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Book review of: *The Nature of Middle-earth: Late Writings on the Lands, Inhabitants, and Metaphysics of Middle-earth* by J.R.R. Tolkien (ed. Carl F. Hostetter)

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an unexpected pleasure for Warnie during this time was the friendship he developed with Clyde S. Kilby. This relationship prospered to such an extent that Warnie saw to it that Kilby's emerging center for the study of C.S. Lewis and others at Wheaton (now the Marion E. Wade Center) received the Lewis Papers, his own diaries, *Boxen*, family photographs, and more.

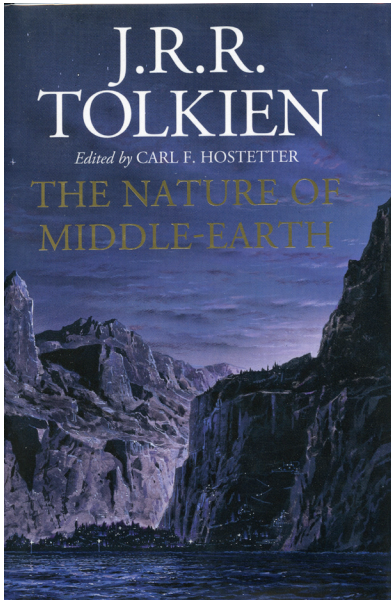
Don King's book is a first-rate piece of work that successfully achieves his goals (and more) in a clear, well-organized, and highly readable fashion. It will reward scholars invested in Inklings studies, but at the same time it is accessible to readers who know little or nothing about them. Highly recommended.

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J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Nature of Middle-earth: Late Writings on the Lands, Inhabitants, and Metaphysics of Middle-earth*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter. New York: HarperCollins, 2021.

This volume contains a variety of J.R.R. Tolkien's writings about Middle-earth, along with detailed notes from editor Carl F. Hostetter about the state and dating of the manuscripts and how various pieces relate to each other. As suggested by the title, the pieces are biological, geological, and philosophical



in nature rather than narrative, with topics that include how quickly Elves age; the relationships between body, mind, and spirit; and the physical nature of Eä (the created universe) and Arda (the realm of Manwë where Elves, Men, and Dwarves dwell). Not surprisingly, much of the work relates to linguistics and the philology of Elven languages.

The writings come from the mid 1950s through the early 1970s and range in length from a paragraph to several pages. Some were carefully written on clean paper, and others were hastily scrawled on the backs of scraps. In most cases, the date can be narrowed to a relatively small window based on the paper. Although some of the writings take the form of essays that might have been

written by knowledgeable characters within Middle-earth, many are notes from Tolkien about revisions or clarifications to his imagined history as he wrestled with the difficult challenges of creating a consistent artificial history for Middle-earth that would also be at some level theologically and geologically consistent with our own primary world.

Much of Part One consists of Tolkien trying to work out how slowly Elves age, when they start having children, and how many children they might have. He felt it necessary to choose these numbers correctly to determine how quickly populations would have grown in order to account for the different kingdoms at early points in their history, and he devoted considerable time to this problem in the late 1950s. He also wrestled with problems arising from the fact that Elves' spirits did not leave Middle-earth upon death, and in most cases Elves were reembodied after death so their spirits would not remain houseless.

Although these pieces about Elven aging and reproduction are full of arithmetic computations and are tedious to read through, intermingled with them are gems of philosophical or theological significance. After dozens of pages working out the length of an Elven generation, readers stumble on a comment noting,

The Quendi never 'fell' as a race—not in the sense in which they and Men themselves believed that the Second Children had 'fallen'. Being 'tainted' with the Marring (which affected all the 'flesh of Arda' from which their *hröar* were derived and were nourished) and having also come under the shadow of Melkor before their Finding and rescue, they could *individually* do wrong. But they *never* (not even the wrong-doers) rejected Eru, nor worshipped either Melkor or Sauron as a god. (88)

Part Two has several pieces more explicitly theological and moral. Along with writings about beards, hair, and physical descriptions of characters, the editor includes essays on Knowledge, Fate and Free Will, and Spirit, with some of Tolkien's ponderings about the nature of Melkor's evil and power. For example, we read about Elves' basis for knowledge, distinguishing between reasoned certainty, judging or having an opinion, supposing or surmising, and just plain guessing. But then he notes that there is a trustworthy spiritual sort of knowledge that comes from revelation and is different from reason: "[Elves] distinguish all these [knowing, judging, guessing, etc.] from *divining*, which is neither *guessing* nor *feigning*; for they hold that the *fëa* [spirit] can arrive directly at knowledge . . . [by] contact with other minds, or at the highest by 'inspiration' from Eru" (200–201).

Tolkien's exploration of whether Manwë could be described as foolish for having been deceived by Melkor is fascinating and profound:

If we speak last of the ‘folly’ of Manwë and the weakness and unwariness of the Valar, let us beware how we judge. In the histories, indeed, we may be amazed and grieved to read how (seemingly) Melkor deceived and cozened others, and how even Manwë appears at times almost a simpleton compared with him. (214)

However, Tolkien goes on with four rhetorical questions to make a point consistent with a central tenet of *The Lord of the Rings*—and indeed the entire legendarium—that we must not attempt to defeat evil using evil’s own weapons: “How otherwise would you have it? Should Manwë and the Valar meet secrecy with subterfuge, treachery with falsehood, lies with more lies? If Melkor would usurp their rights, should they deny his? Can hate overcome hate? Nay, Manwë was wiser; or being ever open to Eru he did His will, which is more than wisdom” (214).

The collection is well edited and organized. The background to each entry provides enough detail for context while allowing Tolkien’s words to speak for themselves. Many of the pieces have not previously appeared in print or have appeared only in shortened form in academic journals with limited availability. Some (especially in Part One) are tedious, and many readers will want to skim them. At times I felt saddened at the amount of time Tolkien spent wrestling with questions few readers consider important. Tolkien also decided that some of the mythologies in *The Silmarillion*—for example, the origin of the sun and moon in Chapter XI of *Quenta Silmarillion*, or the belief that the world was once flat and only made spherical after the fall of Númenor—had to have been false myths made up in later years, presumably by the scientifically illiterate of Middle-earth. He writes, “As now is known and recognized in the Histories, the Sun was part of the original structure of Arda, and not devised only after the Death of the Trees” (89). As one who preferred Tolkien’s original myth of the sun and moon, I confess my own disappointment that he would later make this choice. But that is not a critique of the editing of this volume. And, indeed, knowing more about how and what Tolkien thought is of great value.

Hostetter notes in his introduction, and again in the appendix on “Metaphysical and Theological Themes,” that he hopes the writings he has collected in this volume will support Tolkien’s assertion that his work was fundamentally religious. Despite the tedium of some pages exploring how quickly Elves age and have children, I think Hostetter succeeds in this also.

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