

TOLKIEN: ÉCLAIRER LES TÉNÈBRES

Review by Nancy Martsch

Tolkien: Éclairer les ténèbres ("Lighting the darkness") graphic novel; text by Will Duraffourg, illustrations by Giancarlo Caracuzzo, colouring by Flavia Caracuzzo & Joël Odone; Toulon: Éditions Soleil, 2019. In French. Hard, €17.95; Kindle €10.99 from amazon.fr. 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 13/16" (22.6x29.6 cm), 84 pp. Cover illo by Jean-Sébastien Rossbach shows Tolkien, a weary, filthy soldier, looking out from a trench shelter, walls covered with a map of Regina Trench & elvish material, illuminated by an elven lamp.

Despite the graphic novel format, this is a serious biography of Tolkien, and a reading knowledge of French is necessary to get the most from it. The premise is that Tolkien's war experience influenced his work, and the focus is on Tolkien and his friends the TCBS, at school and most especially at war. The authors follow Tolkien's army movements in detail, while quoting the friends' letters (in French translation) as they discuss their poetry and ideals. Much of this is taken from John Garth's Tolkien and the Great War, and (for Tolkien's earlier and later life) from Humphrey Carpenter's Tolkien: A Biography and Scull & Hammond's The JRR Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology. And, like the recent Tolkien film, Éclairer les ténèbres begins with Tolkien's hallucinating in hospital (seeing scenes from The Lord of the Rings !) before turning to a flashback of Tolkien's life. Then the story continues after Tolkien's release from hospital, his life with Edith (including a very pregnant Edith dancing at Roos, but no hemlock blossoms), and Tolkien's anxiety over whether or not he will be sent back to the front. We see the loss of so many of Tolkien's friends, a (possibly fictionalized) quarrel with his sole surviving friend Christopher Wiseman; a very brief précis of his writing and later life (including a drawing of Tolkien's family, two boys and a girl - should be *three* boys and a girl). The story ends with Christopher Wiseman and John Ronald reconciled at Edith's grave, and finally with Christopher alone at Tolkien's grave, acknowledging that "you have succeeded in carrying on our light... And the world will understand."

Unfortunately, the authors give a physically and psychologically ugly portrait of Fr Morgan, probably derived from Carpenter. Edith is shown unhappy over the sacrifice of her piano career and neglect by Tolkien absorbed in his elven language creation. There are a few errors - the number of Tolkien's children, for instance. Military historians may find others. And some fictionalizing - Rob Gilson's body was found, not vaporized. Still the author and artists have tried very hard to accurately depict both military scenes and the buildings which Tolkien knew. And I do not know of any other biography which emphasizes the fellowship of Tolkien's friends to such a degree.

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