

'A review of Tolkien's *The Story of Kullervo*.' *The Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature*, Autumn 2016, vol. 21

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Story of Kullervo*

ed. Verlyn Flieger

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Tolkien posthumous publications keep returning to our bookshelves and they seem to do it on a more regular basis in recent times. Since 2013, we have been offered the opportunity to welcome 'the last "new" Tolkien work' at least once a year: *The Fall of Arthur* (2013), *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (2014) and *The Story of Kullervo* (2015). If those were not enough to satisfy the literary quench of fans, in 2016 they will be treated to a *Tolkienian* double bill: *A Secret Vice. Tolkien on invented languages* (edited by Dimitra Fimi & Andrew Higgins) and *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (edited by Verlyn Flieger with a preface from Christopher Tolkien).

Some readers and critics may find in this extraordinary proliferation of new (old) books a perfect example of Tolkien as the literary Golden Goose par excellence. The impact of 'the new rare Tolkien book to be (re) published' might perhaps one day lose some of its power to interest an international group of, mostly, fans under a permanent spell, however, that day is yet to come. Stuart Lee reminds us that 'any title bearing Tolkien's name immediately opens up international sales to a large and ever-hungry readership' (Lee, 2015). That being said, *The Story of Kullervo* is far from being a publication lacking academic merit, and it will certainly be treasured by a number of casual readers and fans.

As it is well known Tolkien's fascination with Finnish legends and the *Kalevala* started as a young student at King Edward's School and nearly ruined his Hon. Mods, 'becoming the original germ of the Silmarillion' in the author's own words (Letters, p.87). In *The Story of Kullervo*, Verlyn Flieger, one of the world's foremost Tolkien scholars, offers an in depth insight into the author's exploration of the *Kalevala* and the creative response derived from such activity. Flieger's edition includes, besides the unfinished *The Story of Kullervo*, two versions of Tolkien's essay (or rather drafts of

academic talks) 'On "The Kalevala" or Land of Heroes' and Flieger's own essay, 'Tolkien, *Kalevala* and "The story of Kullervo"'.

The volume also offers Flieger's informative introduction, Tolkien's own artistic depiction of 'The Land of Pohja' as the book's frontispiece, and several images of manuscript pages in Tolkien's own hand such as those including plot synopsis (MS Tolkien B 64/6 folio 21 recto and verso) which the editor has used to suggest what she sees as Tolkien's projected ending. The notes and commentary for Tolkien's take on the Finnish national epic and for the essays are not only useful, but completely necessary for the wider readership that the editor is trying to reach with this publication. *The Story of Kullervo* and most of its accompanying material had already been published in *Tolkien Studies VII* in 2010, which might make certain readers question the need for this volume. Furthermore, the early date of composition alongside the incompleteness of the story, could justify a critical approach to this publication which wishes to consider whether Tolkien would have deemed this material publishable at all. One certainly wonders if a non specialist audience will appreciate the opportunity to look at two versions of a text conceived for a series of talks in Oxford, which exist in manuscript and typescript form, and which undoubtedly show, through a careful analysis of modifications and revision of the early draft, a great insight into the mind at work of one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

Verlyn Flieger explains how *The Story of Kullervo* 'needed to reach a larger audience than that of a scholarly journal' (p.viii) and after reading the tale of 'Hapless Kullervo', one is tempted to accept such view. Fans and scholars alike will enjoy the possibility of exploring Tolkien's interaction with the primitive tales in the original Finnish *runos* of the *Kalevala* as originally recorded by Elias Lönnrot in the 19th Century, and as translated into English by W.F. Kirby and read by Tolkien in 1911. Flieger observes that if *The Story of Kullervo* was written sometime between 1912-1914, 'this is the work of a beginning writer' (p. 140). The young Tolkien is also known to have composed two poems, in 1911, in which he casted himself in the role of Lemminkainen, one of the heroes in the *Kalevala*, poems discussed by Andrew S. Higgins in his PhD Thesis 'The Genesis of J.R.R. Tolkien Mythology' (2015), whose section on "The Kalevala, Finnish and Tolkien's language invention" the reader of this review is invited to consult. The tragic nature of the story of Kullervo, an orphan never in control of his own life, although as Flieger points out, does not offer 'a one-to-one equation between Kullervo

and Tolkien' (p. 144), it certainly presents interesting parallelisms between character and author.

The Story of Kullervo serves as a window into Tolkien's earliest period of creative energy. If Tolkien believed to have found in the Finnish language and the *Kalevala* a new world, primitive and fresh at a time, Flieger edition offers the readers of Tolkien's fiction a similar experience. Kullervo is not as elaborated as Túrin Turambar, his direct fictional heir, and Tolkien reconciliation of two world views (pagan and Christian) under a single narrative framework is not yet fully articulated. Tolkien took the Kullervo cycle from a stage in which he reflected on its translation into Modern English to a process of adaptation which would ultimately result in a move towards invention. Flieger's illuminating notes and comments contribute to a better understanding of Tolkien's use of new names for elements found in the story's source as well as names invented for new characters and places in the author's own retelling (e.g. Kullervo's unnamed sister in the *Kalevala* becomes Wanona or Wanora and the God of heaven in the original is given the names Ilu, Iluko and Ulko) Tolkien's language invention here is particularly interesting when read in the context of its immediate impact on the author's first fully developed invented language: Quenya.

Readers of *The Story of Kullervo* might find the tale strange, ambiguous and lacking the eucatastrophic treatment of likely defeat that they have come to expect from the mature work of Tolkien. This is the tragic story of a doomed hero which the young Tolkien liked for being so in a different way to the classical and Germanic literature which he considered a Childhood attraction, possibly for its 'arresting strangeness'. Verlyn Flieger has done a great job at presenting Tolkien's adaptation of a material he loved, to readers who might struggle if unfamiliar with the text's source, but who will be always able to find a helpful note for confusing passages. The *Kalevala* is a work which deserves a wider audience, and no one like Tolkien has the power to rekindle the love for old texts in a modern audience. From the world of academia and Medieval studies we should welcome this new chance to read about hapless Kullervo, his people, their land and 'the air that blows in that country'.

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REFERENCES: