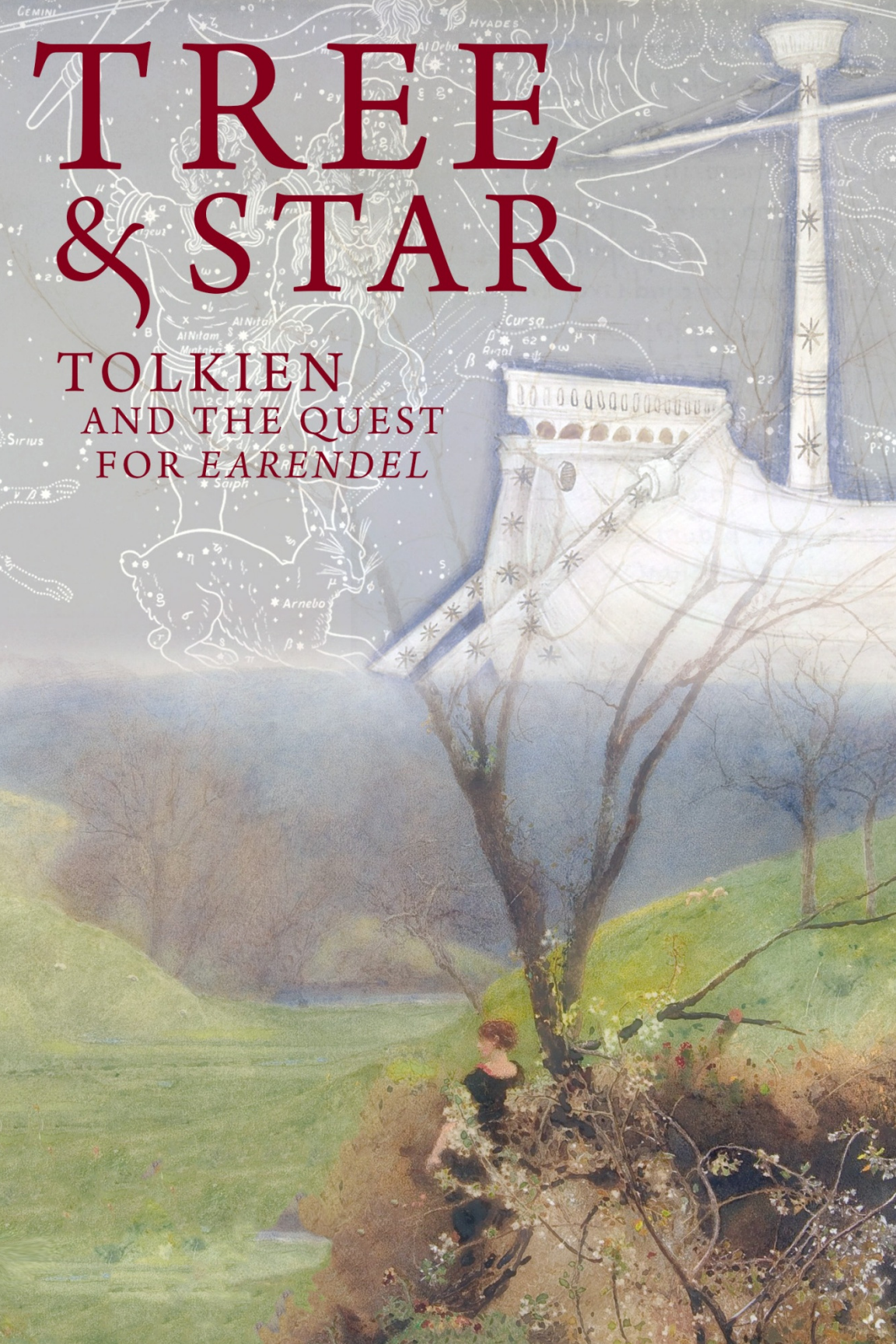


# TREE & STAR

TOLKIEN  
AND THE QUEST  
FOR EARENDEL



## Back cover text:

Once upon a time the word *earendel* had been scribed in an old Anglo-Saxon text. The young J.R.R. Tolkien later encountered this word and thought it beautiful and unusual. His discovery launched him on a lifelong voyage through a world of dazzling imagination. My book examines the history and many variants of this mysterious word, and specifically Tolkien's initial quest for it during the 1913-15 period, with reference to the wider state of knowledge at that time.

Along the winding way I ask several simple new questions:—

- What if Tolkien had also attempted to trace the word further back in time, to a time before the Anglo-Saxon period? What would he have been able to find and how?
- What if he had also investigated related archaic star-lore, classical myths, and had related his new-found word to the new archaeology and scholarship of the period?
- Where could such an extended quest have led him, and what creative inspiration might he have found there?

This book carefully suggests fresh new sources for the genesis of Tolkien's legendarium — sources discovered through a close interweaving of biography, textual evidence, historical context, ancient myth and informed speculation. Along the way, much is also discovered relating to the word *earendel* and its variants, and a number of small mysteries in Tolkien studies are solved.

Cover font is Arno. Adaptation with a public domain painting by John William North (1842-1924). This is similar in style to four paintings Tolkien had on his study walls for much of his life.

# TREE & STAR

Tolkien and the quest for *earendel*

by David Haden

2022

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# Introduction

ON the 24<sup>th</sup> day of September 1914 the young and tanned John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was enjoying one of the finest summers in living memory, working outdoors on his aunt's Phoenix Farm.<sup>1</sup> This was a large 'market garden' farm located in a small rural village near the English city of Nottingham. The farm's fields of flowers, runner-beans and rows of 'taters drowsed and buzzed in the unexpected late summer heat,<sup>2</sup> while warm evenings offered spectacular sunsets which lingered on into the dusk, their sky-colours made especially vivid by dust drifting high in the upper atmosphere. This dust had been lifted there by a far-away strato-volcano, a giant mountain akin to Tolkien's later fictional creation of Mount Doom. This had caused the largest volcanic eruption of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> A portentously large new comet also graced the fading evening scene.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The young Tolkien had stayed at the Farm before, in 1913, so was already familiar with the place. He later made a trip to the Farm by motorcycle in late 1915 or early 1916. For more on the location, the 1914 stay, and Tolkien's aunt, see: Andrew H. Morton and John Hayes, *Tolkien's Gedling, 1914: The Birth of a Legend*, 2008. The book has useful photos of the farm in photographic inserts (see: vi, xiii, xvi, and map).

<sup>2</sup> The fine summer of 1914 was also an extended one according to post-war folk memory and the *Monthly Weather Report of the Meteorological Office* (September 1914).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* There had been a... "striking series of Krakatoa-like sunsets last year [1913], at intervals from early June to mid-December" (*Symons's Meteorological Magazine*, March 1914, page 33) which were attributed to the volcanic eruption in Alaska in 1912, an eruption now said to be the fourth largest in the last 100,000 years. The stratospheric dust from this massive event did not fully settle back to earth until late 1914... "Astronomers report that the dust from the explosion of the Katmai volcano, in the Aleutian Islands, in August 1912, has now nearly settled." (*The Independent*, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1914, Vol. 80, page 263). Also of interest, in a comparison with Mount Doom, is that when it erupted Katmai formed the vast Mordor-like "Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes" and in doing so displaced several large villages of diminutive native Eskimo who lived nearby. According to *Indian Placenames in America* the origin of the local name is unknown, so there can be no influence on Tolkien through the name

He would have looked across the low valley and deepening sunset, to the large Moon and the unusually bright Evening Star.<sup>5</sup> Under such a *faerie* sky, what young man might not wish to forget for a moment his recent call to war, and the prospects of battle and death? To use the last light of day to pen a few lines of aethereal poetry for another world? The 22 year-old Tolkien wrote such words in a poem. In his notebook he crafted the very first instance of his ‘legendarium’.

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meaning ‘Doom’. For Tolkien ‘Doom’ was likely from “The crack of doom”, a well-known colloquial phrase of the Edwardian period, drawn from *Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene 1.

<sup>4</sup> Delavan’s Comet was discovered on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1913, first spotted in the anciently-named river constellation Eridanus (*Publications of the Goodsell Observatory*, 1915). The comet “became visible to the naked eye at the end of August [1914], gradually increasing in brightness” (*Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*). “The new comet has moved very slowly northwestward across the west boundary of the constellation Eridanus” (*Popular Astronomy: A Review*, 1914). “Delavan’s Comet [...] is approaching us and as it grows in brightness it will be a conspicuous object in the sky during the coming weeks.” (*The Times* of London, 8<sup>th</sup> August 1914). “It rapidly increased in brilliance, and soon became quite a conspicuous and interesting object in the evening sky, and [was] quite entitled to rank high among the naked-eye comets of recent times.” (*Transactions and Journal of Proceedings*, Dumfriesshire and Galloway Nat. Hist. and Ant. Soc., 1915). This bright and major comet had twin tails 30 degrees apart, one curving away and one straight, somewhat like a runic mark, although this feature was only clearly visible through a telescope. It is then tempting to suggest educated observers would have known that 17<sup>th</sup> December was the Roman *Saturnalia* and would have reached for Virgil’s *Aeneid* and recalled the portentous appearance of a large comet at the fall of Troy. Yet in 1914 it was surely unthinkable that the First World War would eventually come to be portrayed as having been ‘the first act’ in the fall of the British Empire.

<sup>5</sup> Old maps show that the back of the farm faced south-west and away from the road, so it should have had a good view of the south-western sky across a shallow valley. In September 1914 Tolkien would have seen a Venus appear, very brightly, at sunset:

“‘Astronomical Notes for September, 1914’. [...] Venus will be an evening star, setting a little more than an hour after the Sun.” “We will have to wait until September, 1914, before we will again see our sister world [of Venus] shine so brightly as an evening star.” (quotes both from *The Selborne Magazine*).

These contemporary comments are confirmed by my use of the Stellarium software, by using its ‘time travel’ functionality and geo-location. The time of Tolkien’s observation was just after sunset at 6pm, and the Moon would have appeared to ‘chase’ Venus.

More generally, this star of course ‘wanders’ in the sky — Venus had been the Morning Star until February 1914, then it became the Evening Star until the end of November 1914, then the Morning Star again. At times Venus also appears to wander into and to be subsumed by the Sun. The various “motions of the Evening Star” were known to Tolkien and used in his later work, as Kristine Larsen has observed in several excellent papers exploring the many connections between real astronomy and Tolkien’s legendarium. Her bibliography of her own work is easily found: “The Astronomy of Middle-earth: Astronomical Motifs and Motivations in the Work of J. R. R. Tolkien”.

Lotte Inkenhaag, “J.R.R. Tolkien’s Riddles: International Traditions, the *Exeter Book* Riddles, and *The Hobbit*”.

[2019 dissertation for Utrecht University. Summary account of the riddles in context, and the riddles are given in an appendix in English translation.]

W. P. Ker, “Notes on *Orendel* and other stories”, *Folk-Lore: Transactions of the Folk-Lore Society*, December 1897.

John Kirkup, “Mythology and history”, IN: Helal and Wilson (Eds.), *The Foot*, Churchill Livingstone, 1988. Volume 1.

[Substantial survey article on the foot, by a noted medical historian. It forms the first chapter in the first volume of a medical textbook.]

Peter Kitson, “Gawain/Gwalchmai and his Peers: Romance Heroes (and a Heroine) in England, the Celtic Lands, and the Continent”, *Nomina*, Vol. 23, 2000.

[Notes the early faery opera *Die Feen* by Wagner has a hero named Arindal. “Its plot draws on a Middle High German poem *Frauentreue*”, and “early nineteenth-century German mediaeval scholarship linked *Frauentreue* and *Orendel*” — the latter of course a cognate of *Earendel*.]

\* Barbara Kowalik, “Elbereth the Star-Queen Seen in the Light of Medieval Marian Devotion”, IN: Kowalik (Ed.), *O What a Tangled Web: Tolkien and Medieval Literature: A View from Poland*, Walking Tree, 2013. Cormare Series, No. 29.

Barbara Kowalik, “The Corn-Hero Myth in *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer*, and Tolkien’s ‘King Sheave’”, *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, No. 3, 2016.

Tommy Kuusela, “In Search of a National Epic: The use of Old Norse myths in Tolkien’s vision of Middle-earth”, IN: *Approaching Religion: The Legacy of Lauri Honko: Contemporary Conversations*, Vol. 4, No. 1.