Death and funerary practices in Middle-earth

By Pat Reynolds

I would like to take you with me on a perilous journey. As readers of Tolkien you will perhaps recall the two types of journey for which he is famed. The first is the hero-quest, as exemplified by Bilbo Baggins in the The Hobbit, and second is the allegorical death journey, most explicitly taken by *Niggle* in *Leaf by Niggle*. Death is one of a handful of life experiences which are irrevocable changes. Like birth, it is a one-way ticket. Unlike birth, it usually occurs when the individual has made many links with his or her community. The attitudes and beliefs of that community are reflected in the way they treat the dead: how the body is removed from the community of the living (or maintained within it), the formal opportunities for grief and the proscribed forms which grief may take, and beliefs about what happens to the dead person: does she "go on a journey", or does he "come back to haunt us?" or do they both dispense advice and comfort as revered ancestors?

I want to take you on this deathly journey because I am particularly interested in the power that many readers find in Middle-earth. The tributes to Tolkien published in a recent edition of *Mythlore* (*Mythlore* 69 pp. 32-48) include No other work can bring the same kind of joy to our lives (Marianne Russell, New York, USA.), and Does any other work of fiction give the reader so overwhelming a feeling of supreme significance in a narrative? (Canon Norman Power, Birmingham, England). And in a very different culture, Russian Maria Kamenkovitch writes:

"Even now some badly-written second-rate book could become a memorable event in our lives... That is why Tolkien proved to be even a bit too much for us... It was not just the message of the free world: it was the Free World itself, as in one of the Russian fairy-tales, when you open a little box given you by a fairy - and find yourself in the middle of a great town which you do not know how to put back again. We didn't want to put it back though, but the authorities did."

Maria Kamenkovitch *The Secret War and the End of the First Age: Tolkien in the (former) USSR* (in *Mallorn* 29 page 33). She continues, Tolkien played for us the role of a Christian apostle. Across the world then, Tolkien is read as an inspirational text. There is a continuum amongst readers which ranges from the positive, re-charged feeling which comes from reading eucatastrophe to behaviour which I can only compare to that exhibited by followers of a religion.

There are also, of course, readers for whom Tolkien "does nothing" - the ones who cannot get past Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*. In looking specifically at death and death-customs I hope to show why involvement in Middle-earth takes this emotional, if not religious, form - and conversely why it is rejected. Tolkien, as a practising and devout Roman Catholic, living mainly in the twentieth century knew what happens to people when they die. Tolkien knew many other belief systems, including the very different Hel of Icelandic literature, and the very similar Catholic beliefs of the Middle Ages. Now, I am not suggesting that because Tolkien draws upon these systems that his faith should be doubted, or that he was a closet pagan! As he wrote in a

letter in 1958: I have deliberately written a tale which is built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas, but is not an allegory of them (or anything else), and does not mention them overtly, still less preach them ... It is mainly concerned with Death and Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory. (*Letters* 283-84)

I hope you will not regard death as a morbid subject for a paper: it has not always been so excluded from our lives. Even today, there are plenty of deaths in books and films, and the centenary of a death is seen as an ideal opportunity to celebrate the life before it. What is lacking in English Literature today are works on "the good death". David Day in *The Tolkien and Middle-earth Handbook* (p. 68) has suggested that Tolkien was greatly influenced by George MacDonald, citing McDonald's *Phantastes*, *Lileth* and *At the Back of the North Wind* as examples of 'good deaths'. McDonald's novels are part of a tradition stretching back into the Middle Ages. The literature of the Middle-ages is full of death: probably not because lives were shorter (once you had passed the hazardous infant years, and providing you escaped death in childbirth and weren't living in a plague area, you had a fair chance of reaching three score years and ten). The emphasis was rather due to the religious beliefs of the time. Tolkien is particularly associated with one such work, which he edited: *Pearl*. *Pearl* is an elegy upon the death of the poet's daughter, who died a child: the poet, grief-stricken at the grave is granted a vision of his daughter in heaven. Tolkien defined the main purpose of the poem as: the doctrinal theme, in the form of an argument on salvation ... inseparable from the literary form of the poem and its occasion, for it arose directly from the grief... Much medieval art was concerned with the importance of a good death. The Rohan Book of Hours of 1418-28, for example shows one deathbed repentance. The scroll coming from the man's mouth reads: Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of Truth. Earlier belief is exemplified by the sentiment portrayed in *Beowulf* (lines 3180-3):

Swa begnornodon   *Geata leode*

hlafordes hryre,   *heorð-geneatas;*

cwædon þæt he wære   *wyruld-cyninga,*

manna mildust   *ond mon-ðwærust,*

leodum liðost   *on lof-geornost.*

Thus was the lament of the people of the Geats, the hearth-companions, for the death of their lord. They said that among the kings of the world, he was the gentlest of men and most gracious, kindest to men and most eager for fame. Here, at the funeral pyre, Beowulf's death and life are cause for celebration. The hoarding memory which Tolkien itemised as one of the escapes is thus a product of both life *and* death. When Tolkien talked about 'escapes' from death, he was also referring to 'escapes' from immortality. The 'escapes' are given quotation marks because they are not true escapes, but merely have the appearance of escapes: death finally comes to Aragorn the long-lived, and memory, even collective memory, grows dim with the passage of time.

By bracketing Death and Immortality, Tolkien removes all sense that the 'escape' is fortunate or to be desired. In an earlier letter he had described 'escape' as wicked because 'unnatural' and silly because Death in that sense is the Gift of God (envied by Elves), release from the weariness of time (*Letters* Nº156 note, page 205). As Verlyn Flieger (in *Splintered Light*, p. 29) summarizes it

The real escape from death is through death to eternal life. In *On Fairy Stories* (p.69) Tolkien wrote, in the same paragraph that he wrote of the Great Escape, the Escape from Death, of Eucatastrophe, the opposite of Tragedy, the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Death in the Christian mythology is not a gift, but a punishment, meted out to Adam and Eve for disobeying God. But in seeing death as eucatastrophe in this world, Tolkien is again saying that death is a gift which re-unites us with God. Some, Jane Chance Nitzsche (*Tolkien's Art*, page 51), for example, have seen eucatastrophe as the triumph of man over death and escape into the other world. This is similar to the view found in some medieval poetry where elf-hame, fairyland or Avalon appears as a side-ways alternative to the above/below of heaven and hell. It would be interesting to trace the literary development of this idea through to the Tolkienian concept of the Undying Lands and beyond into the fiction of Donaldson. However, I think Nitzsche is mistaken in thinking that this translation was one of the "escapes" upon which Tolkien focused his attention. In Frodo we are presented with a character who actually makes the voyage west, and it is clear that this is not an escape from death.

Tolkien wrote to many people, expressing his ideas about the after-life of the peoples of Middle-earth. From the correspondence recorded in *Letters*, it is apparent that Tolkien was continually redefining his eschatology. Also, you will recall, the post-death experiences of men, dwarves and elves are clearly differentiated - this is manifest in the ring-verse - and this is not to mention the after-lives (or lack of them) of hobbits, orcs, wargs, bats, Tom Bombadil and all ... As I am interested in the reaction of *The Lord of the Rings*' human readers, I will concentrate upon that race. Additionally, I want to concentrate on the living's response to the dead: to funerary rites. Funerary rites embody belief in afterlife (or lack of it), burying objects with a body, for example, suggests a belief that they will be needed by the dead person. Funerary rites are also concerned with hygiene, and with providing a consolation to the bereaved beyond the reinforcement of beliefs in an afterlife. I would like to compare three very different deaths and funerals in *The Lord of The Rings*: those of Boromir, Théoden and Denethor.

Boromir

Gandalf reports Boromir's death to his father as follows: He is dead, and died well; may he sleep in peace. (*The Lord of The Rings* Book V Chapter 4) Boromir, mortally wounded, made a full confession to Aragorn, and wept as he repented his actions: this is as near as a pre-Christian man of virtue can get to a Good Christian death. The activities of his companions after his death are described in some detail:

> 'Taking his axe the Dwarf now cut several branches. These they lashed together with bowstrings, and spread their cloaks upon the frame. Upon this rough bier they carried the body of their companion to the shore, together with such trophies of his last battle as they chose to send forth with him...

> 'At the waterside Aragorn remained, watching the bier, while Legolas and Gimli hastened back on foot to Parth Galen. It was a mile or more, and it was some time before they came back, paddling two boats swiftly along the shore...

> 'Now they laid Boromir in the middle of the boat that was to bear him away. The grey hood and elven-cloak they folded and placed beneath his head. They combed his long dark hair and arrayed it upon his shoulders. The golden belt of Lórien gleamed about his waist. His helm they set beside him, and across his lap they laid the cloven horn and the hilts and shards of his sword; beneath his feet they put the swords of his enemies. Then fastening the prow to

the stern of the other boat, they drew him out into the water. They rowed sadly along the shore...

'Sorrowfully they cast loose the funeral boat: there Boromir lay, restful, peaceful, gilding upon the bosom of the flowing water. The stream took him while they held their own boat back with their paddles ... in after-days it long was said that the elven-boat rode the falls and the foaming pool, and bore him down through Osgiliath, and past the many mouths of Anduin, out into the Great Sea at night under the stars.'

(*The Lord of The Rings Book* III Chapter 1)

This ritual draws on two distinct traditions: the medieval rituals appropriate for the nobility, and the older Northern traditions of boat-burial. A ship burial is particularly appropriate for a hero. In *Beowulf* Scyld Scefing the heroic ancestor of the Danes arrives and departs by boat.

There in the harbour stood the ring-prowed boat of the noble, icy-covered and ready to sail; they laid down there the beloved lord, the ring-giver in the hold of the ship, the honoured man by the mast; there were loaded many ornamented treasures from far away. Never have I heard of a ship more seemly fitted with weapons of war and armour, swords and corselets... Furthermore they set up a golden standard, high over his head, they bequeathed him for the sea to carry him, gave him to the ocean; he was sad in his mind and of grieving spirit. No man knows, to tell the truth, hall-councillors, heroes under heaven, who received that burden.

(*Beowulf* lines 32-52)

With the image of death-as-journey it is not surprising that boats are an important in many forms of the funeral in the prehistoric north. Boat-pyres, funeral barges, boats inside barrows and boat-shaped grave markers abound. The ship as a symbol can be traced back to the earliest times: it was one of the symbols of the fertility god Freyr, and seems to be more associated with the old gods, the Vanir, than with the new gods, the Æsir. The Vanir are also said to have close connections with life in the burial mound, and with the journey to the land of the dead across the sea.

In Gotland graves and cremations were marked round in the shape of stones. By about 600 A.D.. the dead were buried or burned in real boats. At the beginning of the second world war a seventh century boat-burial was discovered at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. The excavation report was not published until 1949, and Tolkien would have been more familiar with the Oseberg ship. Hilda Ellis Davidson (1964) compares the Northern rite with the Old Kingdom Egyptian practice of including a model boat within the pyramid, where it was linked with the passage of the sun across the heavens, and a symbol of the fertility of the Nile. Davidson also notes that in a rite associated with Isis at Ostia a ship and crew were sacrificed at the opening of each shipping season. The placing of goods around the body is usually interpreted, when found in an archaeological context, as evidence for belief in an after-life where the goods will be consumed or used by the individual. But Tolkien is clear that the reunion with Ilúvatar which will be the after-life for mortal men is in no way connected with the physicalities of Middle-earth.

Nicholas Penny presents other reasons for the presence of grave-goods:

We do not, of course, now believe that the dead will be able to use any presents we give them. But we do not only give presents because the present itself will be appreciated, but ... to satisfy other people, or our conscience, that we are prepared to make some sacrifice for someone we love - or respect - or fear.

But for the source of this aspect we should look to the other tradition I mentioned, the tradition of medieval nobility. The body is laid-out with what are specifically described as trophies. The primary meaning of this word was, according to the Oxford English Dictionary a structure erected (originally on the field of battle), consisting of arms or other spoils taken from the enemy …and dedicated to some divinity. Hence applied to similar monuments or memorials in later times (Julian Litten *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450*). The heraldic funeral, marshalled by the College of Arms was based on the extremely elaborate and complex proceedings of the public expression of homage paid at the French Court funerals of the late thirteenth century, a time when the crowns of France and England were conjoined. Various trophies, known as "achievements", often symbolic were carried in the precession of the coffin, draped with a pall and bearing a wax effigy. The achievements were then displayed within the church: they could include pennants, sword and helm. A stone-carved monument portrait could also include the achievements. The first recorded use of the word "achievement" is 1548, but the achievements of the Black Prince who died in 1376 remain in Canterbury Cathedral. Nicholas Penny of the Victoria and Albert Museum has written (*Mourning: The Arts and the Living* Her Majesty's Stationary Office and the Victoria and Albert Museum 1981 page 8): The crowns, sceptres, rings and robes with which our mediaeval kings were buried were gradually replaced by imitations of less precious material, and these were, in the late Middle Ages, not buried but simply displayed on the King's funeral effigy and then returned to the royal wardrobe The last vestiges of this tradition are present in the military burial where a beret or cap is placed on the coffin as it is carried to the grave.

We can note Aragorn's watch over Boromir's body: the three words used for the activity of sitting by the body on the night before burial in English are "watch", "wake" and "vigil". Sitting by the dead person's body on the eve of the funeral is a practice found in many cultures. It is, I think, significant that both "watch" and "vigil" have a more primary meaning of religious or devotional observance on the night before a festival or ceremony. "Vigil" is particularly associated with the ceremony where a man stays awake and prays for the night before he is knighted. It is Aragorn, the most noble of the company who undertakes to watch Boromir's body. From the descriptions given of normal entombment practices in Minas Tirith given later in the book, we find out that in this respect, Boromir was accorded the kind of funeral he would have had at home.

Théoden

Théoden's last words are Ride now to victory! Bid Éowyn farewell!. Éomer's short elegiac poem speaks of the mound which is to be raised, but in the meantime he asks that the king's companions bear his body in honour from the field, lest the battle ride over it (*The Lord of The Rings* Book V Chapter 6). The same honour is to be accorded to those who fell with their king. Abier is made for Théoden from spear-truncheons,[1] but the seven companions cannot be carried off, and are left behind, guarded by spears. A grave was later dug for Théoden's horse Snowmane, and a stone set up to mark it.

While Théoden dies on 15 March, his funeral cortège does not set out from Minas Tirith until 19th July, and the funeral finally takes place on 10th August. It is clear that the services of the embalmers of Minas Tirith must have been enlisted. In the funeral cortege, Théoden is laid on a golden bier, which is born upon a great wain, with his banner going before; Merry being

---

[1] The Oxford English Dictionary does not include these weapons.

Théoden's esquire rode upon the wain and kept the arms of the king (*The Lord of The Rings* Book VI Chapter 6). Théoden receives the traditional funeral of a king of Rohan:

> '...he was laid in a house of stone with his arms and many other fair things that he had possessed, and over him was raised a great mound, covered with green turves of grass and of white evermind...

> 'Then the Riders of the King's House upon white horses made round about the barrow and sang together...

> 'But Merry stood at the foot of the green mound, and he wept, and when the song was ended he arose and cried...

> 'When the burial was over and the weeping of women was stilled, and Théoden was left at last alone in his barrow, the folk gathered to the Golden Hall for the great feast and put way sorrow...

The feast includes a customary drinking of the memory of the kings of the Mark, who are associated with their burial-mounds.

As might be expected, many parts of this description have parallels and sources in the practices of the Anglo-Saxons. While the early, pagan, invaders, especially in the north of England followed the practice of cremation. Cremations were frequently buried within bronze-age barrows. In Kent, which was always at the forefront of fashion, inhumation seems to have been the practice from the start. Sometimes a low, circular mound was raised over the grave. In other parts of the country, no grave was dug, but a mound raised over the body, as seems to have been the case for Théoden.

The closest parallel for the rite is found in Beowulf, where Beowulf is laid upon a pyre hung round with weapons. While Beowulf's companions mourn their lord, a woman prophesies evil times. Then his people built a wall around the place where the fire had been, and within this barrow placed all the gold and jewels which had been won from the dragon. Then twelve men rode round the barrow, lamenting and telling of Beowulf's great accomplishments.

The funeral cup which Éowyn gives to Éomer is documented in Northern literature: bragarfull, the funeral-cup belongs to Bragr, the god of poetry.

Denethor

Denethor makes explicit his reasons for choosing his funeral rites, when messengers come to tell him the first circle of Minas Tirith is on fire, he tells them:

> 'Better to burn sooner than late, for burn we must. Go back to your bonfire! And I? I will now go to my pyre. To my pyre! No tomb for Denethor and Faramir. No tomb! No long slow sleep of death embalmed. We will burn like heathen kings before ever a ship sailed hither from the West. The West has failed. Go back and burn.'

(*The Lord of The Rings* Book V Chapter 4) The tomb he speaks of is behind the door Fen Hollen (the closed door), so called

> 'for it was kept ever shut save at times of funeral, and only the Lord of the City might use that way, or those who bore the token of the tombs and tended the houses of the dead. Beyond it went a winding road that descended in many curves down to the narrow land under the shadow of Mindolluin's precipice where stood the mansions of the dead Kings and of their Stewards.'

(*The Lord of The Rings* Book V Chapter 4)

The Stewards have a single house, on Rath Dínen, the Silent Street. The House of the Stewards is: a wide vaulted chamber ... [containing] many rows of tables, carved of marble; and upon each table lay a sleeping form, hands folded, pillowed upon a stone. Upon reaching the vacant table awaiting Faramir, Denethor demands that there should be no embalmers, but wood and oil and a torch. (*The Lord of The Rings* Book V Chapter 4) The figures are no effigies, but the embalmed bodies.

Embalming, when not for purposes of hygiene during transportation or delayed disposal of the body, is indicative of a belief in bodily resurrection or of some other use of the body by the dead. There is no indication elsewhere that Tolkien believed that this was the case for the men of Middle-earth - there is for example, no suggestion that the loss of Boromir's body is in any way prejudicial to his enjoyment of his after-life. I think perhaps Tolkien used the image of uncorrupted bodies to place Denethor's self-burning into stark relief.

The opening of saint's tombs and finding their bodies free of decay was a popular exercise for antiquarians: escape from the processes of putrefaction was attributed to virtue. Cremation was re-introduced in Britain in the 1880s. However a popular prejudice exists against it to this day. This seems to me to be quite separate from a belief in bodily resurrection, but may have its roots there.

The funerals of Boromir, Théoden and Denethor have one feature in common: they are all the funerals of nobility. The nearest thing we get to a common funeral is at the beginning of The Hobbit, when Bilbo has been apprized of the true nature of the dwarves' mission his first enquiry is about remuneration: Also I should like to know about risks, out-of-pocket expenses, time required and remuneration, and so forth - by which he meant: 'What am I going to get out of it? and am I going to come back alive?' (*The Hobbit* Chapter 1) The point is properly appreciated by Thorin and Company, who spell it out in their terms: Terms: cash on delivery, up to and not exceeding one fourteenth of total profits (if any); all travelling expenses guaranteed in any event; funeral expenses to be defrayed by us or our representatives, if occasion arises and the matter is not otherwise arranged for. (*The Hobbit* Chapter 2) Given that the Shire is largely modelled upon the immediately post-industrialization England, we can make some guesses as to the kind of thing that Bilbo would have expected his funeral to comprise: the coffin would have been carried on a bier, mourners would have followed in a stately procession. The humorous irony is that this type of funeral - like the images conjured by travelling expenses, images of comfortable lodgings and train-tickets (or at least stage-coach tickets) - cannot be provided on the journey the dwarves have in mind.

However, after the battle of the Five Armies, Gandalf is insistent that Bilbo be sought, not just on the basis that he might be injured, but also because a body was needed if the proper postmortem ceremonies were to be performed: so we see the contract would have been kept.

Bilbo, of course, never dies this side of the sea, and the memorable death-rites of *The Hobbit* are Thorin's own.

> 'They buried Thorin deep beneath the Mountain, and Bard laid the Arkenstone upon his breast.
>
> "There let it lie till the Mountain falls!" he said. "May it bring good fortune to all his folk that dwell here after!"

> Upon his tomb the Elvenking then laid Orcrist, the elvish sword that had been taken from Thorin in captivity.

(*The Hobbit* Chapter 18)

This is another noble funeral: it has elements which will later appear in Boromir's and Théoden's, but it is a dwarvish event. One point to note is that the placing of the Arkenstone upon his breast corresponds, I think to Nicholas Penny's idea of the sacrificial role of grave goods, which I spoke of earlier. Bilbo "pays his respects" to Thorin. This act derives from the royal traditions of the middle ages: it descended into popular usage by the 16th century. We are left, above all, with a keen awareness or Bilbo's loss.

But *The Hobbit* is a children's book, and death is not central to it. Except in the matter of dragons… Dragons have more to do with death than might at first appear.

We know that dragons are particularly associated with fire, and this might be the connection to the dead. In *Beowulf* a dragon lives in a barrow, and in the poem Voluspá a flying dragon is named Niðhooggr: 'corpse-tearer'. In *Beowulf* we find the poet confused between the dragon and the "guardian": a human spirit who watches the treasure. There is a continuing superstition that the last person buried in a graveyard becomes it's guardian: this belief was recorded in the highlands, in Newcastle and Ireland at the end of the last century. (*A Dictionary of Superstitions* ed. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem)

The guardian-spirits are used in *The Lord of the Rings* too, in the Barrow-wights. While the idea of such spirits can be traced back to its sources in Northern literature, the word itself was invented by Andrew Lang, compiler of fairy-tales, in the late nineteenth century.

A similar sort of guardian-spirit is used when the light of Minas Morgul (*The Lord of The Rings* Book IV Chapter 8) is described as a corpse light: the light believed, particularly in Wales to emanate from the grave, a portent of a coming death or indicating the route of a future funeral. This light is used again in the poem *The Last Ark*, quoted in the essay "A Secret Vice",[2] here as a metaphoric description of the moon. The earlier version of the poem quoted by Christopher Tolkien uses the image As a corpse into the grave the moon went down in the west, thus showing that Tolkien is using the corpse-candle which follows the path that the dead body will take to the churchyard.

It is also interesting to note the things which Tolkien does not talk about: the preparation of the body, the orientation of the body, the position of the body. The first I believe is omitted because he is not interested in the hygiene aspects of funerals. The only body whose position is described is Thorin: who has his hands crossed over his chest - presumably in an extended position. I assume that Tolkien does not describe this because he saw no need to suggest that anything other than the various extended burials (with hands across the chest, or by the sides, or clasped in prayer) that have been the norm in England for two thousand years. Tolkien's work is satisfying because even if it does not directly answer the big questions, the authorial voice sounds as if he knows the answers.

While Boromir and Théoden's funerals are so clearly paralleled in almost every feature by Scyld Scefing's and Beowulf's, I do not think that Tolkien expected the reader of *The Lord of the Rings* to pick up on this. Rather, I think he used it, and it is so powerful because the *Beowulf*-poet was

---

[2] Published in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* pp. 214-5.

describing ceremonies which worked. They contained opportunity for the anger of grief, for recall and celebration of the deeds of the dead, for expression of hope in the future of the dead and the living. In Tolkien's writing, as in his life, death is the greatest eucatastrophe. Whether or not any after-life is envisaged by the living, death is an individual and certain challenge to the long defeat. This is why, I believe, reading Tolkien is so spiritually uplifting.

Richard Purtill wrote: Those who do not accept Christianity will see Tolkien at best as an artist giving new imaginative expression to an outmoded view of the universe. But Tolkien himself received a letter from: a man who classified himself as 'an unbeliever, or at best a man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling ... but you', he said, 'create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without visible source...'. (*Letters* Nº328, page 413) I hope I have shown that while working in a contemporary Christian framework, Tolkien has drawn on deeper, older practices and beliefs, which naturally prompt a spiritual response in those with even "dimly dawning" feeling. Myles Dillon and Norma Chadwick, writing on Celtic Literature (*The Celtic Realms*) define it in ways that show why Tolkien's work is sometimes called "Celtic", and capture the essence of the style with which he writes of death: it is religious thought in the heroic mould, wherein: No question of guilt, or punishment or judgement in an afterlife ever disturbs the serenity.

I would like to leave you with a final image: it is of Tolkien's own grave. English readers, especially, like to visit this place: the Tolkien Society lays a wreath there each year. In 1992 they, together with some other societies commissioned these panels which were made using a traditional midlands craft whereby flower petals, small stones and shells are pressed into slabs of clay to make

pictures. It is thought to have its roots in prehistoric well-worship, and is still used to day in Christian well-blessing ceremonies. The method was chosen as the only one capable of displaying the heraldic designs of Beren and Lúthien, but the idea of using the technique at the grave of the "well" of a strong stream of fantasy literature is intriguing. Certainly, a representative of the Folklore Society wanted to come and record the plaques. I end with this picture of a real grave because in his letters Tolkien is clear that the death and immortality he writes of in Middle-earth are not separated from death and immortality in our own world.

Bibliography

Beowulf Edited by C. L. Wrenn, revised by W. F. Bolton Harrap London

H.R. Ellis Davidson *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* Pelican 1964

David Day *The Tolkien and Middle-earth Handbook* Monarch Publications Tunbridge Wells

Myles Dillon and Norma Chadwick *The Celtic Realms* Weidenfeld and Nicholson London 1967

Verlyn Flieger *Splintered Light*

Julian Litten *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* London Robert Hale

Jane Chance Nitzsche *Tolkien's Art*

Nicholas Penny *Mourning: The Arts and the Living* Her Majesty's Stationary Office and the Victoria and Albert Museum 1981

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

J.R.R. Tolkien *Leaf by Niggle*

J.R.R. Tolkien (edited by H. Carpenter) *Letters*

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* Collector's Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1987

J.R.R. Tolkien *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*

J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*

J.R.R. Tolkien (translation.) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London