J.R.R. Tolkien Biography

Personal Background

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892 in South Africa, where his English father worked as a bank manager. His father died unexpectedly of complications from rheumatic fever when four-year-old Ronald (as he was called) was visiting family in England with his mother and younger brother Hilary. His mother did not return to South Africa, but moved with her young children to be near her own family in Birmingham and began to educate Ronald and Hilary at home. Mrs. Tolkien was alienated from her family when she and her sister converted to Roman Catholicism in 1900, and she was forced to move with the children to poorer lodgings. In the same year, Ronald entered King Edward's School in Birmingham, already demonstrating a gift for linguistics. Mrs. Tolkien died in 1904 of complications related to diabetes, leaving the two boys in the guardianship of a benevolent Catholic priest, Fr. Francis Morgan. Ronald always blamed his mother's death on her family's negligence and thought of her as a martyr for her faith. As he continued at King Edwards, Ronald became increasingly interested in the study of language and began to invent languages of his own. When he was sixteen, he met Edith Bratt, three years his senior; the two were captivated with each other, but Fr. Francis forbade Ronald to see Edith. Despite his real love for Edith, Ronald obeyed.

In 1910, on his second attempt, Ronald Tolkien succeeded in winning a scholarship to Exeter College, Oxford, where he studied philology with the legendary Joseph Wright. On his twenty-first birthday, he wrote to Edith and renewed their relationship. They became engaged, and she converted to Catholicism. World War I broke out in 1914, and Tolkien enlisted in the armed service in a special program that allowed him to complete his degree. In 1915, he took a First in English at Oxford, an accomplishment that assured him of a professional academic position.

Edith and Tolkien were married in March 1916, and in June, he joined the war in France. He was engaged in active combat at the front, and several of his school friends were among the catastrophic losses the British suffered. In November, he was sent back to England to recover from trench fever; he suffered a relapse and was never sent back to France. During his convalescence, Tolkien — who had been writing poetry in imitation of Old and Middle English verse for some time — began writing the work that was eventually published in 1977 as *The Silmarillion.* He called it *The Book of Lost Tales*and conceived it on an epic scale as a mythology for England.

The Tolkiens' first child, John, was born in November 1917. A year later, Tolkien took a job as a researcher for the ambitious Oxford English Dictionary project, and the Tolkiens moved to Oxford. In the course of that work, he was recognized as being highly knowledgeable in linguistics. At this time, he also did private tutoring to earn extra money.

In 1920, Tolkien was hired as a Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds, where he became friendly with a young Canadian, E. V. Gordon, with whom he collaborated on an edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (published 1925). The Tolkiens' second child, Michael, was born 1920 and their third, Christopher, in 1924. In 1925, Tolkien was appointed Professor of the English Language at Leeds, although he was considered very young for the position. In the same year, he was hired as Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. The Tolkiens moved back to Oxford, where their youngest child, Priscilla, was born in 1929.

Tolkien spent the rest of his professional life at Oxford. He lived an exceedingly ordinary existence, absorbed in the joys and frustrations of family life and engaged in the intellectual concerns of the academic profession. He rarely traveled, but entertained his young children with stories of fantasy lands often told in invented languages. He was fond of plain English clothes and plain English food, and he valued the beauty of the English countryside. At Oxford, he formed a very close friendship with writers C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams; they became known as the Inklings and, with other writers and Oxford faculty, spent much time together in the discussion of literary and religious issues. The Inklings and his own family were the first audience for Tolkien's tales and poems as well as his academic work. The friendship with C. S. Lewis was especially significant, and Tolkien was doubtless an influence in Lewis's conversion to Christianity and the composition of his series, *The Chronicles of Narnia.*

Writing *The Hobbit*

The origin of *The Hobbit* is almost a fantasy story in itself. Tolkien graded School Certificate exams in the summers to supplement his rather meager faculty salary. It was boring work, and one day, finding a blank page in one of the exam booklets, he wrote impulsively, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." Nothing much happened to that sentence for several years; Tolkien continued to tell stories to his own children, to write poems, and to do scholarly work. In the early 1930s, he began to write down much of what he had been telling his children in an effort to integrate it with his more intellectual interest in mythology, and it became the book that is now known as *The Hobbit.*It was published by the British firm of Allen & Unwin in 1937 with eight of his own illustrations. To a remarkable degree, the tale of the hobbit does constitute a kind of mythology of the English people, whose history Tolkien knew well as a scholar and as an Englishman of his generation. He once said, "I've always been impressed that we are here, surviving, because of the indomitable courage of quite small people against impossible odds."

*The Hobbit* was quite successful as a children's book, and for the next twelve years, Tolkien worked on *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in an effort to create an epic-scale context for the adventures recounted in*The Hobbit.*Allen & Unwin had rejected *The Silmarillion,* which hurt Tolkien, because he found the work deeply meaningful; when *The Lord of the Rings* was finished in 1949, he toyed with the idea of finding a different publisher for it. Ultimately, however, the trilogy was published in 1954 (*The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*) and 1955 *(The Return of the King)* by Allen & Unwin. It became an astonishing international bestseller, and Tolkien achieved world renown as a literary figure. He retired from teaching in 1959 and began to revise *The Silmarillion.* In 1968, he and Edith moved to Bournemouth, a middle-class British resort town. Edith died in 1971 from complications of gall-bladder illness, and Tolkien moved back to Oxford, where he died in 1973.