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Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth

By John Garth



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"Very much the best book about J.R.R. Tolkien that has yet been written." -- A.N. Wilson

"A highly intelligent book ... Garth displays impressive skills both as researcher and writer." -- Max Hastings

"It is a strange story that Garth tells, but he tells it clearly and compellingly." -- Tom Shippey

"Somewhere, I think, Tolkien is nodding in appreciation." -- Charles Matthews, San Jose Mercury News

"Gripping from start to finish and offers important new insights." - Library Journal

"A labor of love in which journalist Garth combines a newsman's nose for a good story with a scholar's scrupulous attention to detail... Brilliantly argued." -- Daily Mail

"Insight into how a writer turned academia into art, how deeply friendship supports and wounds us, and how the death and disillusionment that characterized World War I inspired Tolkien's lush saga." - Detroit Free Press

"To be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than in 1939 . . . by 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead."

So J.R.R. Tolkien responded to critics who saw *The Lord of the Rings* as a reaction to the Second World War. *Tolkien and the Great War* tells for the first time the full story of how he embarked on the creation of Middle-earth in his youth as the world around him was plunged into catastrophe. This biography reveals the horror and heroism that he experienced as a signals officer in the Battle of the Somme and introduces the circle of friends who spurred his mythology into life. It shows how, after two of these brilliant young men were killed, Tolkien pursued the dream they had all shared by launching his epic of good and evil.

This is the first substantially new biography of Tolkien since 1977, meticulously researched and distilled from his personal wartime papers and a multitude of other sources.

John Garth argues that the foundation of tragic experience in the First World War is the key to Middle-earth's enduring power. Tolkien used his mythic imagination not to escape from reality but to reflect and transform the cataclysm of his generation. While his contemporaries surrendered to disillusionment, he kept enchantment alive, reshaping an entire literary tradition into a form that resonates to this day.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Millions of new captives of the *Lord of the Rings* saga have been roped into J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy world as the result of Peter Jackson's three-part cinematic interpretation of the great 20th century fantasy. John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* will certainly captivate an elite segment of those recent converts, but it is written more for those who have long been enthralled by Middle-earth and its fantastic denizens. While many early readers found parallels between World War II and the *Lord of the Rings* fairy-tale, Garth reaches back to World War I to find the deep roots in Middle-earth. Prior to the Great War, Tolkien was a scholar with a deep passion for language and fables. In fact, he formed a literary circle with a few friends dubbed the Tea Club and Barrovian Society. Its members had the misfortune of coming of age just as the war was reaching a fevered pitch; Tolkien, a second lieutenant in the British army, survived the bloody Battle of the Somme, which took the lives of two of his closest friends. Garth adeptly chronicles how the devastation Tolkien witnessed helped shape the mythic tale that was already brewing in his mind. Written with a seriousness one associates with the time it chronicles, *Tolkien and the Great War* is a erudite but eminently readable exploration of how the harsh reality of the early 20th century colored one of the beloved fantasies of the modern era. --Steven Stolder

From Publishers Weekly

This dense but informative study addresses the long-standing controversy over how J.R.R. Tolkien's WWI experience influenced his literary creations. A London journalist, Garth is a student of both Tolkien and the Great War. He writes that when war broke out, Tolkien was active in an Oxford literary society known as the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (TCBS), along with three of his closest friends. Finishing his degree before joining up, Tolkien served as a signal officer in the nightmarish Battle of the Somme in 1916, where two of those friends were killed. The ordeal on the Somme led to trench fever, which sent him home for the rest of the war and probably saved his life. It also influenced a body of Northern European-flavored mythology he had been inventing and exploring in both prose and verse before the war, toward its evolution into *The Book of Lost Tales* and in due course *Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. This book could not pretend to be aimed at other than the serious student of Tolkien, and readers will benefit from a broad knowledge of his work (as well as a more than casual knowledge of WWI). But it also argues persuasively that Tolkien did not create his mythos to escape from or romanticize the war. Rather, the war gave dimensions to a mythos he was already industriously exploring. Garth's fine study should have a major audience among serious students of Tolkien, modern fantasy and the influence of war on literary creation.

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Review

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Users Review

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