



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

*John Garth*

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## **Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth** John Garth

Revealing the horror and heroism the creator of Middle-earth experienced as a young man, *Tolkien and the Great War* also introduces the close friends who spurred the modern world's greatest mythology into life. It shows how the deaths of two comrades compelled Tolkien to pursue the dream they had shared, and argues that Tolkien transformed the cataclysm of his generation while many of his contemporaries surrendered to disillusionment. The fruit of five years of meticulous research, this is the first substantially new biography of Tolkien since 1977, distilled from his personal wartime papers and a multitude of other sources.

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

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# From Reader Review Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth for online ebook

## Laura says

I really found this book very interesting. He ties events going on in the war and his friendships to themes and ideas being developed in Tolkien's imaginative world. There are some really powerful ideas to think about.

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## Joshua Emil says

As of this day of reviewing this book, I have only read *The Lord of the Rings The Fellowship of the Ring*. Some factors may have affected in the rating of this book.

This book is not what I really expected. I thought I was going to read *War Stories* of J.R.R. Tolkien and how that became a factor in shaping Middle-Earth. It was more of a combination of Literary History, Military History and Biography, focusing more on Literary.

### **Literary History:**

John Garth explains the pieces of literature that influenced Tolkien's Middle Earth. Tolkien was more inclined to Germanic, Norse and Celtic literature and he was inspired by it. In some perspectives, the Germans, the Norsemen and the Celts are deemed to be 'barbaric' but some would say they have a rich culture, notably literature.

### **Military History:**

Tolkien's Generation was called "The Lost Generation" because half of this generation lost their lives fighting World War One or in other names "The Great War" or "The War to End All Wars". Here, it tells the story of 2nd Lt. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien in this time of conflict. He was a signals man tasked with communications. There was little action told and not much of it. It was mostly how Tolkien did his duty when his country asked him to defend it.

### **Biography:**

Not much of a biography. It talked about Tolkien's Early Age, his educational background, his military service, and some parts of his latter life. It didn't speak of much specifics but it did detail some parts of his life.

This book is a bit boring if you don't understand some references. But for me, this was academical and analytical. I learned about Tolkien's state of mind (sort of) and how the world's beloved Middle Earth writer came to be. It wasn't entirely focused on Tolkien. It talked about his companions and how he developed languages (for his legendarium) and analyzed stories (later inspired by it) and later the creator of Middle-Earth

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## Polymathic J says

A good book, but not one that flowed particularly well (at least for me).

I'll be honest: I find Tolkien's writing to be difficult at times, and this book felt like it was written by Tolkien's literary brother. I read the book in fits and starts because it often felt like I was reading a textbook. Despite this, I enjoyed the book thoroughly. I found it to be a thorough and informative look at Tolkien and the experiences that molded him and his mythology. And for history buffs, it offered a glimpse into England's past from a perspective not likely to be found elsewhere. Definitely worth the read, but don't expect to blast through it.

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### **Elizabeth says**

I actually really enjoyed this book. Other books about Tolkien seem to skip over the time he spent in WWI. They talk briefly about it and then move on.

This book was based all around the time he spent in the army and its effect on his writing. It seemed very logical for his war experiences to be portrayed in his writing some way, so I agree with the author. Also I was happy that they went not only into detail about Tolkien's war experience, but also Rob Gilson's, G.B. Smith's and Christopher Wiseman. They did talk about JRR grief at the death of Rob Gilson. But I was disappointed that they didn't go into his grief over G.B. Smith's death, since I know he had a closer relationship with GBS than he did RG.

It was really cool, to see the timeline of what he wrote, during what. And how he revised it.

It was an enjoyable read, I recommend it.

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### **Moir Russell says**

This is a necessary book - worth reading not just for the inside dope on Tolkien's mythology (which frankly I'm not *that* interested in, but the book was compelling anyway). This book is also a thoughtful, sensitive, well-written consideration of the WWI generation, and how the pre-War world and the War itself formed Tolkien and his fellowship of four friends. It is the best kind of cultural-literary criticism, especially when Garth talks about how the accepted narrative of WWI became the pessimistic Graves/Sassoon/Owen poetry. (Fussell does this a bit, but, as Garth correctly points out, he is clearly on the side of the pessimists.) This book also explains Tolkien's personal literary theory more clearly than any book I've read so far, including Carpenter's biography. It was easier for me to understand why Tolkien insisted LOTR was *not* allegory, i.e. Sauron was not Hitler/Stalin dressed up in a funny medieval hat. Also, clearly one reason Tolkien had such a problem with Lewis's Narnia series wasn't just the mixing together of Christian myths and Santa Claus, but the straight-up allegory of Aslan = Christ. Tolkien wasn't that happy about the modern literary critical technique of mapping personal experience to artwork, either, but I like to think he would have liked this dignified and respectful approach to how his own searing personal battles influenced the mythic ones he wrote out.

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Supplemental reading from John Garth's website:

Chronology of Tolkien in the Battle of the Somme

Corrections and clarifications

Tolkien, Exeter College and the Great War (supplementary chapter)

Article: "Tolkien fantasy was born in the trenches"

Interview

‘As under a green sea’: visions of war in the Dead Marshes, in *The Ring Goes Ever On: Proceedings of the 2005 Tolkien Conference*, ed. Sarah Wells (Tolkien Society, 2008), and (in slightly expanded form) in *Myth and Magic: Art according to the Inklings*, ed. Eduardo Segura and Thomas Honegger (Zürich: Walking Tree, 2007).

Frodo and the Great War, in *The Lord of the Rings, 1954–2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*, ed. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006). Presented at Marquette University, 2004. Revised version forthcoming in the proceedings of the Hungarian Tolkien Society’s Budapest 2012 conference.

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## **E.F.B. says**

Note: I decided to pair the physical copy of this book with the audio version and found reading and listening at the same time was very helpful in keeping my focus and helping me progress through this book without getting slowed down or distracted. The author of the book actually narrates the audiobook, which is something I always really enjoy.

An excellent read for this Tolkien fan! Thanks again for recommending and gifting it to me, Mary! :) <3

This being non-fiction, and me not reading non-fiction nearly as much as fiction, I’m always a little unsure how to write my review. I guess I’ll start by saying that I thought it was very well-written, well-researched, well-paced, and interesting enough that I never once got bored or wanted to skip ahead even though I already knew some of the things being conveyed. There were some new things too, though, such as more details about the TCBS (a close-knit group of friends and writing critique partners Tolkien was a part of in his college days) than I ever knew before and enjoyed learning. I also loved that the author included excerpts of Tolkien’s poetry where appropriate to make points and show how Tolkien’s writings developed over time, and I very much enjoyed reading them and discovering his inspiration for them.

Overall, this was a highly enjoyable non-fiction read for me and I happily give it 5 stars.

I would recommend this book both to long time Tolkien fans who are curious about his life, especially his experiences in WWI and their influence on his writings, and to people who are new fans, or maybe not even fans at all, but are still curious about this well-known person and his life. You don’t necessarily have to have read any, much less all of Tolkien’s works in order to get something from this book (though knowing at least some of his works will certainly add depth to what you learn here) as the author tells the audience just as much as is needed in order to show what he’s wanting to show.

**Content advisory:** I personally would recommend this book for ages 12+ simply because of how intellectual it is and the fact that, unless they were very curious and at an advanced reading level, children

younger than that simply probably wouldn't be interested in a book like this or be able to fully comprehend it to appreciate it. Otherwise, there is very little content of concern for younger readers.

**Language:** One instance of the word d\*\*\*\*d in a brief quote from Tolkien. I don't recall any other swear words.

**Violence:** There is talk of war and combat throughout, but the author keeps it very matter-of-fact, never going into icky detail, while still communicating what happened in various battles and such.

**Worldviews:** Again, the author simply reports the facts and doesn't give his own opinion on things.

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^ says

This is an intensely poignant book of two genres: English fiction literature of the first half of the twentieth century (including J.R.R. Tolkien's "**The Lord of the Rings**" and "**The Silmarillion**"); and World War 1 non-fiction. On the back cover A.N. Wilson is quoted: "*I have rarely read a book which so intelligently graphed the relation between a writer's inner life and his outward circumstances*". That nails it; and a very unusual fascinating combination it makes, too.

We are often told that war makes men of boys; or that no good comes of fighting. How very, very different the world today might have been had circumstances of family, school and the development of such effective means of mechanical mass killing not unexpectedly proved quite so favourable for Tolkien's etymological development of his creations of literary genius? From the Word came Myth. C.S. Lewis' Christian allegories are not difficult to identify; whilst J.R.R. Tolkien's instead embed the Christian faith in Middle Earth sufficiently deeply so as only to be discovered by those who read with eyes wide open, and an alert mind.

How many young children invent 'secret' imaginary words? Very many, I suspect, listening in to playtime at nursery school. But how many, like the young Tolkien go on further, to invent a new lexicon entirely of words that though new are not unrelated to known ancient or reconstructed words; before diligently inventing a new grammar, devising and enforcing formal rules of that invented grammar, and finally creating a new and unique fictional mythology? Vanishingly few, I expect.

So it was that I learned of the honour and close bond between four school friends growing up in Birmingham, members of the self-appointed Tea Club & Barrovian Society; and thence, as the pages turned, of the later utter, bleak despair in the horror of the taking of young lives by means of the rise of appallingly efficient new methods of killing by machine. Four lives in so very, very many, separated forever on this earth by (in one way or another) the Battle of the Somme, within a uniquely dreadful War.

Garth doesn't dwell on or wallow in doom and gloom; he maintains a clear headed neutrality of fact and description; giving the mind of his reader the freedom to fully occupy the scene. Occasionally Garth makes welcome observations which distract from welling distress and the pooling of horrors. I learned of the Royal Defence Corps, founded in 1916 for the same reasons as would later be found needful in the Second World War (The Home Guard). I was surprised to also learn of a popular name for a cat, *Tibert/Tybalt*, derived from the tom cat in the medieval *Reynard the Fox*. 'Tibbles', or " 'Tibby', ... "SUPPER"; a wail I've often heard cried of a Summer's evening; when I've wondered from whence such an odd name could have been derived!

Tolkien (a Roman Catholic) argued that *“There is nonetheless a case for it: a form of language familiar in meaning and yet freed from trivial associations, and filled with the memory of good and evil, is an achievement, and it’s possessors are richer than those who have no such tradition.”* (p.291). If only the Church of England would heed such words, look at the extraordinary and now long term popularity of Tolkien’s Middle Earth, and give up its utterly embarrassing attempts to modernise the language of Anglicanism!

Nothing is new under the sun. Garth in his postscript argues valuably and forcefully against the late 1920s revisionist approach of a mass waste of life. He illuminates Tolkien’s outlook in moving beyond the very disaster or discovery which should naturally be expected to light the fuse of extinguishing all hope; to an unexpected event, a change for the better which grows, widens, and leads to a confidence to dare for hope and redemption. For the last few years I have dreaded the thought that 2014 will turn into a 365 day long anniversary of the weeping and wailing of the ‘waste’ of it all. This book has reminded me of what is Good, and has girded me with Hope.

[P.S., see also Quote, “Literature shrivels in a universal language...” (J.R.R. Tolkein).]

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## **Terry says**

2.5 – 3 stars

Tolkien and the Great War is an obviously well-researched book that goes into explicit (at times I must admit tedious) detail on J. R. R. Tolkien’s involvement in World War I and its possible impact on his then-current and later writings. We begin by observing Tolkien’s earliest close friendships formed at ~~St.~~ *King* Edward’s Grammar School under the auspices of the “TCBS” (an acronym for Tea Club, Barrovian Society) where the core group of Tolkien, Christopher Wiseman, Robert Gilson, and G. B. Smith became close artistic confidantes, encouragers and critics of each other’s work. Convinced that they were a group that would change the world with their work, their dreams were turned to harsh reality with the advent of “the war to end all wars”.

We spend the majority of the remainder of the book following Garth as he traces the movements and vicissitudes of the various platoons to which each member of the TCBS was assigned, with a special concentration on Tolkien himself. It’s common knowledge that the Great War winnowed a generation, destroying the optimism of the Edwardian era and putting paid to facile romantic notions of the heroism of war. The ‘innovations’ of technology that made killing men easier than it ever had been before, along with the harrowing conditions of trench life and seemingly incompetent leadership, made this conflict a wake-up call for the world that shattered many illusions. As Tolkien himself noted: “By 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead.” In the midst of this carnage and despair Tolkien managed to begin work on the poems and stories that would become the germ for his masterpieces *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as well as the accompanying material that would evolve into the posthumously published *The Silmarillion*.

Garth does a fine job giving us details of the World War I experience, but I have to admit that in general I was a bit underwhelmed by this book. I found the prose to be a bit workmanlike, and this wasn’t helped by the sheer amount of detail. I appreciate the thoroughness of Garth’s research, but I did find my eyes glazing over a bit from time to time as troop movements, platoon names, and other details were gone into. Some of

the extra biographical detail given on Tolkien was interesting, but I must admit that most of it I already knew, at least in broad strokes, from other sources so I didn't come away feeling that I had learned anything heretofore unknown to me about the man himself. The main gist of Garth's critical argument, namely that Tolkien, far from being an anachronistic throwback despite his literary tastes, was actually truly a man of his era who was responding uniquely to the horrors present at the birth of the twentieth century has also been covered by others, especially Tom Shippey in several of his works.

I did find the last section of the book the most interesting. In it Garth concentrates almost exclusively on the early writings Tolkien did in what would ultimately become his legendarium of Middle Earth and examines how his experiences in the war may have coloured the world he created, or even been lifted from direct experiences in his life. It is a kind of 'biographical criticism' for which Tolkien himself had great distaste and whose value he felt was dubious at best, but I must admit that much of what Garth posits makes sense to me, and I imagine that Tolkien's youth, coupled with the monumental nature of the events through which he was living, could not help but leave their mark on what he wrote in ways perhaps more apparent than exists in his later, more mature writings.

In retrospect my review is probably unduly harsh. This was a fine work of biographical criticism giving great detail about a formative period of a great writer's life. I think it was simply the fact that I wasn't utterly wowed by the book, and found some moments slow going, that made it an interesting, though not inspiring, experience for me.

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## **Christopher says**

This book was something quite different from what I expected. Going in I expected a book focused on J.R.R. Tolkien almost exclusively, with discussions of the hells of the Western Front in WWI and then a deeper discussion of the themes of loss or nature and industrialization play out in *The Lord of the Rings*. I was looking forward to that analysis of the 'coming of the machine age' that Peter Jackson had played up so beautifully in the movie version of *The Two Towers*.

Instead, Garth treats us to a view into a group of Victorian friends with discursions on the philological and poetic world/myth building that Tolkien was working on at the time. The group of friends are the four self-appointed members of the "Tea Club and Barrovian Society" (shortened to TCBS for most purposes). The grand name concealed what was no more than a high-school clique. I'm reminded of my own high-school poseur-gang dubbed "the D-Men" although in practice, the TCBS was closer to Tufts University's Film Series club.

Each of the four members of the TCBS saw themselves and the group as having the potential to change the world and bring forth works of immortal quality. Garth asserts that the TCBS was purely middle-class, but there is a strong strain of upper-class Victorian exceptionalism in Tolkien's peers views of their world. After being split apart to attend Cambridge and Oxford, the four friends still exchanged letters, poems, writings, and music and periodically met in what were referred to as 'Councils.'

It's all very idyllic and the reader can't quite say whether these young men were destined to be the next Algonquin Round Table or just a group of high-school alumni pen-pals. And then Tolkien's generation of young academics was swept-up in the Great War. Three of the four TCBS members were young officers leading patrols and assaults in the Battle of the Somme, the fourth was on a battlecruiser in the Battle of Jutland. Only one of the three sent to France came back. Tolkien was infected with lice-borne "trench-fever"



and spent second half of the war on home guard duty and medical convalescence.

Garth makes a good argument for the power of Tolkien's experience in the Somme for shaping much of his mythic background for Middle-Earth, particularly the stories that went into his *Book of Lost Tales* and *The Silmarillion*. I was pleasantly surprised to learn of the conceptual links between Tolkien's mythology and books of H. Rider Haggard.

In the long Postscript, Garth makes an effort to place the writings of Tolkien in a literary universe defined by post-Great War writing. He makes a case that Tolkien was writing about his wartime experience without falling into the two major camps of war-writing of the period. Tales of Middle-Earth are neither the 'high diction' propaganda created by imperial powers in the image of Haggard and [William Morris] to impress their people and drive in recruits nor the studied, modernist, or gritty writings of [author: Robert Graves] or Sigfried Sassoon. Instead, Tolkien sought to create a new style. In the process, he created a whole new genre of popular literature.

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## Neil Coulter says

I read *Tolkien and the Great War* as part of a group read with the Tolkien group on Goodreads, and I'm so glad I did. I've read a lot of books about Tolkien, and this is one of the very best. Garth delves into the biographical details of Tolkien's youth and young adulthood, looking especially at Tolkien's friendship with three other schoolmates: G. B. Smith, Rob Gilson, and Christopher Wiseman. Together, these four formed the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (TCBS), a brotherhood dedicated to rekindling the enchantment of the world through their creative output (especially prose and poetry). The TCBS began as a group for conversation and clever pranks, but as these four men grew up together the TCBS became a refuge, a place of hope in the midst of a world at war. All four members eventually enlisted and served in the Great War, and as the grueling tedium and horror of trench warfare (and naval warfare, in Wiseman's case) took their toll, the men's letters to one another display a poignant yearning for even a brief time together, that the hope of the TCBS might enable them to endure through the war and dream of a better world after.

Gilson and Smith died in the war, which effectively ended the TCBS. Wiseman became a school headmaster, and Tolkien . . . well, of course we know what he did after the war. This story is significant because it was during these years that Tolkien began creating the Elvish languages and the history that goes with them. The encouragement of the other TCBS members helped give Tolkien the motivation to pursue his poetry and prose, and the dreams he shared with the TCBS--that beauty in writing might re-enchant the world, opening people's eyes to the "faerie" all around us--obviously resonated within him for the rest of his life.

John Garth's telling of this story is even and well reasoned. He presents the details as he has put them together, drawing from letters, wartime documents, other literature of the time, and other scholarship on Tolkien. There is surely a temptation for the biographer to make many presumptions, drawing connections between Tolkien's life experiences and his writings, and much of this would seem reasonable. However, Garth generally restricts himself to simply presenting the facts, and the book is stronger because of this. Throughout the book, he suggests that Tolkien's experiences may possibly be visible here and there in his fiction, only rarely in an obvious or direct way, but he respects Tolkien's own disdain for bringing the author's biography into his works.

For me the most fascinating parts of *Tolkien and the Great War* are Garth's Epilogue and Postscript, which

are really distinct essays considering Tolkien's work as a whole, from a critical standpoint. Garth shares some wonderful insights into Middle-Earth: for example, the interesting parallel between Melkor's destruction of the Two Trees, using the shadowy cover of Ungoliant, and Beren's theft of the Silmaril, using the shadowy cover of Luthien's enchantment. How many times have I read *The Silmarillion* and yet not made that connection! Probably the greatest part of Garth's book is the Postscript, in which he defends Tolkien's writing against the attacks of critics, showing how Tolkien's archaic, seemingly backward-looking epic-creating is every bit as valid and appropriate a response to World War I as the trench memoir and poetry of disillusionment and disenchantment. Garth proposes that the literature of disillusionment in the decade following the war in many ways hijacked the actual feelings of the returning soldiers, giving the war in hindsight an emotional color that might not be entirely accurate. Tolkien, in contrast, created a literature that acknowledges the horrors and confusion, while still affirming that every act of heroism and bravery is valuable in itself, regardless whether the ultimate outcome seems to make any sense. The Beren/Luthien and Turin stories act as pictures of two ends of a spectrum of understanding war. In the story of Beren and Luthien, heroism and bravery result in victory, as well as the maturity of the heroic characters (though even in that story, the ending is tainted by the evils of war, greed, and selfishness). In Turin's story, the hero is ennobled through his dogged pursuit of justice and righteousness, even though he is also often rash and his decisions are fated to go awry to the very end; but the confusion and darkness that results from the hero's actions don't make his actions the less noble.

Garth's Postscript ought to be required reading for any Tolkien fan, and I highly recommend the whole book especially for readers who have spent some time with *The Book of Lost Tales*, the History of Middle-Earth series, or even just *The Silmarillion*. *Tolkien and the Great War* is simply a fantastic Tolkien book.

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### **Tara says**

Why it took me so long to read this I cannot say. It had been on the back burner for me, and only really pushed to the forefront as I am seeing the author at a conference in a few weeks. To say that this book spoke to me in a way that only a small handful of books have done would be an understatement. I have long been fascinated both by Tolkien and military history, so it was a natural pairing. But beyond that, you cannot read this book without feeling a sense of the utter tragedy of youth and promise swallowed up in the trenches, and how no one from that generation, least of all the veterans who survived, escaped unscathed.

Tolkien himself disliked literary criticism based on biographical exploration of the author, but we are all products of our environment and experiences. WWI changed Tolkien, and as Garth speculates, likely changed the trajectory of his writing. Consider this book part biography, part literary analysis. I think it is worth a read alone for the postscript: an examination of the prevailing narrative of Great War writers (disenchantment and disillusionment), and where Tolkien fits in that narrative. It also presents a strong argument against fantasy as "escapism", of which Tolkien has long been accused. I promise you will see Tolkien's work, especially what he produced in these war years, in a totally new light.

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### **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

DOES ANYONE REALIZE HOW CLOSE WE WERE TO LOSING TOLKIEN?!?!?? Can you imagine a world without his Hobbits, his elves, his orcs?

The man is a genius, not just a literary genius, but an absolute linguistic pedant. I finished this book simply

fascinated and now I want to learn Norse, Welsh, Latin, and Greek. Not only have I gained a better understanding of the warfront during WWI, but I also appreciate the gifts Tolkien gave to us more than ever. I will cherish this book. A perfect audio read because all of the foreign and Tolkien vocabulary is pronounced correctly.

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### **Katherine says**

One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead.

— J.R.R. Tolkien, forward to *The Lord of the Rings*

World War I represented everything Tolkien hated: the destruction of nature, the deadly application of technology, the abuse and corruption of authority, and the triumph of industrialization. It interrupted his career, separated him from his wife, and damaged his health. Yet at the same time it gave him an appreciation for the virtues of ordinary people, for friendships, and for what beauty he could find amidst ugliness.

"They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, with weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead."

- "The Passage of the Marshes", *The Two Towers*

The dead lying in pools of mud is a powerful image of trench warfare on the Western Front, and is something that Tolkien would have undoubtedly seen during his wartime service. As the autumn rains fell, the battlefield of the Somme turned into a stinking mire seeded with the rotting corpses of men and animals. The dead men that Frodo and Sam see are not physically present – only their ghostly shapes have been preserved –but their forms inspire horror and pity.

We are all shaped by the world in which we live.

(I used this volume for a presentation on Tolkien and The Great War. I found it very useful and insightful into Tolkien the man and the "Lost Generation")

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### **Nicholas Whyte says**

<http://nhw.livejournal.com/325040.html>[return][return]This book carries a recommendation by A.N. Wilson to the effect that it's "the best book about Tolkien that has yet been written". While I don't think it is actually better than Tom Shippey's work, it is none the less a very good book, moving well beyond the cliches of equating the Dead Marshes to the Somme. It basically concentrates on the story of the friendship between Tolkien and three of his schoolmates, G.B. Smith, Rob Gilson and Christopher Wiseman, who together formed an intimate group called the TCBS. It could have been the story of any group of naive and idealistic young men, pledged to change the world and to renew a sense of old values through their works of literature, except of course that one of them actually did.[return][return]Garth saves his analysis of the effect of the war per se on Tolkien's writing for an afterword, and concentrates for most of the book on the narrative of what actually happened to the four friends. This is very effective. The actual events of the Somme are dealt with

surprisingly quickly, but Garth manages to balance a detailed account of where Smith, Gilson and Tolkien were (Wiseman was in the Navy) with a sense of the overall perspective of the agonising shifts in the 1916 front line. (This may be what A.N. Wilson was getting at - I haven't read much else about the first world war, but I find it difficult to believe that there are many other accounts of it that are as lucid as this.)[return][return]Of course, the effects of the Somme were devastating. Gilson and Smith were both killed, and Tolkien invalided home with trench fever; he never returned to the front line, fortunately. And it's fairly obvious that the deep friendship between Tolkien and Wiseman was fatally undermined by their war experiences. Garth makes a persuasive argument for the deep impact of the TCBS on Tolkien's writing. I would like to know more about the effect of Tolkien's relationship with his wife Edith, who he was courting and marrying at this time, on his writing. Perhaps there is little to say, or to be discovered.[return][return]There are two lengthy postscripts to the main narrative. The first looks at the relationship between what Tolkien was actually writing during the Great War and his eventually published work (two decades later for *The Hobbit*, four decades later for *The Lord of the Rings*). The second ranges freely across the whole spectrum of English literature in the twentieth century, pointing out that Tolkien describes both the heroism and the horror of war (where Owen and Sassoon concentrate on the horror, to the point of concealing what they themselves were up to), and concluding with a favourable review from C.S. Lewis about the realism of Tolkien's portrayal of the psychology of wartime.[return][return]There's lots more here. Recommended.

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## **Josh says**

I probably have in-mind something more like 4.75 stars. This is a phenomenal history, a heck of a book.

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