

JRR Tolkien and the influence of Lyme Regis

Tolkien was always an imaginative child.

From a very young age he was excited by myths and legends. Once while on holiday at Lyme Regis, a place rich with fossils, Tolkien found a prehistoric jawbone and imagined a piece of petrified dragon. He developed a fascination for languages and was soon inventing his own, having been introduced to Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' in Middle English at school. These early interests in runes and language developed into stories for his own children, especially 'The Hobbit' and eventually, for adults in 'The Lord of the Rings'. 'The Silmarillion', which was not published until after his death, is a complex mix of mythological tales which he had worked on through most of his life.

Some of his most imaginative artworks were produced during holidays in Lyme Regis, some of which were later used in his books, these are listed in Appendix 1 below. He was taught to paint and draw by his mother who was herself a capable artist, and by the age of 14 was attempting some ambitious subjects such as 'Ship at Anchor' and 'Alder by a Stream', which show a sense of perspective and depth.

In 1906, on a holiday in Lyme Regis with his guardian, Father Francis Morgan, he sketched the Cobb, 'Lyme Regis Harbour from the drawing Room of The Three Cups Hotel', showing details of ships, clouds and stone walls, and signed with his monogram.



Lyme Regis Harbour from the Drawing Room Window of 'The Three Cups Hotel'

Bodleian Library: MS. Tolkien Drawings 86, fol. 6.

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He went up to Oxford, to read English, specialising in Old and Middle English and Philology, but retained his interest in sketching the countryside and began to draw more often from his imagination.

Returning to Lyme Regis on holiday with his wife and family in 1927 and 1928, he produced a long series of paintings and drawings, some of the countryside, but more frequently illustrations for the mythological tales he was developing. Even the countryside ones appeared in later books. For example a study of tall trees called 'Tumble Hill near Lyme Regis' is similar to those he made for 'the Silmarillion' earlier that summer. These were 'Taur-na-Fuin' and 'The Vale of Sirion', and it looks ahead to other related pictures of trees 'Mirkwood' and 'The Elvenkings Gate' for 'The Hobbit'. Tumble Hill is almost certainly Timber Hill as it is called today.

The most striking of Tolkien's 'Silmarillion' pictures also dates from 1928. This was 'Halls of Manwe in the Mountains of the World above Faerie' better known as 'Tanequetil' and shows jagged mountains rising above the sea. However, this was more likely derived from visits to Switzerland rather than Lyme. It seems that the relaxed environment of family holidays in Lyme at this time, enabled Tolkien to express his imaginary landscapes in his paintings.

In Lyme he would have been surrounded by the rolling hills and valleys of the Dorset countryside where small villages with mysterious names were scattered over the land. Such ancient landscapes could easily be envisaged as the source of the green and pleasant downs of 'The Shire', home of the Hobbits, and described in 'The Hobbit and 'Lord of the Rings'.

Tolkien was, after all a highly imaginative person and would have been influenced by every experience. His biographer, Humphrey Carpenter wrote 'The drawings of scenes from 'The Silmarillion' show how clearly he visualised the landscapes in which his legends are set, for in several of the drawings, the scenery of Lyme itself is drawn into the stories and invested in mystery'.

Lyme is, of course, a maritime town, with a long history, set on the banks of the River Lim on the Dorset coast. However, whilst the sea is mentioned many times in the stories, principally as somewhere far away in the West, it is also the location for the Grey Havens quayside on the Firth of Lune. Whilst the origin of Grey Havens is unclear, it would be good to think that The Cobb at Lyme might have provided the model for the quayside from which the Hobbits and their friends made their last journey 'across the Sundering Seas into the Undying Lands'.

Margaret Batt and John Dover

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Appendix 1

List of Drawings made during Visits to Lyme Regis in 1927 and 1928

References

'The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide Part I Chronology: Part II Readers Guide by Christina Scull and Wayne G Hammond, Pub: Houghton Mifflin. 2006.

'J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator' by Wayne G Hammond and Christina Scull, Pub: Harper Collins. 1995.

Topographical

1927

Golden Cap from Langmoor Garden 'Artist and Illustrator' (A & I) fig 6

An unidentified House

Boats, Lyme Regis

Oh to be in Oxford (North) now that Summer's There A&I fig25

1928

View from Mr Wallis', Lyme A&I fig 26

Tumble Hill near Lyme Regis A&I fig 27

Sketch of roofs and chimneys (of Lyme)

Mythology.

1927

Beowulf

Coiled Dragon with two Flowers A&I fig48

Roverandom

The White Dragon Pursues Roverandom and the Moondog A&I fig75

The Gardens of the Merking's Palace A&I fig 76

House Where 'Rover' Began His Adventures as a Toy A&I fig 73

Rover Arrives on the Moon A&I fig74

Three drawings on a single page A&I fig 77

(22 Northmoor Road, Seated Giant, and an Ogre and Child)

'The Silmarillion'

Mithrim A&I fig 46

Glorund sets forth to seek Turin A&I fig 47

1928

The Silmarillion

Nargothrond, the underground stronghold of the Noldorin Elves

2 drawings (later used in the Hobbit) A&I figs 56 & 57

Taur-na-Fuin (Fangorn Forest, based on Tumble Hill, Lyme ?)

(later used in The Hobbit as Mirkwood) A&I fig 54

Halls of Manwe on the Mountains of the World above Faerie (Tanequeti)

A&I fig 52

The Vale of Tol Sirion

A&I fig 55

Hirilorn and Luthien's hut, sketch

Mountain Landscape (after 'Halls of Manwe')

A&I fig 53

Tree of Amalion

A&I fig 62

Gondolin & the Vale of Tumladin from Crithorn

Possibly not made at Lyme A&I fig 58