GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH AND J. R. R. TOLKIEN:
Myth-making and National Identity in the Twelfth and Twentieth Centuries

Carl Phelpstead

Cardiff University

Abstract: The twelfth-century account of the early history of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth, his *Historia regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), introduced the stories of King Lear and Cymbeline to the world and provided the seminal early account of King Arthur. The parallels between Geoffrey's work and that of J. R. R. Tolkien seem to me now to be even more striking than when I wrote that paragraph in *Tolkien and Wales*. This essay explores in greater depth and more detail than was possible in my book the ways in which Geoffrey and Tolkien turned to the making of myth in order to address contemporary concerns around the issue of national identity.

Keywords: Tolkien – Geoffrey of Monmouth – National identity – Myth – History

In a chapter on Arthurian literature in my book *Tolkien and Wales: Language, Literature and Identity* I wrote that:

"There was once a writer living in Oxford, though he had been born outside England. His most famous work was an enormously popular piece of fantasy fiction that presented itself as a true history, claiming to be based on an ancient manuscript source. The book dealt with kings, heroes and a wizard. It became a bestseller not only in England, but internationally; it was translated into many languages, was widely illustrated and was adapted in other media. That writer was, of course, Geoffrey of Monmouth and his work the *Historia regum Britanniae*, but the parallels with J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* are strikingly exact." (PHELPSTEAD 2011: 69)

The twelfth-century account of the early history of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth, his *Historia regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), introduced the stories of King Lear and Cymbeline to the world and provided the seminal early account of King Arthur. The parallels between Geoffrey's work and that of J. R. R. Tolkien seem to me now to be even more striking than when I wrote that paragraph in *Tolkien and Wales*. This essay explores in greater depth and more detail than was possible in my book the ways in which Geoffrey and Tolkien turned to the making of myth in order to address contemporary concerns around the issue of national identity.[1] This focus on myth-making and nationality reveals that alongside the remarkable similarities between the two writers they crucially differ in their view of the relationships between the different peoples on the island of Britain.[2]

1. Tolkien, Myth-making, and National Identity

J. R. R. Tolkien's strong sense of English (rather than British) identity and his desire to give expression to it through the medium of fantasy or myth, has long been recognised as a major impetus (though not the only one) behind his creative writing. In recent years the UK has witnessed a very public debate about the relationship of English, Welsh, and (especially) Scottish national identities to the idea of Britishness. More than half a century ago Tolkien was dismissive of the idea that Britishness is anything other than a political fiction; in a letter to his son Christopher written in December 1943 Tolkien writes: "I love England (not Great Britain and certainly not the British Commonwealth (grrr!))" (TOLKIEN 1981: 65).

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[1] The present essay draws on material included in Chapters 4 and 6 of my book *Tolkien and Wales*, but combines this with a fuller account of Geoffrey of Monmouth's myth-making and a more sustained comparison of the two writers than is provided in the book.

[2] I presented this material as a plenary lecture at the 'Worlds Made of Heroes' conference in Oporto, November 2014, and as the Annual Public Lecture of the Centre for the Study of the Middle Ages, University of Birmingham, October 2014. I am very grateful to the organisers of both events for their kind invitations.

Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond reveal that when staying at Stonyhurst in 1946 Tolkien gave his nationality as 'English' in the guest book, thus 'breaking a line of dittos under the topmost entry, "British"' (SCULL and HAMMOND 2006: 244). Tolkien generally used 'British' to mean 'Brittonic': that is, pertaining to the Celtic language from which Welsh, Cornish, and Breton derive or to the speakers of that language. He saw the appropriation of 'British' by the modern state (Great Britain) as an abuse, writing in his 1955 O'Donnell lecture on 'English and Welsh' that…

"The misuse of British begins after the union of the crowns of England and Scotland, when in a quite unnecessary desire for a common name the English were deprived of their Englishry and the Welsh of their claim to be the chief inheritors of the title British." (TOLKIEN 1983: 182)

There were times, in fact, when other identities proved more congenial to Tolkien than 'English'. As I argued in the final chapter of my book on *Tolkien and Wales,* Tolkien – who was of course a professional medievalist – looked back beyond the early modern period of so-called 'British' state formation to seek more congenial identities in the early Middle Ages. After coming from South Africa to England at the age of three, Tolkien spent his childhood in the West Midlands and he sometimes preferred to identify with the region in which he grew up rather than with the English nation as a whole. When doing so he referred to the English Midlands by the name of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, which had covered the area in the period before the Viking invasions of the ninth century and the subsequent creation of a single English kingdom by the successors of King Alfred the Great. Near the beginning of his O'Donnell lecture on 'English and Welsh', Tolkien declared himself to be 'one of the English of Mercia' (TOLKIEN 1983: 162). The name Mercia is a Latin adaptation of (West Saxon) Old English *Mierce,* the equivalent of *Marc* in the dialect of Mercia itself; it means 'border or boundary people' (and survives today in the phrase 'Welsh Marches'). The Mercian form of the kingdom's name (Marc) is also, of course, the name of the realm of the Rohirrim in *The Lord of the Rings* (The Mark) and, as has long been recognised,

the names, place-names, horse-names and weapon-names of the Rohirrim are in the Mercian dialect of Old English.[3]

The Tolkien family had been established in the West Midlands since the time of Tolkien's paternal grandfather, but Tolkien's maternal ancestors, the Suffields, had lived for many generations in what Humphrey Carpenter refers to as "the quiet Worcestershire town of Evesham".[4] In a letter to his son Michael on 18 March 1941 Tolkien declared:

"Though a Tolkien by name, I am a Suffield by tastes, talents, and upbringing, and any corner of that county [i.e. Worcestershire] (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way 'home' to me, as no other part of the world is." (TOLKIEN 1981: 54)

The connection with Worcestershire continued throughout Tolkien's life: his aunt had a farm in Worcestershire which gave its name, Bag End, to the home of the Bilbo and Frodo Baggins (CARPENTER: 106). After the First World War Tolkien's brother Hilary bought an orchard and market garden at Blackminster, near Evesham.[5]

Rather dubiously, Tolkien associated his linguistic tastes and abilities with his ancestry, claiming a special connection with the medieval dialects that would be a major focus of his academic work. In a letter of 17 June 1955 to W. H. Auden Tolkien writes that: "I am a West-midlander by blood (and took to early west-midland Middle English as a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it)" (TOLKIEN

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[3] See John TINKLER, 'Old English in Rohan' in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (1968: 164-69); T. A. SHIPPEY, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000: 91-97); Idem, *The Road to Middle-earth* (2005: 139-140).

[4] CARPENTER, *Biography*, 19. See also 'Suffield family' in SCULL and HAMMOND, *Reader's Guide* (2006: 984-85).

[5] Hence the pun on Persia/Pershore in J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *Roverandom*, ed. Christian Scull and Wayne G. Hammond (1998: 14). On Hilary Tolkien see the brief biography in Angela GARDNER, ed., *Black and White Ogre Country: The Lost Tales of Hilary Tolkien* (2009: 61-70).

1981: 213). The next month he writes to his American publishers, Houghton Mifflin, that

"I am in fact more of a Suffield (a family deriving from Evesham in Worcestershire) [than a Tolkien . . .] I am indeed in English terms a West-midlander at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches; and it is, I believe, as much due to descent as to opportunity that Anglo-Saxon and Western Middle English and alliterative verse have been both a childhood attraction and my main professional sphere." (TOLKIEN 1981: 218)

An earlier letter to his son Christopher in 1942 shows that the identification with Mercia was of longer standing: "barring the Tolkien (which must long ago have become a pretty thin strand) you are a Mercian or Hwiccian [. . .] on both sides" (TOLKIEN 1981: 108). Here the regional identification is refined even further: Hwicce was a small kingdom that was absorbed into Mercia during the eighth century, though its separate identity was to a limited extent preserved in the diocese of Worcester which covered more or less the same territory.[6]

The Anglo-Saxon bishop to retain his see longest after the Norman Conquest was St Wulfstan of Worcester, who died in 1095 and it is in this West Midlands area that continuities between Old and Middle English literature are clearest to see. Much of Tolkien's academic work in the field of Middle English literature was on texts from the West Midlands, texts in the dialect to which, as we have seen, he claimed to have taken like a native. In his posthumously published translation of the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Tolkien notes that the language, metre, and scenery of the poet's work indicate that "his home was in the West Midlands of England".[7] Earlier in the Middle English period the

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[6] See Della HOOKE, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce* (1985, especially pp. 12-20).

[7] J. R. R. TOLKIEN, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Sir Orfeo,* ed. Christopher Tolkien (1995), 1. In their edition of *Gawain,* Tolkien and E. V. Gordon had earlier maintained that the dialect of the surviving manuscript is that of south Lancashire, which is further north than would usually be considered the Midlands): see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (1925; corrected reprint 1930: xxii).

poet Layamon lived in the West Midlands at Areley Kings, where he produced a version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's history in English alliterative verse c.1200. A group of Middle English texts which feature prominently among Tolkien's academic publications were produced in the same West Midlands area at around the time Layamon was writing: a handbook for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse* and a related group of five religious texts preserved in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodley 24 (TOLKIEN 1929: 104-126). Tolkien localized the production of these texts to Herefordshire; E. J. Dobson later narrowed this down to Wigmore Abbey in north-west Herefordshire; they are now thought to have been written in north Herefordshire or the southern tip of Shropshire.[8] Tolkien published on specialised aspects of the language of this group of texts and for many years he was engaged on the production of a diplomatic edition of the Corpus manuscript of *Ancrene Wisse* for the Early English Text Society, eventually published in 1962.[9]

This deep personal and professional engagement with the distinctive medieval literary traditions of the West Midlands strengthened Tolkien's sense of a strong regional identity. By choosing to identify as Mercian, Tolkien affirms the value of the local and the particular in the face of what we might now call globalization. John Garth reveals that in 1914 Tolkien was a supporter of Home Rule for the Irish because he believed that self-realisation was a nation's highest goal (GARTH 2003: 51). In a letter to his son Christopher in December 1943, Tolkien bemoans the tendency to obliterate local differences in a uniform global culture, singling out the growing dominance of the English language as a "damn shame": "I think I shall have to refuse to speak anything but Old Mercian" (TOLKIEN 1981: 65). One sees, I think, a reflection of these views in the *Lord of the Rings* in the political settlement after the defeat of Sauron: Elwin Fairburn writes of the Free

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[8] On the importance of Tolkien's work to the study of these texts see Arne ZETTERSTEN, 'The AB language lives' in *The Lord of the Rings 1954–2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*, ed. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (2006: 13–24).

[9] Cf. J. R. R. TOLKIEN, ed., *Ancrene Wisse: The English text of the Ancrene Riwle edited from MS. Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402*, Early English Text Society Original Series 249, introduction by N. R. Ker (1962).

Peoples of Middle-earth (the Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Ents and Men) that "They each preserve, without mutual hostility, their own speech and way of life and ethnicity" (FAIRBURN 199: 79). This diversity is fostered by Aragorn when he becomes King of the West, notably in the very high level of autonomy which he grants to the Shire under his rule.

By choosing to identify himself with terms dating from before the creation of a united kingdom of the English, Tolkien looks back to a period when the multi-lingual British and Irish Isles comprised a number of locally governed communities: these ancient identities are, he implies, more deeply rooted than is the recent "misuse" of "British". For Tolkien, identity is constituted, but not entirely determined, by ancestry, environment, and language: it is also at least partly a matter of personal choice, as when he consciously chose to identify as English, Mercian, or Hwiccian rather than as British. In this way, identity is an expression of desire and devotion, of where one's heart and home are. Tolkien was, as he put it, "at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches".

This sense of belonging to a particular place inspired Tolkien to construct a mythology appropriate for his country, born from the same soil. He revealed in a now much-quoted letter to the publisher Milton Waldman in 1951 that he had long regretted that England possessed no mythology of its own comparable to the national mythologies of the Greeks, Celts, Scandinavians, Finns and other peoples. He explains that

"once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story [. . .] which I could dedicate to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East)." TOLKIEN 1981: 144)

In 1956 Tolkien drafted a letter to a Mr Thompson in which he similarly recalled setting himself "to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with

a mythology of their own" (TOLKIEN 1981: 231). As is now well known, in his biography of Tolkien Humphrey Carpenter was inspired by such statements to write of Tolkien's "desire to create a mythology *for England*" (CARPENTER: 89), slightly adapting Tolkien's talk of dedicating or restoring a mythology *to* England.[10]

The "body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story" to which Tolkien referred in his 1951 letter was never to appear in print in the form in which he at that time hoped Waldman would publish it, but Tolkien's writings on Middle-earth – *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, together with the posthumously published *The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales,* and associated texts in the History of Middle-earth series – do comprise an interconnected body of myths, legends, and fairy-tales of extraordinary richness and complexity.

Whereas in the 1956 letter to Thompson Tolkien writes of presenting the English with "a *mythology* of their own" (italics added), in the 1951 letter to Waldman he writes of "a body of more or less connected *legend*, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story' (italics added). Christopher Garbowski (like others) describes Tolkien as a 'mythmaker" (GARBOWSKI 2004), but the term *legendarium* is also often used to label the corpus of Middle-earth texts. Scholarly vacillation between the terms myth and legend (and fairy tale and fantasy) to describe Tolkien's writings mirrors a similar equivocation in Tolkien's own letters and in his essay "On Fairy-stories": Tolkien slips between

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[10] A series of articles has appeared debating whether Carpenter's formulation is an appropriate or adequate description of Tolkien's undertaking: see Jason FISHER, '"Mythology for England"' in Michael D. C. DROUT, ed., *The J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (2006: 445–47; Carl F. HOSTETTER and Arden R. SMITH, 'A mythology for England' and Anders STENSTRÖM, 'A mythology? For England?' in *Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference, Oxford, 1992*, ed. P. Reynolds and G. H. GoodKnight (1995: 381-390 and 310-314; FAIRBURN, 'A mythology' (1999); Michael D. C. DROUT, 'A mythology for Anglo-Saxon England' in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, ed. Jane Chance (2004: 229-247).

the terms myth, legend, fairy-story, and fantasy.[11] No doubt this slippage reflects Tolkien's sense that myth, legend, and fairy-tale form a continuum, rather than a series of clearly demarcated genres: hence his reference in the letter to Waldman to a "body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story".

A narrow definition of myth would limit it to a story primarily about divine beings. Such a definition would exclude very nearly all of Tolkien's writing and cannot be what he meant when he wrote of creating a mythology, nor what readers and scholars of his work mean by referring to 'Tolkien's mythology'. Many definitions of myth require that the story must once have been accepted as having happened: this too would exclude Tolkien's work (although Tolkien did write in a letter that "I had the sense of recording what was already 'there' somewhere: not of 'inventing" (TOLKIEN 1981: 145). Other key characteristics of myth are more clearly exemplified by Tolkien's creative writings: they are narratives set in the far distant past; they involve supernatural beings; and they convey or embody understandings of the nature of reality in narrative form.

The mythological focus of Tolkien's creative writing can be related to both Romantic and modernist strands of English literary tradition, as I have argued elsewhere (PHELPSTEAD 2014: 79-91). From the Romantic period, one can see parallels with William Blake's "private mythology". Early twentieth century modernist writers including James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and David Jones responded to modernity by turning to mythological and legendary narratives from the past. Tolkien went beyond such use of such narratives as ways of organising representations of contemporary reality: in the connected series of works comprising *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien instead took motifs and patterns from classical, medieval, and later mythological

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[11] J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *On Fairy-stories,* ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2008). The lecture was delivered in 1939, published in 1947, and again in expanded form in 1964.

traditions, transformed them in combination with a wealth of wholly original material into a comprehensive new mythology of his own.

Tolkien's patriotic impulse, and what he referred to as its gradual waning, explains the evolving frame narrative with which Tolkien attempted to link his Elvish mythology with England – and its eventual replacement by a supposed source in the Red Book of Westmarch: very early drafts of material that was incorporated into *The Silmarillion* feature a series of intermediary figures (including Eriol the Mariner and an Anglo-Saxon translator, Ælfwine) through whom stories were imagined as passing from Elvish into Old English; later Tolkien experimented with a time-travelling link between modern England and the legendary past.[12] Each of these narrative devices can be seen as an attempt by Tolkien to link his creative work with the particular country for which it was at that time intended: England. Traces of the attempt survive in the published *Lord of the Rings*, with its claims in the Prologue to be based on a manuscript copy of the diaries of Bilbo Baggins, Frodo's account of the War of the Ring, and other material preserved by Hobbits at the home of the wardens of the Westmarch: "This account of the end of the Third Age is drawn mainly from the Red Book of Westmarch" (TOLKIEN 2005: 14). The model for the Red Book of Westmarch is clearly the Red Book of Hergest, one of the two main manuscripts of the medieval Welsh story-collection known now as *The Mabinogion*, but the imaginary manuscript's association with the West*march* echoes too the name of the kingdom of Mercia.

In the preface to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien took issue with critics who had decided the book was an allegory, stating his dislike of that form and declaring that "I much prefer history, true or feigned" (TOLKIEN 2005: xxii). A taste for feigned history is something Tolkien certainly shared with Geoffrey of Monmouth, but for Tolkien a story that was not true history need not be untrue. When he writes in letters of his original desire to dedicate a mythology to England he claims to have renounced such a grand plan, implying that the

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[12] On these frame narratives and their development see Verlyn FLIEGER, *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (2005: 87–118).

patriotic motive may no longer be primary. The connection Tolkien made between imaginative writing and Christian theology in his poem "Mythopoeia", subsequently reinforced in his essay *On Fairy-Stories,* appears to have led Tolkien to the realisation that his work might aspire to a universal rather than merely national resonance: he came to believe that myths and related forms of story-telling can, to a degree, embody the truths revealed in Christianity.[13] In his long letter to Milton Waldman written in 1951 Tolkien's view of the relation between myth and reality takes on an almost Jungian hue:

"I believe that legends and myths are largely made of "truth" and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear" (TOLKIEN 1981: 147).

Far from being a deviation from reality, myth enables a truer perception.

2. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Fabulous History, and National Identity

Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth-century writer whose "history" of the kings of Britain is the well-spring of medieval (and later) Arthurian literature, was born around 1100, almost certainly in or near the Welsh town of Monmouth. He is referred to in contemporary documents as Galfridus Artur(us) (Geoffrey Arthur), perhaps because his father was called Arthur or because of his well-known scholarly interests in the British hero of that name (or both); in his *Historia regum Britanniae,* however, he refers to himself twice as Galfridus Monemutensis, Geoffrey of Monmouth.[14] Geoffrey locates King Arthur's court at Caerleon-on-Usk; he also praises Caerleon in the book IX of the *Historia* (IX.156), and this may reflect his first-hand knowledge of the Roman remains there and perhaps,

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[13] See further PHELPSTEAD, 'Myth-making and Sub-creation" (2014: 79-91).

[14] Prol. 3; XI.177. All references here to Geoffrey's text are to Geoffrey of MONMOUTH, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans., Neil Wright (2007). Further references will be given parenthetically in the main text.

given the proximity of Caerleon and Monmouth, what O. J. Padel calls his "local pride in his home district of Monmouth" (PADEL 2000: 75). Michelle R. Warren has recently drawn attention to the way in which Geoffrey and other twelfth- and thirteenth-century historians of Britain are associated with border regions (WARREN 2000): this resonates intriguingly with Tolkien's self-identity as Mercian and as being "at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches".

Pro-Breton sympathies evident in his *Historia* have led some modern scholars to claim possible Breton ancestry for Geoffrey, a suggestion lent credibility by the fact that the lordship of Monmouth passed to a Breton family in 1075: Brynley Roberts writes that "It is possible that Geoffrey's family were among those Bretons who had been such a significant element in William I's forces, many of whom settled in south-east Wales".[15] For most of his life Geoffrey (like Tolkien) lived and worked in Oxford, but a further Welsh connection emerges at the end of Geoffrey's life, when he was consecrated as bishop of the north Walian see of St Asaph in 1152, three years before his death: there is, however, no evidence that he ever visited his diocese.

Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae* was completed by 1138 (almost exactly 800 years before publication of the *Hobbit*) and quickly became one of the most popular non-religious texts of the Middle Ages; more than two hundred medieval manuscripts of the text survive today and over fifty of these are from the twelfth century. Two translations were made into French within twenty years (Gaimar's lost version of the 1140s; Wace's by 1155); Layamon's English version appeared c.1200 and translations into Old Norse and other languages followed, including – intriguingly – three thirteenth- and two fourteenth-century versions in Welsh. The

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[15] Brynley F. ROBERTS, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Brut y Brenhinedd*' in Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and Brynley F. Roberts/ eds., *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 97-116 (98). For further discussion of possible Breton sources and connections see J. E. Caerwyn WILLIAMS, 'Brittany and the Arthurian legend' in Rachel Bromwich et al., *Arthur of the Welsh*, 249–72 (1991: 263-66).

various Welsh versions, known collectively as *Brut y Brenhinedd*, became the most widely copied of all medieval Welsh narrative texts (HUWS 2000: 12) and Geoffrey's version of events seems largely to have superseded other traditions about Arthur circulating in Wales, even where those traditions were in fact of greater antiquity.

Geoffrey's work fills in what had been perceived to be a gap in British history, recounting the deeds of the island's kings from the arrival of the Trojan refugee Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, after whom the island of Albion was re-named Britain, through to the last of the British kings, Cadualadrus (Cadwaladr) in the seventh century, a period of around 1900 years. Geoffrey's work has always divided readers, but its immense influence cannot be denied: his *Historia* is one of the most influential of all medieval texts.

Just as Tolkien claims to be translating the Red Book of Westmarch, so Geoffrey claims at the beginning and end of his work merely to be translating an ancient book shown him by Walter Archdeacon of Oxford: "quendam Britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum" (Prol. 2; "a very old book in the Britannic/British/Breton tongue"; cf. XI. 177 and XI. 208). There is an ambiguity here as *Britannia* and related words in medieval Latin could refer either to Britain or to Brittany. An old book in *Britannici sermonis* could therefore, be in either Welsh or Breton. At the end of the *Historia* Geoffrey forbids his contemporaries William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon to write about the kings of Britain, leaving them to tell of the Saxon kings, because, Geoffrey says, they do not possess "the book in British, which Walter, archdeacon of Oxford bought from Brittany" (librum illum Britannici sermonis quem Walterus Oxenefordensis archidiaconus ex Britannia aduexit (IX. 208)). Probably the context requires that *Britannia* here be translated Brittany, since it is hard to see how a book could be brought from Britain to Oxford, but it is possible that a book in Welsh might be brought from Brittany.

No such "very old book" covering the history of Britain up to the seventh century survives or is known from other texts to have existed in either Welsh or Breton.

Readers and scholars have taken very different views of Geoffrey's claims but most have dismissed them as typical of medieval writers' need to claim a source even when being wholly original. Geoffrey certainly used a number of earlier sources, principally Gildas's sixth-century *De excidio Britanniae,* the ninth-century *Historia Britonum* attributed to Nennius, and Bede's early eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, but although he may well have drawn on Celtic traditions of some kind, if not a full-length historical manuscript, the vast bulk of Geoffrey's history is, as far as we know, entirely his own invention. The very fact that Geoffrey's history was translated into Welsh suggests that no similar account previously existed in that language, though the Welsh translators assume Geoffrey's very old book was in Welsh; one Welsh version (falsely) claims that Geoffrey himself translated his history *back* into Welsh (*kymraec*) in old age (WARREN 2000: 78-79).

Recently Michael Faletra has described Geoffrey as 'mocking' scholarship in his vague source references (2000: 64). It has also been suggested by Valerie Flint that the whole work is a parody of the national histories of England being produced by Geoffrey's contemporaries (1979: 447-468). A few scholars have, however, believed that Geoffrey may have had access to Welsh or Breton source material that no longer survives.[16]

Geoffrey makes King Arthur central to his *Historia,* and so to later medieval chronicle and romance. Building on earlier traditions and transforming them, he creates the earliest known account of Arthur's life from birth to death, a narrative that takes up between a quarter and a half of the whole *Historia*. Tolkien and E.

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[16] Sebastian Evans idiosyncratically argued in his translation of Geoffrey (which Tolkien and Gordon recommend in their edition of *Gawain*) that Geoffrey's 'very old book' could have been in *English*: see Sebastian Evans, trans., Geoffrey of MONMOUTH, *Histories of the Kings of Britain* (1912: 244). Lewis and Currie take this bizarre claim as the starting point for an unconvincing argument that Tolkien's *Book of Lost Tales* was an attempt to imagine what Geoffrey's 'ancient book' may have been like: see Alex LEWIS and Elizabeth CURRIE, *The Epic Realm of Tolkien: Part One-Beren and Lúthien* (2009: 182-87).

V. Gordon write in their edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that Geoffrey's *Historia* is "the origin or earliest record of much Arthurian matter" (1930: xxvi), and many motifs that became characteristic of Arthurian literature make their first appearance in the work, including Arthur's conception at Tintagel, Mordred's treachery, and Arthur's fatal wounding and removal to Avalon.

Unlike Tolkien, Geoffrey left no letters, lectures, or other evidence of his national identity and allegiance. Although he was born in Wales his history was written for the Anglo-Norman elite (by whom Geoffrey was later honoured by elevation to the see of St Asaph) and is not in any straightforward sense patriotic Welsh propaganda. John Gillingham argues that a new English identity emerged in historical writing of the 1130s, a sense of "Englishness" that embraced both English (Anglo-Saxon) and Norman (GILLINGHAM 1990: 99-118). The formation of this identity was linked with political crises of the 1130s and with the fortunes of Norman claims on Wales, for, as Michael Faletra notes, historical writing flowered contemporaneously with and in support of Anglo-Norman expansion in Geoffrey's native Wales (2000: 61). Indeed, writing in the mid to late 1130s Geoffrey must have been aware how precarious Norman power was in south Wales; there was a revival of Welsh sovereignty in the kingdom of Glamorgan from 1136, and Welsh insurgents temporarily regained Caerleon, among other places, from Norman control.

In his *Historia* Geoffrey certainly admires the heroism of the early Britons, but he follows the sixth-century writer Gildas in blaming the British for their defeat by Anglo-Saxon invaders; Geoffrey says that divine retribution has come because of the Britons' "pride" (Descrip. 5) and attributes the contemporary subservient state of the Welsh to their failure to maintain unity among themselves (XI. 185). So, for Michael Faletra, Geoffrey legitimates "Norman colonization of Wales by creating and perpetuating textual myths of the innate defeatedness – and the inevitable defeatability – of the British people" (FALETRA 2000: 82).

At the end of the *Historia* Geoffrey suggests that the Welsh are now called 'Welsh' and no longer known as Britons because they have proved unworthy of their ancestors' name (XI. 207). For Geoffrey, the valour and strength of the early Britons has been transferred to the Bretons rather than maintained by the Welsh: having described the foundation of Brittany as the establishment of a "second Britain" (*alteram Britanniam* (V. 86 cf. V. 88)), Geoffrey depicts several British kings as depending on Breton support (perhaps as William I had done in the Norman Conquest); in Book XI a character (Caduallo) attributes the weakness of the Britons to the fact that their best men had all settled in Brittany (XI. 195).

These pro-Breton sympathies may, as we have seen, be linked to Geoffrey's Monmouth origins. They led J. S. P. Tatlock in his hugely influential work on the *Legendary History of Britain* (1950) to characterise Geoffrey as a Breton patriot promoting a pan-Celtic alliance of Welsh and Bretons and, as Faletra puts it, "this model of Geoffrey as the mouthpiece of the Celtic fringe has informed much subsequent scholarly work" (2000: 61). But more recently a number of scholars have become more sensitive to the ways in which Geoffrey writes in the service of Norman, or Anglo-Norman, rule. Roberts and Gillingham argue that Geoffrey attempts to cater to both Welsh and Norman audiences; Schichtman and Finke show that where Geoffrey manipulated his known source material he did so in ways designed to please his Norman patrons.[17] The most recent work in this area has tended to see Geoffrey as much less consistently pro-Welsh or even pro-Breton and much more supportive of Anglo-Norman sovereignty than earlier scholarship was disposed to do. So Faletra writes that

"Despite the occasionally pro-Briton, and indeed pro-Celtic implications of Geoffrey's text, and despite the fact that he seems to glorify the kings and heroes of the ancient Britons, the *Historia regum Britanniae* [. . .] finally supports the Normans in their tenure of an *imperium* over all of Britain." (FALETRA 2000: 61)

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[17] Roberts, 'Geoffrey'; Gillingham, 'Context and Purposes'; Martin Schichtman and Laurie Finke, 'Profiting from the Past: History as Symbolic Capital in the *Historia regum Britanniae*', *Arthurian Literature* 12 (1993), 1–35.

At first sight, this may seem a bold claim, as the *Historia*'s narrative concludes in the seventh century, some four hundred years before the Norman Conquest of 1066: how, then, can it support Norman rule? The answer lies in the last three words of that quotation: 'all of Britain'. Geoffrey consistently presents the island of Britain as a *single* political entity, from his description of *Britannia, insularum optima* (Britain, the best of islands) in Book I onwards. His history traces the successive dominance over the whole island by Britons, Romans, and then Saxons; by showing that successive peoples proved incapable of maintaining sovereignty over the ideal political unit that is the whole of Britain, Geoffrey is able to imply that the Normans are now the rightful successors of previously dominant peoples. He traces a *translatio imperii* from Britons to Romans to Saxons and leaves the reader to see that as the Saxons proved unable to withstand Norman conquest, the Normans are now rightful rulers of the whole island, not only of England. Tolkien maintained that the idea of Britishness was invented to support the union of the English and Scottish crowns; there is a sense in which Geoffrey of Monmouth promoted a similar sense of island-wide unity for similar political reasons back in the 1130s. For Geoffrey, unity is strength; in his history the failure of rulers to maintain unity is often the cause of their defeat: even Arthur's great empire falls to internal conflict with Mordred's treachery. Writing in the 1130s, including during the first years of Stephen's troubled reign (1135–54), Geoffrey offers a timely warning to the Anglo-Norman elite of the dangers in civil war.

3. Tolkien's Knowledge of Geoffrey's Work

Comparing Tolkien and Geoffrey, their work and its relation to contemporary issues of national identity, is illuminating, regardless of any direct connection between the two writers. In fact, though, Tolkien knew Geoffrey's work well. Tolkien's familiarity with Geoffrey's writing is evident in the edition of the Middle English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* on which he collaborated with E. V. Gordon. The edition was originally published in 1925, before the

appearance of editions of Geoffrey by Edmond Faral and Acton Griscom and Robert Ellis Jones with which Tolkien could have become acquainted later. So Tolkien and Gordon refer students to the earlier and inferior editions by J. A. Giles and San Marte [A. Schulz] as well as to the Everyman translation by Sebastian Evans.[18] They also make fairly frequent reference to Geoffrey in their editorial material and notes.

We can also detect an affectionate nod to Geoffrey in the mock scholarly Foreword to Tolkien's *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949), with its claim be a translation from 'very Insular Latin' into English of a legend that affords a glimpse of 'life in a dark period of the history of Britain' and its statement that 'Since Brutus came to Britain many kings and realms have come and gone' – which happens also to be an accurate one-line summary of Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*.[19] The foreword suggests that the tale must have taken place "after the days of King Coel, maybe, but before Arthur or the Seven Kingdoms of the English" (TOLKIEN 1999: 8).

Tolkien nowhere refers to Geoffrey as a model for his creative writing. We know, on the contrary, that Tolkien deliberately rejected the idea of retelling the Arthurian legend that Geoffrey had popularised and in his 1951 letter to Waldman, Tolkien explicitly denied that the story of Arthur was English enough for his purposes: "Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing" (TOLKIEN 1985: 144). Tolkien's only attempt at retelling Arthurian legend, his poem on *The Fall of*

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[18] J. A. Giles, ed. (1844). *The British History of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, trans. A Thompson, rev. edn (London: James Bohn); San Marte, [A. Schulz], ed. (1854). *Gottfried's von Monmouth Historia Regum Britanniæ, mit literar-historischer Einleitung und ausführlichen Anmerkungen, und Brut Tysylio, altwälsche Chronik in deutscher Uebersetzung* (Halle: Eduard Anton); and Evans in MONMOUTH, *Histories of the Kings* (1912).

[19] J. R. R. Tolkien (1999). *Farmer Giles of Ham: 50th Anniversary Edition,* ed. Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, London: HarperCollins.

Arthur, remained an unfinished fragment and was not published until 2013.[20] But although elsewhere Tolkien quite deliberately avoided the material which Geoffrey of Monmouth had popularized, given Tolkien's evident familiarity with the *Historia* it is not impossible that Tolkien realised that he was doing something in some ways similar to the work of his Oxford-based predecessor.

4. A Modern Geoffrey (and a Medieval Tolkien?)

Whether or not Tolkien was aware of any similarities between his creative project and that of Geoffrey of Monmouth, it can be argued that both writers were constructing national mythologies, Tolkien offering the English people a specifically English mythology and Geoffrey promoting a united Britain rightly under Anglo-Norman rule. Scholars have compared Tolkien's determination to make good England's lack of a mythology to Elias Lönnrot's creation of the Finnish national epic, *The Kalevala*, in the nineteenth century.[21]

Just as Tolkien's national myth-making means he can appropriately be compared with figures like Lönnroth, so he might be thought of as a 'modern Geoffrey of Monmouth', doing something similar in the twentieth century to what Geoffrey did in the twelfth. But it is also possible to see things from the other direction: the evidence that we have of what Tolkien thought he was doing might offer an insight into what Geoffrey was doing, or might have thought he was doing. Geoffrey left no letters, no theoretical lecture on the nature of myth or historiography, and few comments about his aims and intentions. Assuming that the 'very old British book' to which he defers is a fiction, one cannot help wondering what he thought he was doing inventing stories and passing them off as history when he knew that in

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[20] J. R. R. Tolkien (2013). *The Fall of Arthur*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, London: HarperCollins.

[21] On parallels between Tolkien and Lönnrot see, for example, Verlyn FLIEGER, "A mythology for Finland: Tolkien and Lönnrot as mythmakers" in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, ed. Jane Chance (2004: 277-83).

fact he had made them up: did he expect people to believe he had used a British/Breton source? Or did he expect them to see through that fiction? (Assuming it was a fiction) We can never know, of course. But perhaps Tolkien's conception of myth-making as expressive of a certain kind of truth (other than the literal and historical) is relevant here.

Reflecting on medieval understandings of the genre to which Geoffrey's work actually claims to belong encourages one to think along these lines. Although I have referred to the *Historia regum Britanniae* as myth or legend, it presents itself (not least in its title) as history. Its fanciful contents mean it conveys very little history in the modern sense, but medieval conceptions of historical writing were rather different from ours. In the Middle Ages history was seen as a rhetorical or persuasive genre and it was perfectly normal and expected that historians would use their imaginations in order to bring out more effectively what they perceived to be the underlying historical truth, even though this often meant writing what is, to us, fiction. The most obvious and widely prevalent manifestation of this is the invention of speeches which are put into the mouths of historical characters but which cannot possibly be verbatim records of what they actually said. Medieval people believed that one might use the imagination in order to arrive at a deeper historical truth; this does not mean that they were incapable of distinguishing between history and fiction. The early reception of Geoffrey's *Historia* is instructive here: although Henry of Huntingdon was taken in by it; William of Newburgh was not deceived:

"[…] in order to expiate the Britons of their sins, a writer has emerged in our times who has woven the most fantastic lies regarding them […] This man is called Geoffrey, and he is surnamed Arthur due to the fact that he put the fabulous deeds of Arthur into Latin, drawing from the old yarns of the Britons and from his own imagination and cloaking them with the name of actual history." (in MONMOUTH 2008: 289)

Tolkien, of course, has also been criticised by unsympathetic readers for indulging in fantasy. Elizabeth Solopova writes that Tolkien's success

"[…] in creating an illusion of historical truth may be partly responsible for a persistent suspicion that he actually believed in the legends and mythology that he invented. The same question is sometimes asked about him, as is asked about medieval writers whose work appears to be somewhere on the borderline between history and fiction: is it deliberate invention or did they think that they were writing history?" (SOLOPOVA 2014: 241)

We know that Tolkien invented Middle-earth's history and we know that he knew that was what he was doing. But we have also seen that he wrote in a letter that he had 'the sense of recording what was already there somewhere'. At a time when the dividing line between history and fiction was more blurred than it later became, might it be that Geoffrey of Monmouth would have said something similar about his own work, even though he also knew he was inventing it? Verlyn Flieger has written that "The chief function of any mythology, real or feigned, is to mirror a culture to itself, giving it a history and identity" (FLIEGER 2005: 139). It is this gift of a history and identity which Geoffrey and Tolkien offer to twelfth-century Britain and twentieth-century England. Neither writer, I think, would accept that a feigned history could not also be true on a deeper level.

So, not only was Tolkien a kind of modern Geoffrey of Monmouth, but Geoffrey of Monmouth was a kind of medieval Tolkien, too. The comparison is illuminating in both directions. Both these Oxford-based writers born outside England produced enormously popular pseudo-historical fantasies that have stimulated many other creative artists in various media, just as Tolkien hoped might happen when he wrote to Waldman of a desire to "leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (TOLKIEN: 1981: 145). National identity was a fundamental driving force behind the two writers' creativity. Whereas Tolkien rejected the idea of Britishness, in the modern sense, and identified himself as English (not British), or more locally as Mercian or Hwiccian, Geoffrey's work embodied an alternative vision of the island of Britain as a single, united polity. Nevertheless, however narrowly national the impulse behind their writing may have been (and Tolkien, at least, came to realise that his English mythology had more than merely national resonances), the work has, in both cases,

outgrown its origins and been read, admired, and adapted by people of many, many other nationalities.

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