

A Hitherto Overlooked 1925 Letter from Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, Then at Leeds University, to the about-to-retire from Oxford Professor Joseph Wright *

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ABSTRACT: Various of his admirers and old pupils and wrote personal letters to him, when announcement had been made, in January 1925, of his retirement to Professor Joseph Wright, the modestly nurtured Yorkshireman, the holder of the Chair of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford.

Background

J.R.R. Tolkien (b. 1892) and the Wrights, Joseph and Mary, as passionate language scholars, dialectologists, and personal friends had a long association,—from the young student's earliest days in Oxford (1911, following) and in what would prove to be his crucial apprenticeship. For Professor Wright was Tolkien's tutor and mentor, throughout his choice of Comparative Philology as an option in his early Classics' studies when he was a student of classics at Exeter College. While the matter of this association¹ is variously referred to by Humphrey Carpenter in his *The Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, some of the most engaging references to this association may be found in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, as Selected and Edited by Christopher Tolkien, in 1981.

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* This document is not included in the standard collection of the more public letters written by Tolkien, namely the collection later selected and edited by Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981). Although, as a known student of Tolkien's, and, later, a reflective writer about him, as in my *Tolkien: Cult or Culture?* (1969), and had been invited to offer material to this collection, I had deemed various messages/ notes to be of a more personal nature.

The matter of the retirement of Joseph Wright from this Chair is discussed in the context of the time—and of her recollections and records of the same event—by his widow in her *The Life of Joseph Wright*, by Elizabeth Mary Wright (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, (1932), in two volumes.

¹ Professor Joseph Wright is referred to on pp. 11, 22, 236, 357, and 397, while Mrs E.M. Wright is mentioned on pp. 11, and 74.

Ever since I had met the gracious Elizabeth Wright in her old brave age, in a chill winter evening of the cold winter of 1954-55, I have held a remarkable interest in her scholarly career as so lucid grammarian of both Old and Middle English, and also as the power behind the achievement of her husband in his *The English Dialect Dictionary* (1898-1905, in 6 volumes). I had published an earlier essay on this Tolkien relationship in *Minas Tirith Evening Star* 14.1 (1985), pp. 6-10, and, more recently, I expanded this in my essay of 2009, as 'An Important Influence: His Professor's Wife, Mrs Mary Elizabeth (Lea) Wright', in my *Tolkien's View: Windows into his World*.² One of the points that I had made there (pp. 27-32), was about the mass of folkloric material³ in her *Rustic Speech and Folklore* (1913), and the number of passages or themes there which appeared in relatively similar form in the Tolkien trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, in particular.

On a recent re-reading of the magnificent and warm and inspirational 1932 *Life* of her late husband,—and towards the end of the second volume,—I came across the proud and splendidly comprehensive section about the various responses to the public announcement of Joseph Wright's retirement, his wife—by then widowed—commencing the record thus—

When the announcement of the retirement became publicly known, it was, as usual on the appearance of any item of information relating to Joseph Wright, the occasion of a fresh burst of patriotism, especially in Yorkshire, where local patriotism lent thereto a note of personal pride. (p. 648).

After listing these warm and gracious tributes, Elizabeth had then made a modest reference to her own contribution to the monumental *English Dialect Dictionary*, quietly adding—

I had some little share, many hundreds of the '2,000,000' slips being supplied by me, along with other helpers in various parts of the British Isles.

This section is followed by a reference to a Yorkshire man, and then there comes the first academic and response to the announcement (p. 657):

Various old pupils wrote expressing praise and gratitude. One of them, Professor Tolkien, wrote from Leeds:

² This work of 2009 is issued through Walking Tree Publishers, Zurich and Jena.

³ The lore had been quietly assembled during her years of work for her husband's *Dialect Dictionary*, and this born wondrous fruit in her own exhilarating work, the dialect-focussed *Rustic Speech and Folk-Lore*—it to be issued in the following year, (i.e. 1913).

Jan. 26, 1925. In the first place I hope that you are not retiring now because of renewed or increased ill-health, but only to enjoy a very long period of well-earned rest and happiness. I hope I may send my very best wishes, to yourself, and to Mrs Wright, as a grateful disciple (it was your works that came into my hands by chance as a schoolboy, that first revealed to me the philology I love) to whom you have since shown so many kindnesses.

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While there are many stylistic echoes/ nuances of Yorkshire folk expression and behaviour⁴ in the hobbits-at-home sequences in the writings of Tolkien, it is certainly the case that the visually delightful style of celebration of the stay-at-home hobbits in their Party Field, as captured in the recent films, indicates something of the Yorkshire traditional celebratory and zestful style savoured by Mrs Elizabeth Wright. And it is also, I believe, nicely caught in Tolkien's affection for the young hobbits at play.

Postscript

It is also my intention in this note to indicate that there is a considerable research field awaiting investigation in the splendid collection of lore and language⁵ that Mrs Wright has left us, and which would seem to have contributed in subtle yet significant ways to the (Tolkienian) hobbit style of recreation and celebration.⁶

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⁴ Here I wish to acknowledge the guidance and help in these fields that I have received over the years from the Dialect Survey at the University of Leeds, as from the late Professor Harold Orton and from Stanley Ellis there, and, at the University of Sheffield's Centre for English Language and Tradition, from Emeritus Professor J. D. A. Widdowson and his staff.

⁵ In addition to her comprehensive nation-wide bibliography, there are also the various Yorkshire records as listed on pp. 23-28 of the 'Appendix' to the last volume of the *E.D.D.* The style of the Shire expression and behaviour, subtle though it is, may be linked to both Yorkshire and Warwickshire modes of expression, especially as surviving in the earlier twentieth century.

⁶ And see also the cluster of associations of 'sprinkle' in the sixth volume of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (first edition).