JRR TOLKIEN

National Literacy Trust
Changing life stories

THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION

JRR Tolkien is one of the most celebrated authors in English literature. His most famous books - the children's book The Hobbit and the epic The Lord of the Rings trilogy are some of the most popular books ever written. Following the tales of mythical creatures and beings in 'Middle-earth' including dwarves, hobbits, orcs, elves and powerful sorcerers, The Lord of the Rings books have proved to be powerful tales which have inspired generations of readers. The recent Hollywood film versions of Tolkien's stories have been huge blockbuster successes and have brought the tales to life for a whole new generation.

Biography

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on 3 January 1892 in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State (which is now known as a province of modern day South Africa).

Tolkien's father sadly died when he was aged only five, so he, his mother and his brother moved to Britain and lived just outside Birmingham. Ronald (as he was known in the family), enjoyed exploring the local mill towns and villages. His mother taught him to read and helped him with his early love of botany (the study of plants). Ronald was a keen pupil and learned to read both English and Latin from an early age.

When he was twelve, Tolkien tragically lost his mother to diabetes and was brought up from then on by a Catholic priest who was a close friend of the family. He led an eventful life and as a member of his school's army cadet group, was chosen to line the streets outside Buckingham Palace for the coronation of King George V. Tolkien continued to be a keen student, doing very well at school and eventually attending Oxford University where he studied English Literature.

Battle of the Somme

The Battle of the Somme was one of the bloodiest battles in human history. Originally intended by the army generals to hasten victory for the allies during the war, it quickly became a treacherous and costly conflict on the western front. Taking place between July and November 1916, it injured or took the lives of nearly one million men.

Tolkien took part in the battle as a young signaller for the Lancashire Fusilliers regiment and saw firsthand the tragic loss of life and suffering which the men experienced.

His good friends Robert Gilson and Geoffrey Bache Smith were both killed in the battle, affecting Tolkien greatly.

Tolkien was inspired by the bravery of the young soldiers who had given their lives in battle and it is thought that he formulated many of his ideas for the battle sequences in his The Lord of the Rings trilogy while recovering from his own injuries in hospital.

The Fall of Gondolin

One such example of this was in Tolkien's tale The Fall of Gondolin which it is said he penned while recovering from trench fever in 1917. The tale is described by the publisher Harper Collins as a story of "two of the greatest powers in the world" and details how the great evil 'Morgoth' uses great metal dragons to launch an assault on the Elven city of Gondolin.

It is thought that these images are an allegory for the great tanks used by the opposing armies and which caused such destruction in the battle of the Somme. Tolkien often denied that there were such direct comparisons to be made by his work, but it is clear that the influence of seeing such destruction had a massive effect on the tone of his writing.

Questions

1. What are two of Tolkien's most famous books? (2)
2. What are some of the beings that appear in the Middle-earth stories? Name at least three. (3)
3. How old was Tolkien when his father died? (1)
4. Which King did Tolkien attend the coronation of? (1)
5. How many men were killed or injured at the Battle of the Somme? (1)

Extension questions

6. How long did the Battle of the Somme last? (1)
7. In which country was Tolkien born? (1)
8. What area of science was Tolkien interested in from an early age? (1)
9. Who unleashes 'great metal dragons' in 'The Fall of Gondolin'? (1)
10. What do you think an allegory is? (1)