Book Review Supplement

John Garth, ***The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien: The Places that Inspired Middle-earth.*** **(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), $29.95 (hardcover).**

As many travelers know, there is no end to paid tours and local legends about sites or landmarks that may have inspired the writers and artists who spent time there. When I visited Oxford in 2018 and took tours related to Inklings locations, seemingly every ornamental lion that graced the Oxford architecture was said to have inspired Lewis's Aslan. There is an attraction to the romance and physical connection that come from experiencing firsthand what inspired great works or what might claim an affiliation with historical figures. But where do fact and fiction meet? For those wanting to know the truth about what served as legitimate influence versus what amounts to wishful thinking and local lore, some verification through facts and historical record becomes essential. That's where John Garth steps in with *The Worlds of J.R.R.Tolkien: The Places that Inspired Middle-earth*.
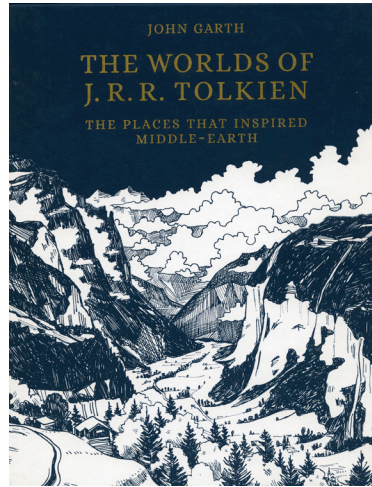
Several studies have been published on influential locations in Tolkien's life, such as *Tolkien's Bag End* (Brewin Books, 2009) and *Tolkien's Gedling, 1914* (Brewin Books, 2008) both by Andrew H. Morton; *Tolkien's Oxford* by Robert S. Blackham (Tempus Publishing, 2008); *Tolkien's Switzerland: A Biography of One Special Summer* by Alexander Lewis and Elizabeth Currie (Elansea, 2019); and numerous journal and newspaper articles. What distinguishes Garth's book from the rest is his endeavor to cover all of Tolkien's geographical influences—no small feat—rather than focus on a specific area or time in Tolkien's life. Garth is uniquely situated for this study given his well-received earlier books *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003) and *Tolkien at Exeter College* (2014). He also brings an extensive background in journalism, research, and, as he states in the book's introduction, "a particular interest in biography, history, landscape, and language" (6). Garth describes the book's scope as follows:

> This book advances many theories of my own about what inspired the Middle-earth 'legendarium', alongside a few of the most cogent and interesting claims made by others. . . . [It] also looks at places, real and imaginary, that Tolkien knew from his reading.

> It examines the influences that shaped his imagined cultures and cosmology. It counts place as a combination of location, geology, ecology, culture, nomenclature and other factors. It seeks to show the how and the why. (6)

Where Garth draws conclusions, he also readily lists his reasoning and sources. The endnotes and citations are complete and extensive enough to satiate even the most meticulous scholar who wants to verify all of Garth's findings. This gives others the freedom to look at the same historical records and draw the same or different conclusions in future works of scholarship. Garth's years of research are evident in the wide range of sources cited, including original manuscripts from the Tolkien Papers collection at the Bodleian Library, published Tolkien scholarship across the decades, current popular culture resources, and even newspaper articles written during Tolkien's lifetime.

Garth also admits that some Tolkien enthusiasts reject, or at least are suspicious of, any attempts to prove Tolkien's influences because arriving at substantive conclusions is incredibly difficult. Tolkien himself was reticent about comparisons between his life and his writing, and he can often appear hesitant about, and at times adamantly against, claims of inspiration presented to him in his correspondence. But in response to these concerns Garth reminds us that "Tolkien, however extraordinary his own imagination, likewise needed fuel. He said, 'I take my models like anyone else—from such "life" as I know'" (6). With that assumption, the book launches into the exploration of which influences may be determined from Tolkien's literary and life experiences.

The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien includes eleven chapters, the author's introduction, and a brief appendix for additional details. The chapters are both topical (such as "Places of War" and "Craft and Industry") and based on geographical location type ("The Shore and the Sea," "Roots of the Mountains," and "Tree-woven Lands"). While the book can be read straight through, it also serves as a wonderful reference tool for those seeking specific influences relating to places in Middle-earth or the real world. I am pleased with the robust and carefully compiled index that ranges from "Aberfoyle" to "Zermatt," with abundant page references for the casually curious reader, serious scholar, or those like myself who answer reference questions as part of our occupation. The book itself is beautifully bound in a sewn hardcover with full color illustrations, photos, and additional panels featuring related topics in each chapter.

One of the revelations I had while reading the book is how similar Tolkien's creation of place is to his invention of languages. With fictional word creation, Tolkien took the sounds and elements he liked best from various real languages and wove them into his own work, using his expertise in philology to make them fit snuggly together in a believable manner. Garth observes that "Making precise geographical matches was not Tolkien's general habit. When he took inspiration from a place he knew or had read

about, it did not usually matter much where it was on the map—he dipped and daubed at will" (46). Like an artist looking for just the right hue of paint for his artwork, Tolkien combined elements of his personal seaside experiences to create Middle-earth seascapes, or firsthand experiences of desolate landscapes to make a convincing evil and barren wasteland in his legendarium. There may be exceptions, such as Lauterbrunnen, Switzerland, embodying as close a match to Rivendell as one could wish, but on the whole, it is more the resonances of place that spoke to Tolkien's imagination than the correlation of a specific location to its Middle-earth equivalent. It is fascinating to watch Garth trace the threads and separate the layers of influence through a number of convincing sources and arguments.

This book is a wonderful addition to anyone's library. It is an asset to Tolkien scholars launching into further studies of place and influence and an indispensable reference source to anyone curious about the inspiration for the Middle-earth locales readers have loved and enjoyed throughout the years. An additional benefit may be that readers will look with reawakened favor on their own local landscape and, as Frodo says at the end of *The Return of the King*, "so love their beloved land all the more" (Bk. 6, Ch. 9, 103).

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Work Cited

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. Unwin Hyman, 1990.