

J.R.R. Tolkien & *The Lord of the Rings*

Philately in Middle-earth

by Robert A. Moss

Fifty years ago I was a chemistry graduate student at the University of Chicago living in Charles Hitchcock Hall, a Prairie Gothic building listed in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. Hitchcock had a splendid lounge with a fireplace, wood-beamed ceiling, comfortable armchairs, leaded windows, and many lamps. I spent hours there reading, and there I was approached by a Tolkien evangelist (whose name I have forgotten). This fellow student had a number of copies of *The Hobbit* and lent one if you promised to read and return it, much like those street corner evangelists in New York who gave you a Bible if you promised to read it. After several entreaties, I read *The Hobbit*. It seemed to me a pleasant enough children's story about hobbits (think half-sized humans or "halflings"), dwarves, dragons, orcs, golden treasure, and an all-powerful ring that rendered the wearer invisible. In truth, I struggled to finish it, and returned the book to the lender with polite thanks.

I thought I was done with Tolkien, but when I related the incident to newly arrived friends from Harvard, they asked if I had yet read *The Lord of the Rings*, the subsequent Tolkien books then sweeping the Harvard campus. No, I had not. They lent me the first volume of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. After a hundred pages, read in one sitting, I hurried to the University Library where I borrowed the second volume, *The Two Towers*. The library's copy of Volume 3, *The Return of the King*, was signed out, so I took the "el" downtown



to Brentano's where I bought my own copy. I subsequently returned for the other volumes, too. I still have them; the notation on their flyleafs reads "Chicago, October 1962."

Who was J.R.R. Tolkien, and how did he come to write *The Lord of the Rings*? John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, the child of overseas English parents, but he and his younger brother, Hilary, returned to England permanently when their father died in 1896. Tolkien was raised by his mother, Mabel, in Birmingham and in the nearby village of Sarehole. In 1900 Mabel and her children joined the Catholic Church and Catholicism became a central feature of the mature Tolkien's world-view. Mabel Tolkien died of diabetes in 1904, after which Father Francis Murphy became Ronald and Hilary's guardian.

Tolkien was educated at St. Edward's School in Birmingham and at Exeter College, Oxford. He manifested a remarkable gift for languages, learning Greek, Latin, Gothic, Welsh, and Finnish, as well as various old forms of German and English. Indeed, as a hobby, he began to create his own languages, from which his mythology and stories later grew. It was during his Oxford studies of Old English and Old Norse that he encountered the line "Hail Earendel brightest of angels, over Middle Earth sent unto men." From this seed, *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), the saga of Tolkien's great imagined reality, was to germinate many years later. One of its earliest manifestations was a poem written at this time, "The Voyage of Earendel the Evening Star." It was the beginning of Tolkien's own mythology, in which the legend of Eärendil the Mariner finds an honored place.

After completing his degree in English Language and



J.R.R. Tolkien.

Literature (with first class honors) in 1915, Tolkien married, enlisted as a second lieutenant, and was sent to fight in France during World War I. Sickened by trench fever, he was returned to England, and spent months in military hospitals. There he continued to work on his invented languages, Quenya and Sindarin, which would later become the languages of the elves in LOTR. By themselves, these languages, related to Finnish and Welsh, were unanchored, unassociated with their speakers or their poetry (which Tolkien also



First day cover of "Magical Worlds, classic fantasy books for children" (Great Britain, 1998). The 20p value (Scott 1820) honors Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

composed), and so Tolkien began to create a mythology as a back-story for the languages.

These early efforts led to the *Book of Lost Tales*, and related stories later collected in the *Silmarillion*. Neither of these books was published during his lifetime, but their contents served as the background for *LOTR*. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of *LOTR* is the feeling that it imparts of great depth, of a history that narrates merely a portion of a much larger body of related lore. The reader forms that impression because it is true — an intricate tapestry of interwoven mythology and languages underlies *LOTR*. When Tolkien came to write his epic, that imaginative world was already in place to be drawn upon.

In 1918 Tolkien began working at the Oxford English Dictionary, where he honed his philological skills on words beginning with W. In 1920 he was appointed Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds, beginning his academic career. He was to remain at Leeds for five years, during which time his intellectual life proceeded on two tracks: professional literary work, exemplified by a well-regarded new edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (with E.V. Gordon), and the continuing development of his mythology in *The Book of Lost Tales*.

In 1925 Tolkien returned to Oxford as Professor of Anglo-Saxon, and continued these parallel creative paths. His academic endeavors saw the publication of the highly influential lecture “Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics.” His mythology and languages now focused on the interconnected collection of tales and legends that would ultimately be edited and published in 1977 as *The Silmarillion* by his son, Christopher Tolkien. *The Silmarillion* contains Tolkien’s creation myth, including an account of the fall of an angelic being, Melchor, as the origin of evil. Also described is the creation of “Middle-earth,” the coming of elves and men into that region of the world, and an account of the forging of the rings of power and the wars related to them. Here, too, is a recasting of the Atlantis legend in the sinking of Numenor and the ruin of an ancient, noble culture of humankind. A high point is the story of Beren and Lúthien, which tells of the love of a mortal man for an elf maiden. Tolkien said that his wife, Edith, “was and knew she was my Lúthien.” The names “Beren” and “Lúthien” are engraved on the tombstone that J.R.R. and Edith Tolkien share in a cemetery on the outskirts of Oxford.

The *Silmarillion* was ultimately the origin of *LOTR*, but an intermediate step was *The Hobbit*. Legend recounts that in the early 1930s, while grading examinations, Tolkien used

an empty page of an examination booklet to write the cryptic sentence: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” By 1936 he had nearly completed the story of the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, and his quest to help a band of dwarves recover a golden hoard taken from them by the dragon Smaug. The story grew in part as bedtime readings to his four children, but an incomplete manuscript was brought to the attention of Stanley Unwin of the publishers George Allen & Unwin.

Unwin asked his ten-year-old son, Rayner, to read it; Rayner approved and Unwin asked Tolkien to finish the tale for publication. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937 to critical acclaim; it has not been out of print since, and is now recognized as a staple of children’s literature.

In 1998 Great Britain issued a set of five stamps to celebrate “Magical Worlds, classic fantasy books for children.” The 20p value (Scott 1820), picturing the confrontation of Bilbo and Smaug,



Great Britain, Scott 1820.

is devoted to Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Other stamps in the set represent *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (C.S. Lewis), *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (E. Nesbit), *The Borrowers* (Mary Norton), and *Through the Looking Glass* (Lewis Carroll).

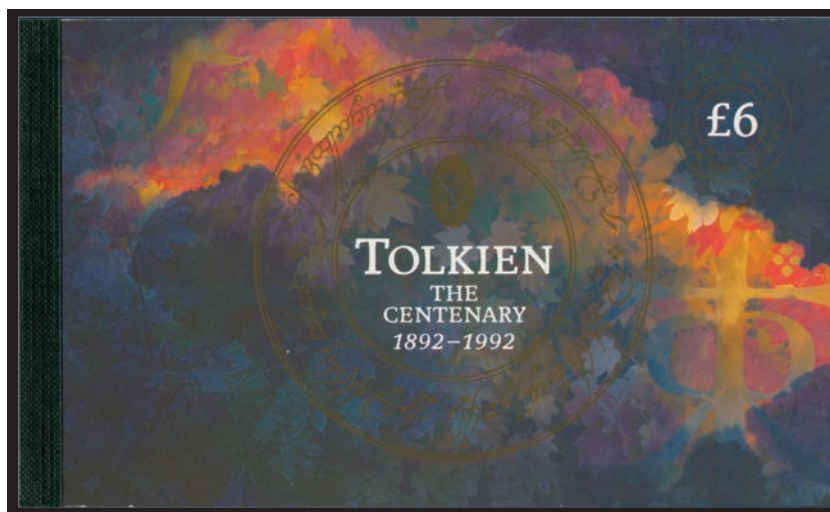
The success of *The Hobbit* led Unwin to request a sequel. Tolkien responded by submitting portions of *The Silmarillion*, but Unwin’s reader had mixed reactions and the decision went against publication: the public wanted more hobbits, was Unwin’s advice to Tolkien. In response, Tolkien began the “New Hobbit,” initially conceived as a sequel in which Bilbo’s nephew, Frodo, embarks on his own adventure. However, the tale darkened, deepened, and acquired its own momentum as Tolkien “discovered” the true nature of the magic ring that Bilbo had obtained in *The Hobbit*. It was, in fact, the Ruling Ring, forged in the volcanic fires of Mount Doom by the evil Sauron, a servant of Melchor. Into this ring Sauron distilled a great portion of his evil nature. How it was taken from him, how it came to be lost and Bilbo to acquire it, are dealt with in other installments of Tolkien’s mythology, but as he continued to write, it became apparent that the new tale was less a sequel to *The Hobbit* than a sequel to *The Silmarillion*, imbued with similar serious intent.

Tolkien labored on the new story from 1937 through 1939, in parallel with his normal academic duties. As Humphrey Carpenter relates in his biography of Tolkien, “Every aspect of the earlier work was playing a part in the new story: the mythology itself, which provided both a historical setting and a sense of depth, the elvish languages that he had developed so painstakingly and thoroughly over more than twenty-five years....”

With the start of World War II in 1939, Tolkien's time became more fragmented, much of it claimed by wartime instructional duties at Oxford. The tale made slow progress, but a key plot development was the formation of a Fellowship, dedicated to helping Frodo in his quest to destroy Sauron's ring, and with it the power of evil. The Fellowship represented an alliance of hobbits, men, elves, dwarves, and Gandalf the Wizard. It is tempting to regard *LOTR* as an allegory of the war, with the Allies or Fellowship pitted against Sauron, representing the Axis powers. However, Tolkien denied this reading and expressed a general distaste for allegory, adding, "There is a 'moral,' I suppose, in any tale worth telling. But that is not the same thing." *LOTR* was eventually completed in 1949, but it would take five more years until the huge saga, divided into three volumes, each comprised of two "books," was finally published in 1954 and 1955.

The reviews were decidedly mixed; C.S. Lewis (author of the *Narnia* series and a close friend) and W.H. Auden wrote highly favorable reviews, but Edmund Wilson, the eminent literary critic, was dismissive. Nevertheless, sales slowly gathered momentum, spurred by a BBC radio version, so that the first printing of 3,500 copies of Volume 1 had to be augmented by a second printing only six weeks later. A real turning point came in 1965 when Ace Books issued an inexpensive, pirated, three-volume paperback edition in the United States, which sold wildly among college students, impelling the publication of an authorized paperback edition by Ballantine Books. During 1965, 100,000 copies of the Ace edition were sold and then a million copies of the Ballantine version; sales became exponential. The extraordinary popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy continues today, and received a giant boost from Peter Jackson's three-film adaptation, released in 2001–2003. On the basis of both sales and reader surveys, the trilogy is one of the most popular fictional works of the twentieth century; more than fifty million copies have been sold worldwide.

What makes *The Lord of the Rings* so captivating? It is "escape fiction" at the highest level; in C.S. Lewis's words, "heroic romance, gorgeous, eloquent, and unashamed...." It offers an alternative reality with a richly detailed history, a world that is at once remote yet still recognizable, where good and evil are clearly defined and good triumphs through travail and sacrifice. In the 1960s, with the Cuban missile crisis and heart-breaking political assassinations, and more generally through the decades of the Cold War, when an atomic Armageddon seemed possible or even likely, Tolkien's world provided not only escape, but consolation. The trilogy spoke directly to the '60s counterculture; to some,



Cover of Great Britain Scott Bk157, issued in 1998 to commemorate the centenary of J.R.R. Tolkien's birth.

the books were an acid trip without acid. Or, as E.E. Cummings put it, "listen: there's a hell of a good universe next door; let's go." A Tolkien "cult" arose among young people, who wore buttons that proclaimed "Frodo Lives"; Tolkien societies were formed; and the books were translated into many languages. I have sets in Hebrew and Russian, gifts from my children.

Tolkien passed away in 1973 at the age of eighty-one. He never completed *The Silmarillion*, but his son Christopher, also an Oxford don, published an edited, coherent version in 1977. Christopher went on to publish *Unfinished Tales* (1980) and a twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* (1983–1996), based on Tolkien's extensive notes and unpublished writings.

Tolkien's achievement has since been recognized in the philatelic world. In 1992 Britain issued a "Prestige" stamp booklet (Scott Bk157) honoring the centenary of Tolkien's birth. There are no specifically Tolkien stamps within the eight-leaved booklet. Rather, it contains four panes of lithographed Machin heads of Queen Elizabeth II at several values; however, the stamp panes alternate with four two-sided illustrated leaves devoted to Tolkien's life and works. An interesting quotation included in the booklet is from a letter Tolkien wrote to the publisher Milton Waldman: "I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own.... I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend ... which I could dedicate simply: to England, to my country." Tolkien's phrase "it had no stories of its own" is curious. Surely the medievalist professor had not forgotten Chaucer, Beowulf, or the legends of King Arthur and Camelot. Rather, he referred to mythological antecedents set in a remote pre-historic Britain. Indeed, he termed his own tales a "Legendarium," and noted that "Middle-earth is our world.... I have (of course) placed the action in a purely imaginary (though not wholly impossible) period of antiquity, in which the shape of the

First day cover of Britain 2004 (Scott 2183–2192): block of ten stamps issued to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. Note the use of J.R.R. Tolkien's monogram in the postmark.



continental masses was different.” This statement, too, is included in the booklet, as are leaves devoted to an alphabet of runes that he devised for the language of the dwarves.

In 2004 Britain issued a se-tenant block of ten first class stamps to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *LOTR*. Nine of the stamps bear Tolkien’s own illustrations, and the tenth features a map of Middle-earth drawn by Christopher Tolkien.

Descriptions of the stamps follow.

Top row, left to right:

1. A map of Middle-earth (detail), depicting the mountains, rivers, and forests as described in the three volumes of *LOTR*.
2. The Forest of Lothlorien in spring — Lothlorien was an elven kingdom where the High-Elven Queen Galadriel lived.
3. The dust-jacket of the first edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, showing the ruling ring, forged by the Dark Lord Sauron. The central device is the eye of Sauron within the ring, which is surrounded by the ring’s inscription in Elvish script. Translated, it reads: “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the Darkness bind them.” It is this ring that Frodo the hobbit must bring into Mordor, Sauron’s realm, and destroy by casting it into the fires of the volcano where it was forged.
4. Rivendell, the home of Elrond, Half-Elven, in the foothills of the Misty Mountains, is a way station on the journey of Frodo and his companions in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The name in the Elven language, *Imladris*, means “deep cloven valley.”
5. The Hall at Bag-End in Hobbiton in the Shire, the

residence of Bilbo Baggins and his nephew, Frodo. Note the characteristic circular door. The name “Bag-End” derives from a local appellation for the Worcestershire farm of Tolkien’s Aunt Jane. Tolkien once noted that “I am in fact a hobbit in all but size. I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe and like good plain food....” The Shire is Tolkien’s idealized vision of rural England.

Bottom row, left to right:

6. Orthanc, the Tower of Isengard, occupied by the turncoat wizard Saruman, an ally of Sauron. Originally constructed by the men of Gondor, it was one of the most impregnable fortresses of Middle-earth.
7. The Doors of Durin, which guard the entrance to Moria, the great underground city of the dwarves, carved from living stone. The Fellowship essays a disastrous shortcut through Moria, where the wizard Gandalf is lost in combat with a fearsome Balrog, a demonic power created by Melchor long before this time. Those with a magnifying glass can read the text beneath the sketch of the door: “Here is written in the Feanorian characters according to the mode of Beleriand: (translated) The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria, Speak friend, and enter.” This text, in Elvish script, also appears across the archway, above the crown and seven stars representing the ancient Dwarf Lords. As Gandalf finally deduces, it is only necessary to speak the Elvish word *mellon* (“friend”) and the doors will open.
8. The Tower of Barad-Dur, the Dark Tower. It is the fortress of Sauron in Mordor, “with its towers and battlements, tall as hills, founded upon a mighty



Three miniature sheets from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: 40-cent Gandalf and Saruman (Scott 1750a); 90-cent Frodo and Samwise (Scott 1752a); \$2 Boromir (Scott 1755a).



mountain-throne above immeasurable pits....”:

9. Minas Tirith, the Tower of Guard, also known as Minas Arnor, the Tower of the Setting Sun. It was originally a fortified city built by men of the Kingdom of Gondor centuries before the era described in *LOTR*.
10. Fangorn Forest, the ancient forest that stood on the eastern side of the Misty Mountains and was home to the ents, guardians of the trees. Tree-like themselves, the ents, led by Treebeard, become allies of the Fellowship.

A second group of LOTR stamps feature the trilogy of films derived from the Tolkien novels, directed by Peter Jackson and filmed in his native New Zealand. Jackson's project required eight years to complete; his films were released in 2001, 2002, and 2003, with each film corresponding to one volume of the Tolkien trilogy. Although costing \$285 million to produce, the films were a major critical and financial success, garnering seventeen Academy Awards out of thirty nominations, and grossing \$2.91 billion, the sixth highest-grossing film series.

New Zealand issued three sets of LOTR stamps, each set corresponding to one film, offered simultaneously with opening of the movie. I must add that the commercial instincts of the New Zealand Post were given very free rein. For example, the “ultimate” stamp collection for *The Two Towers* costs NZ\$299.99. It includes two sets of gummed and self-adhesive stamps, six gummed stamp sheets (each of twenty-five stamps), a stamp booklet of ten self-adhesive stamps, a set of six miniature sheets, a set of six maximum cards, two first day covers with gummed and self-adhesive stamps, a set of miniature sheet first day covers, and a Presentation Pack. Redundancy not being my goal, I will describe only the miniature sheets, corresponding to eighteen

scenes, six from each of the three films. Alas, each stamp is simply a direct reproduction of a movie scene; there is no attempt at enhanced design or creative interpretation.

The Fellowship of the Ring (New Zealand, 2001, Scott 1750a–1755a). The 40-cent value shows the wizards Gandalf and Saruman walking in the gardens of Isengard, Saruman's fortress. Gandalf informs Saruman that the One Ring has been found, but he will shortly learn of Saruman's treacherous dealings with Sauron. The 80-cent design (not shown) depicts Galadriel, the Elven Queen. Frodo offers her the One Ring; although tempted, Galadriel refuses his offer, knowing that the ring corrupts whoever wields it. The 90-cent value pictures Frodo, the ring-bearer, and his closest hobbit companion, Samwise Gamgee. Here they await the arrival of Gandalf at the Inn of the Prancing Pony, but Gandalf, having been detained by Saruman, will not arrive.

On the \$1.30 sheet (not shown), the Guardian of Rivendell keeps watch over a sleeping Frodo in the elven kingdom where the Fellowship rests on its quest. The \$1.50 design (not shown) pictures Strider, the Ranger who befriends the



Three miniature sheets from *The Two Towers*: 40-cent Aragorn and Lady Eowyn (Scott 1835a); \$1.30 Haradrim soldiers (Scott 1838a); \$2 Lady Eowyn on the steps of Meduseld, the great hall of Rohan (Scott 1840a).



tures Frodo, dressed in the characteristic gray-green cloak of the wood-elves. The \$2 design shows Lady Eowyn on the steps of Meduseld, the royal hall of Rohan. She is strongly attracted to Aragorn, but his affections have long been given to Arwen Evenstar, daughter of the Elven King, Elrond.

hobbits and leads them on their journey. In reality, Strider is Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor. The \$2.00 sheet depicts Boromir, son of the Steward of Gondor. Boromir is shown blowing the ancient horn of Gondor to summon help during an attack by Saruman's orcs in which Boromir ultimately falls.

The Two Towers (New Zealand, 2002, Scott 1835a–1840a). The 40-cent stamp pictures Aragorn and Lady Eowyn, niece of King Theoden of Rohan. Aragorn and some of the Fellowship journey through Rohan and participate in the defense of its bastion, Helm's Deep, against the orcs of Saruman. The 80-cent design (not shown) features a mounted orc raider. The orcs are a savage cross of human and elvin stock originally bred by Melchor as soldiery for use in his wars against men and elves. Later, Sauron and Saruman breed orcs for their own nefarious purposes. The 90-cent sheet (not shown) pictures the wizard Gandalf, reborn after his calamitous battle with the Balrog in the Mines of Moria. Gandalf is the spiritual leader of the free peoples against the dominion of Sauron.

The \$1.30 design depicts a group of Haradrim soldiers. The Haradrim or Southrons are a fierce warrior race who are enemies of the Kingdom of Gondor and fight against it in alliance with Sauron's armies. The \$1.50 sheet (not shown) pic-

The Return of the King (New Zealand, 2003, Scott 18979a–1902a). The 40-cent design pictures Legolas the elven prince, member of the Fellowship and a formidable archer. Behind him is Gimli, the dwarf, Legolas's unlikely friend. The 80-cent value features Frodo holding aloft the vial given to him by Galadriel, which illuminates the dark. The 90-cent sheet depicts the hobbits Merry and Pippin, members of the Fellowship, in the flooded ruins of Isengard.

The \$1.30 value illustrates Aragorn in his status as King Elessar of Gondor; the King has returned to lead many allies in a final assault on Sauron's stronghold of Mordor. The \$1.50 sheet pictures Gandalf the White in the last battle before the Gates of Mordor. The \$2 value shows Gollum, once a hobbit-like creature named Sméagol, but now "twisted and ravaged" by thwarted desire for the One Ring that he lost to Bilbo many years before.

In 2004, a year after the release of the third film, New Zealand issued a se-tenant block of eight stamps (and a corresponding souvenir sheet) featuring the landscapes of Middle-earth. As shown here, the block consists of four vertical pairs. The upper row presents four scenes from the films, while the matching lower row shows the corresponding sites in New Zealand where the filming took place.

The 45-cent pair depicts the crossing at the Ford of Bru-



Six miniature sheets from *The Return of the King*: 40-cent Legolas (Scott 1897a); 80-cent Frodo (Scott 1898a); 90-cent Merry and Pippin (Scott 1899a); \$1.30 Aragorn as King Elessar (Scott 1900a); \$1.50 Gandalf the White (Scott 1901a); \$2 Gollum (Scott 1902a).



inen, a crucial episode in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when the elven princess Arwen summons a flood to stymie Sauron's Black Riders as she and Frodo escape into Rivendell. The matching stamp shows the Shotover River in Skippers Canyon near Queenstown, once a major goldfield, where this episode was filmed. The 90-cent pair deals with the Fellowship's trek to Rivendell. Legolas is seen surveying the

rocky approach. The paired stamp shows the outcroppings near Mt. Olympus in Kahurangi National Park on New Zealand's South Shore.

On the \$1.50 pair, the Fellowship approaches the Golden Hall of King Theoden of Rohan and the accompanying buildings of Edoras. Shown on the matching stamp is the bare, rocky hill near Mt. Sunday in the Southern New Zea-



Four scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and the four matching sites in New Zealand (New Zealand, 2004, Scott 1956–1963).

land Alps where the complex was constructed. Building the Rohan set required eleven months and subsequently has attracted many tourists. The \$2 pair shows Sam and Frodo approaching Mordor, passing through Emyr Muil, a range of hills cleft by the great River Anduin. The actual location, shown on the paired stamp, is in Tangariro National Park. There the volcanic rock and ash were used for the setting of Mordor's Mount Doom, where the One Ring was forged and where it was destroyed.

Lastly, in 2003, the Isle of Man issued a set of eight stamps and a miniature sheet devoted to the film version of *The Return of the King* (Scott 1013–1020 and 1021). Similarly to the New Zealand issues, the Isle of Man stamps depict stills from the movie featuring major characters of the saga. The values and their subjects include: 23-pence, Aragorn wearing the crown of Gondor; 27-pence, Gimli the Dwarf; 30-pence, Gandalf and King Theoden; 38-pence, Legolas mounted on his horse; 42-pence, Gollum; 47-pence, Sam and Frodo;

68-pence, Legolas shooting an arrow; and 85-pence, Aragorn riding to battle.

Illustrated here is the \$2 miniature sheet, which depicts the One Ring, as well as Aragorn and other characters from the film. Tolkien's One Ring, with its aura of evil power, has been likened to the Ring of the Niebelungen, the focus of Wagner's great operatic tetralogy. This comparison greatly irked Tolkien, who remarked, "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceased."

In the last chapter of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien wrote "...for the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Ring were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times." For Tolkien, it was indeed the end of a labor of many years, but it was not the end of the story and song of those times. Three generations later, *The Lord of the Rings* still casts its spell, and seems likely to remain a permanent part of the literary landscape. With a new film version of *The Hobbit* soon to be released, we may expect continued interest in Tolkien's mythos, and perhaps further philatelic tributes as well.

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The Author

Robert A. Moss is Research Professor and Louis P. Hammett Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He collects British covers, Channel Islands, Israel, and the Faroe Islands.



Miniature sheet issued in 2003 for *The Return of the King*, Isle of Man (Scott 1021).