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**Stratford Caldecott and Thomas Honegger (eds),
Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: Sources of Inspiration
Review by Faith Liu
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Stratford Caldecott and Thomas Honegger (eds), *Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: Sources of Inspiration*. Zollikofen: Walking Tree Publishers, 2008. 237 pp. ISBN 978-3905703122.

The contents of Stratford Caldecott and Thomas Honegger's collection have less to do with the actual inspiration behind Tolkien's composition than with the recent critical effort to consider his works as a source of inspiration for scholarship across and beyond Tolkien's oeuvre. This at least was the intent behind the 2006 International Tolkien Studies Conference, held by Tolkien's own *alma mater* at Exeter College, Oxford, whose proceedings this book comprises. Keeping with the goals of the conference – establishing the legitimacy and encouraging the growth of Tolkien scholarship through international and interdisciplinary collaboration – this volume's selection of ten papers seeks to demonstrate the successful emergence of Tolkien Studies through its broadness of scope. The collection discusses Tolkien and his legendarium through a wide variety of lenses; however, within the spectrum of subjects covered, there is little to justify the volume's title: only half of its contributors deal directly with *The Lord of the Rings*, and the majority of

those, rather than analyzing text for Tolkien's own 'sources of inspiration', utilize passages only as illustrations for broader theses or comparative study with another work or author. The search for a genuine unifying principle in lieu of such a title proves unrewarding, and yet perhaps this is to be expected for a volume as varied and interdisciplinary in character as this one is.

After a short foreword by Frances Cairncross, current rector of Exeter College, on Tolkien's undergraduate life, Caldecott expands upon the goal of the conference itself, an event he deems to have 'marked the "coming of age" of Tolkien Studies' (6). Caldecott's defense of the academic worthiness of this discipline appears unnecessarily aggressive, and is matched by a heartfelt if perhaps unnecessary defense of the value of fantasy from a layman's perspective, connecting Tolkien with such modern popular fantasists as J.K. Rowling. Ultimately, Caldecott brings both perspectives together, reminding the

reader that the rise of Tolkien Studies as an academic endeavour should not leave Tolkien stuffed and mounted on the dusty pedestal of ‘the greats’, nor should Tolkien’s popular appeal, including the spawn of numerous imitators, exclude his works from serious study. Indeed, the collection’s various authors, while not unified in subject matter or style, all demonstrate a refreshing degree of enthusiasm to match the academic vigour of their topic. While the level of prior knowledge demanded may put this volume beyond the reach of the general reader, its diverse offerings contain many unique insights, and invite the reader to explore further the many directions and disciplines in which Tolkien Studies has expanded.

The papers are organized into three parts, beginning with the ‘biographical’. Of its three essays, the first two are primarily supplements or expansions upon books written by the authors themselves: John Garth’s *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003), and Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall and Edmund Weiner’s *The Ring of Words* (2006). Both papers burst with information and insight, but also exhibit the shortcomings of their form: rushed summaries, leaps in logic, and fragmentary glimpses in place of detailed analysis. John Garth’s essay, ‘Tolkien, Exeter College and the Great War’, utilizes an impressive array of memoirs and unpublished documents to

paint an often amusing and sometimes elegiac picture of Tolkien’s undergraduate life, ranging from his many pranks and parties to the War’s impact on the College and on Tolkien as a student. Garth’s essay focuses mainly on Tolkien’s non-academic endeavours, making only a cursory attempt at connecting them with his writings; however, his discussion of Tolkien’s academic interests and involvement in the Apolausticks and the Stapeldon Society – particularly Tolkien’s highly dramatic secretarial accounts – reveal roots and early offshoots of Tolkien’s more mature work. Gilliver, Weiner and Marshall, as editors in the *Oxford English Dictionary* Revision Programme, each discuss a particular aspect of Tolkien’s work with the *OED* in their essay ‘The Word as Leaf: Perspectives on Tolkien as Lexicographer and Philologist’. Gilliver describes, with frequent tangents into the obscurities of dictionary editing, Tolkien’s personal relationships with two of the *OED*’s chief editors, William Craigie and Henry Bradley, as well as his work on Middle English texts with Kenneth Sisam. Weiner’s contribution is a speculative appraisal of the often-dry linguistic origins of Tolkien’s words – some of which are fascinating, others of which seem unnecessarily complex for words as straightforward as ‘Treebeard’ and ‘wolf-rider’. In contrast, Marshall’s note on Tolkien’s ‘incorrect’ use of the plural *dwarves*

provides a satisfyingly detailed, well-supported argument for Tolkien's right to adopt a minority spelling. Finally, Verlyn Flieger's essay, 'Gilson, Smith, and Baggins,' addresses *The Lord of the Rings* itself, reading Sam Gamgee's last line 'Well, I'm back' in the light of those who were not – namely, Tolkien's close friends Rob Gilson and Geoffrey Smith, two of the 'immortal four' of the TCBS, both killed in France. Flieger at times reaches too far in demonstrating how Gilson and Smith are represented in Frodo and those characters who cannot, or cannot fully, return to earthly life; however, she does make strong connections between Tolkien's struggles to reconcile the senselessness of his friends' deaths and the themes of death and immortality, divine purpose and self-doubt, within his work.

The second section, 'Mythos and Modernity,' seeks to relate Tolkien to contemporary trends in philosophy, a subject in which readers unfamiliar with Enlightenment and Modernist thinkers may easily become lost. Patrick Curry's essay on enchantment, though written in his trademark conversational tone and clarified with bullet-pointed lists, is somewhat difficult to follow. The connections drawn between Max Weber's ideas of disenchantment, Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories', and the writings of Jan Zwicky stand well-supported, but the arguments Curry draws from Tolkien's

personal experiences as well as from his fiction fail to reveal a clear line of reasoning, leading many of his statements to appear as opinion rather than extensions or explanations of Tolkien's philosophy. Mark Oziewicz's 'The Affirmation of Myth against the Tyranny of Reason' notes parallels between the philological work of eighteenth-century philosopher Giovanni Battista Vico and that of Tolkien. Both men affirmed myth and philology, decried the rationalism and modernism of their day, and devoted themselves to the development of vast mythopoeic projects. Interesting as these similarities are, Oziewicz admits in his opening paragraph that there is as yet no proof that Tolkien ever encountered Vico's treatises; thus, the identification of Vico as a source of inspiration 'may...be legitimate only in its broadest sense of "intellectual tradition"' (113). Peter M. Candler's essay comparing Tolkien and Nietzsche likewise must draw intellectual connections where no evidence of personal familiarity exists. Candler ably discusses both authors' disdain toward modernity, but the similarity ends there: their proposed solutions for the problem of modernity take the concepts of myth and philology in opposite directions, Tolkien turning to 'sub-creation' and Nietzsche to the eternal recurrence wherein nothing can be truly created. Candler also examines the One Ring as an image of Zarathustrian eternal recurrence,

reading *The Lord of the Rings* as the triumph of Christianity and of joy, a joy found even in pagan myth, over nihilism and modernity.

Candler's essay transitions the book into its final section, concerning Christian aspects of Tolkien's work. Leon Pereira, O.P., discusses the influence of Tolkien's Catholicism on his mythology. In addition to drawing heavily on Tolkien's own statements about his work in the *Letters*, Pereira's essay carefully walks the reader through Tolkien's moral system as made apparent in the acts of pity and love by Bilbo, Frodo, and especially Sam depicted within *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Pereira singles out Sam as the true hero of the story: the simple, rustic man, deeply religious in his love, made heroic by his experience, and ultimately returning to home and family. Alison Milbank contributes an essay on 'Tolkien, Chesterton, and Thomism', in which she argues for Tolkien's complex fictional world as a reflection of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics and theology, saying that G.K. Chesterton's philosophy, in its presentation of Thomistic ideas, 'undergirds Tolkien's Middle-earth, and contributes towards its credibility and overall tone and effect' (187). At first, it might seem unnecessary for Milbank to approach Aquinas through Chesterton's lens; however, in doing so, she not only creates a more accessible essay, but

also reveals several moments in *The Lord of the Rings* where Chesterton's work provides a possible verbal parallel. Guglielmo Spirito, O.F.M. Conv., in his essay entitled 'The Influence of Holiness: The Healing Power of Tolkien's Narrative,' utilizes only two primary texts: a letter from Tolkien in reply to a reader who wrote of a 'sanity and sanctity' in *The Lord of the Rings*, and a passage from *The Two Towers*, when Frodo and Sam are shown the Window on the West. Guglielmo's essay does not exude academic erudition so much as effusive joy and wonder at Tolkien's presentation of transcendent glory, beauty, and truth in myth. And in the last essay, Stratford Caldecott brings together John Garth's biographical work, Tolkien's Catholicism, Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake*, and various events in the history of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and even early city-based civilization in connection with Tolkien's mission of preserving, or perhaps rescuing, the essence of England.

Certain aspects of this volume challenge its introduction's claim that Tolkien Studies have in fact 'come of age'. The book could benefit from an index, several footnote and citation corrections, a more professional cover art and typeface, and a title more representative of its content. At times, its contributors are enthusiastic to the point of incoherence, but their

enthusiasm itself, and the level of care and skill they put into their work, stands as an encouraging proof of Tolkien Studies' burgeoning growth. Thomas Honegger's speculations in his

Conclusion concerning the future of the discipline is altogether hopeful, and, with a little work, he may not be wrong.

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