of Lang are not, perhaps, lumber rooms. They are more like stalls in a rummage-sale. Someone with a duster and a fair eye for things that retain some value has been round the attics and box-rooms. His collections are largely a by-product of his adult study of mythology and folk-lore, but they were made into and presented as books for children. . . . Now I was one of the children whom Andrew Lang was addressing. I was born at about the same time as the *Green Fairy Book*.³²

But it was the *Red Fairy Book* which was Tolkien's favorite, "for tucked away in its closing pages was the best story he had ever read. This was the tale of Sigurd who slew the dragon Fáfnir" from "The Volsunga Saga."³³ Tolkien wrote, in "On Fairy-Stories," of Fáfnir, "the prince of all dragons . . . [t]he dragon had the trade-mark *Of Faërie* written plain upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire."³⁴

There are five drawings to illustrate "The story of Sigurd" in the *Red Fairy Book*, the first of which, on page 359, shows Fáfnir the dragon. A copy of the 1890 edition of Lang's *Red Fairy Book* from the Andrew Lang Collection was put on display in St. Andrews in March 2004. The illustrations in the book are by Henry Justice Ford and Lancelot Speed. It is unclear whether Ford or Speed was responsible for the image of Fáfnir, since there appears to be no signature on the illustration, but the other four drawings for this story are clearly signed "L. Speed." A careful examination of the rest of the volume indicates that one of the illustrators was responsible for all the pictures in each complete story. Therefore, by implication, the drawing of Fáfnir is by Speed. The style is, however, admittedly more like Ford's. Ford "mixed carefully observed objects from the real world with fantasy creatures from an imagined world in a very convincing way. His penwork is assured and clear. . . . A whole generation of Edwardians grew up on Ford's illustrations to Andrew Lang's fairy tales, the long series of little books appearing between 1889 and 1913."³⁵

The 1890 *Red Fairy Book* image of Fáfnir shows a horned and whiskered dragon with prominent ears, with wisps of smoke curling from his mouth; long, scaly, and lizard-like, in the act of emerging through a hole in a wall, descending to the floor of his cave, which is littered with human skulls and bones. His front legs are visible, the right one clearly showing claws.³⁶

Tolkien represented dragons, those creatures to him so evocative of faërie, in both words and pictures. In their magnificent *J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*, Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull provide an excellent analysis of Tolkien's dragons,³⁷ building on Scull's earlier work. This appeared as "Dragons from Andrew Lang's Retelling of

Sigurd to Tolkien's Chrysophylax" in *Leaves from the Tree: J. R. R. Tolkien's Shorter Fiction*.³⁸ She identifies a chronology of dragons: from Tolkien, age 7, reflecting on his "great green dragon"³⁹ (49); through Glorund/Glaurung in *The Book of Lost Tales*, part II, written about 1919, published in 1984, as "the most powerful, malicious and totally evil of Tolkien's dragons" (50); the dragons of "The Fall of Gondolin"; then the dragon in the poem "The Hoard," published in *The Gryphon* (50), who is very similar to Smaug in *The Hobbit* (51); then Chrysophylax in *Farmer Giles of Ham* (51–52); followed by Glomund in "The Later Annals of Beleriand," written in the 1930s (52); and finally "The Dragon's Visit," published in 1937 and 1965 (53). In the second half of her paper she analyzes the treatment of dragons by Tolkien's contemporaries. Hammond and Scull together also include his illustrations of dragons, coiled, flying, and fighting knights. However, perhaps Tolkien's most well-known visual representation of a dragon remains Smaug in *The Hobbit*.

On 1 January 1938, Tolkien delivered a Christmas lecture to children on the subject of dragons at the Oxford University Museum. He discerned two sorts of dragons, "'creeping' and 'winged' but, in general, large, deadly, coiling serpent-creatures."⁴⁰ He showed a slide of the last of his *Hobbit* watercolors to illustrate *draco fabulosus*, "a serpent creature . . . 20 feet or more."⁴¹ Smaug does not have quite the majesty of Glorund but is every bit as dangerous and just as capable of creating a desolation. The original impression of *The Hobbit* in 1937 had contained no colored pictures, but the second English impression of the same year and the first American edition in 1938 included five colored pictures by Tolkien,⁴² one of which was entitled "O Smaug, the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities," Bilbo Baggins's words to the dragon in chapter 12—an illustration now more familiarly known as *Conversation with Smaug* and completed by Tolkien in July 1937.⁴³ In this familiar picture we see the dragon lying on his heap of treasure, with his belly toward the top of the pile, so that he is lying curled downwards, with his head resting on the hoard, smoke issuing from his nostrils and his ears pointed and alert, his right clawed foot extended. Littering the floor of the cave are human skulls and bones.

Hammond and Scull have already established that Tolkien's own visualization of scenes was often heavily influenced by earlier pictures

with which he was familiar. Thus, as Brian Alderson notes in *The Hobbit, 50th Anniversary*, the basic composition of “The Trolls” in *The Hobbit* is borrowed from an illustration for *Hansel and Grethel* by Jennie Harbour in a book of fairy tales (*The Fairy Tale Book* by Edric Vredenburg). Also, the eagle in Tolkien’s “Bilbo Woke Up with Early Sun in His Eyes” is adapted from Alexander Thorburn’s “Golden Eagle (Immature)” in Lord Lilford’s *Birds of the British Islands* (1891). Finally, Professor J. S. Ryan in “Two Oxford Scholars’ Perceptions of the Traditional Germanic Hall”⁴⁴ highlighted Tolkien’s use of E. V. Gordon’s “Interior of a Norse Hall” as the model for *Firelight in Beorn’s House*.⁴⁵ No one, though, seems yet to



Figure 2: Fáfñir the dragon, from “The Story of Sigurd” in Andrew Lang, *Red Fairy Book* (London: Longman, Green, 1890), 359.

have identified the likely source for one of Tolkien's most distinctive and familiar depictions, a link suggested by the juxtaposition of two images (Tolkien's aforementioned *Conversation with Smaug* and the drawing of Fáfñir from the *Red Fairy Book* of Andrew Lang [see Figure 2]) in the exhibition mounted in St. Andrews in March 2004.⁴⁶

Careful consideration of the two drawings reveals clear compositional similarities in the shape and alignment of the dragon's shoulder, neck, and forearms—particularly the right claw—the skulls scattered on the floor, and the wisps of smoke arising from the head. The basic configuration of the dragon in the *Red Fairy Book* illustration clearly remained with Tolkien (whether or not we must suppose him to have had it in front of him) when, in 1937, he duly came to commit this particular “dragon” form, Smaug, to paper.⁴⁷ Perhaps the clinching piece of evidence, however, is in what Tolkien himself referred to as his “low philological jest”⁴⁸—the choice of the name for his dragon. Originally the dragon in *The Hobbit* was called “Pryftan” but Tolkien changed its name to Smaug. Various interpretations have been offered for the name: *smog* meaning “brimstone, smoke and vapor of a dragon”; the Old English influences of *smeagan* meaning to “inquire into”; *smeagol* meaning “burrowing, working into”; and Tolkien's preferred *smugan*, from the past tense of the primitive Germanic verb *Smugan*, “to squeeze through a hole.”⁴⁹ The *Red Fairy Book* has a dragon squeezing through a hole in a wall, down onto the cave floor which is littered with skulls and bone.

It seems appropriate to conclude with Carpenter's quotation from Tolkien and his comments on it:

“One writes such a story,” said Tolkien, “out of the leaf-mould of the mind”; . . . One learns little by raking through a compost heap to see what dead plants originally went into it. Far better to observe its effect on the new and growing plants that it is enriching. And in *The Hobbit*, the leaf-mould of Tolkien's mind nurtured a rich growth with which only a few other books in children's literature can compare.⁵⁰