

## 'A Milestone in BBC History? The 1955-56 Radio Dramatization of *The Lord of the Rings*'

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The 1955-56 BBC radio dramatization of *The Lord of the Rings* often only receives a minor mention in studies around the dramatization of Tolkien's works<sup>1</sup>. The first series ('Series One'), entitled 'The Fellowship of the Ring', was broadcast through November-December 1955 and covered the first volume. Series Two (November/December 1956, by now entitled 'The Lord of the Rings'), completed the story by attempting all of *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. Both series consisted of six episodes (c. 30-minutes each). Now overshadowed by the seminal BBC radio drama by Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell in 1981, and the films of the books, this adaptation is often only remembered for Tolkien's intense dislike of it<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, as no recordings survive, it would seem there is little to discuss. This article will attempt to redress this using the scripts of the original series<sup>3</sup>, and correspondences held in the BBC Written Archives<sup>4</sup>. However, by way of an opening, this was the first attempt to portray any of Tolkien's fiction through mass media<sup>5</sup>, and importantly it took place during Tolkien's lifetime when the books were more or less 'hot off the shelf' (*FR* published July 1954, *TT* November 1954, and *RK* October 1955).

### *The Lord of the Rings: Series One*

Tolkien had a long and strained relationship with the BBC dating back to his first interaction in 1936 (when part of his translation of *Pearl* was read on regional radio). The late 1940s and 1950s saw failed projects (e.g. a broadcast on Richard Rolle in 1949, or a biographical piece on Joseph Wright in 1955) and successful ones (e.g. his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* aired 6/12/53, and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, 3/12/54)<sup>6</sup>. This level of activity alone would be sufficient to demonstrate an ongoing, if often frustrating relationship between the broadcaster and Tolkien. However, in the middle of this there was the first ever dramatization of *The Lord of the Rings*. The

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<sup>1</sup> The notable exception being Scull and Hammond – *Reader*, pp. 11-17.

<sup>2</sup> See his letter to Molly Waldron (30/11/55, *Letters* #175) where he wrote he had not enjoyed the broadcasts, describing Norman Shelley's Bombadil as 'dreadful' and a mistaken description of Goldberry and Willowman as 'worse still'. See also *Letters* #176, plus the comment in June 1957 (*Letters* #198) describing the BBC's 'sillification'.

<sup>3</sup> Scripts for Series One survive in paper (R71/289) and microfilm (R. P. Nos. TLO 16820, -822, -821, TLO 17626, -643, 18653) at the BBC Written Archives, Caversham. I am extremely grateful to Samantha Blake, BBC Archivist, for her assistance.

<sup>4</sup> BBC Written Archives, R19/2194/2.

<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking the first adaptation of *The Return of the King* at least was by Silvia Goodall *School Scripts: Adventures in English* (BBC Home Service, 19/1 - 22/3/56). This consisted of ten episodes: The Hobbits; The Old Forest; Strider; The Ring Goes South; Treebeard the Ent; Riders of Rohan; The Way to Mordor; The Siege of Minas Tirith; The Last Battle; Mount Doom.

<sup>6</sup> The latter was not liked by Tolkien though, see *Letters* #152.

producer, Terence Tiller, may have first encountered Tolkien when he had been approached about producing *Homecoming* in 1954 (which he declined). However, what is clear is that by late 1954 (only a few months after the publication of *FR* and *TT*) a successful pitch was made to dramatize *FR* because on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1955 Tiller was already engaging the services of E. H. Wakeham (BBC Rights Department) to negotiate the necessary approvals and fees.

Even at this stage Tolkien was voicing concerns about covering '390 pages' in under five hours broadcast time but due to being 'bogged down in the business of term, and the labours of producing VOL III' he was unable to comment further (26/1/55, see *Reader*, p. 12). He did add though that Rayner Unwin had given his approval. Tiller replied (2/2/55) noting Tolkien's understandable request for more details before giving consent, explaining that 'the dialogue of the original book would be preserved as far as possible'. A Narrator would be used to link scenes<sup>7</sup>, assisted by newly commissioned music<sup>8</sup> for background and *leit-motifs*, as well as sound-effects. Importantly, at this stage it was envisaged that each of the six episodes would last 45 minutes (e.g. 4.5 hours in total), but even so Tiller acknowledged this could cover only a third of *FR*. Cutting would be necessary, especially for most of the songs, but he preferred this to excessive 'summarising'. Tiller promised not to alter the narrative except 'where the ear requires more information than the eye' and cited his previous radio adaptations of Lewis's 'The Great Divorce' and 'The Pilgrim's Regress' as examples.

Matters were seemingly resolved, permissions agreed, as well as a fee of £30 per performance (BBC memo, 1/3/55). By June drafts were ready (Tiller to Tolkien, 1/6/55) and both men met at the BBC Club to discuss progress (24/6/55). Allen & Unwin also sent Tiller draft versions of the Appendices and Maps for *The Lord of the Rings* (acknowledged 29/7/55 thus 2-3 months before publication of *RK*).

Importantly in the correspondences we have two interesting examples of Tolkien's direct engagement with the script, giving further insights into his work. First, in a letter (stamped '5 Feb 1955'<sup>9</sup>) having noted he will instruct Allen & Unwin to approve, Tolkien recognised the need to cut the songs noting they were 'seldom contributors to the action, but a means of depicting character or providing decorative background'. He added that though the songs 'have no special music ... one or two are written to 'tunes'', giving two examples – Sam's 'Troll-song' which 'goes to the old tune assoc. with "The Fox went out on a Winter's night<sup>10</sup>"' and the 'Elvish chant (p.394) has in mind the tones used in the Lamentatio of Tenebrae<sup>11</sup>'. This indicates that when writing the 'verse' pieces scattered

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Sibley explained that whilst the 'Narrator' has gone out of fashion in radio dramatizations, he also used one in 1981 (Gerard Murphy) as it allowed you to 'capture the authorial voice of the book', convey a sense of place and passing of time, move you across scenes (especially useful when the Fellowship splits up), and gave the listener a sense of the vastness of Middle-earth (Sibley, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> The composer Anthony Smith-Masters of Marlborough College was engaged. Some of this still survives and can be heard in 'Tolkien: The Lost Recordings' (see references).

<sup>9</sup> See *Chronology*, p.473.

<sup>10</sup> A traditional English folk song also called 'The fox went out on a chilly night'. The structure is very similar to Sam's with the refrain 'down-o, down-o' (and similar). See, for example, Peter Adamson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDTBV3lppQQ>.

<sup>11</sup> 'Tenebrae' is the service of darkness leading up to Easter. A Gregorian reciting tone is traditionally used that conjures up a feeling of sadness.

throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, most did not have a defined music to accompany them, but at least two did drawing their inspiration from English folk-music and Catholic reciting tones.

Second, is a letter sent to Tiller (10/9/55 – see Figure 1-3, and also *Reader*, pp. 12-13). Tolkien is responding to a request about accents to help the actors<sup>12</sup>. Referencing ‘Vol iii p 408 and 411’ and ‘characterization in my text’ he observed ‘the Hobbit ‘gentry’ should not be made rustical in actual tones and accents’, adding their ‘divergence from High Speech is cast rather in forms of grammar and idiom: they just speak unstudied modern English’. Merry and Pippin (‘two young hobbits of the highest birth in the land’) should sound like Frodo (whose ‘superior linguistic skill would be exhibited only in Elvish’), and he was vehemently against ‘anything more than the merest tinge of “country” (if any) in their speech’. Comparing ‘gentlehobbits’ with ‘the Great’ the difference is more ‘one of period ... than dialect’ with the Great using ‘a more archaic language (when functioning as the Great)’ and speaking ‘with greater solemnity and precision’, whereas Hobbits ‘just use our own rather slack colloquial’.

Tolkien noted Sam and Butterbur (‘Breelandians, Men and Hobbits were in the same linguistic position’) could be given ‘a “country accent” of some kind – fairly but not too strongly marked’ but was concerned at a mention of “West-Country” which ‘since Elizabethan days ... seems to have been favoured as ‘stage dialect’ though not often with any local or historical accuracy’. Whilst he recognised the text purports to be a ‘translation into modern terms of a vanished past’ any ‘accent’ should be consistent and could be ‘vaguely “countrified”’ but at all costs it should be noted he had avoided making ‘the dropping or misuse of h a feature of any kind of hobbit-speech’ and wanted this observed. Moreover Tolkien would ‘passionately’ not want any ‘supposedly ‘Zummerzet’ z/v for s/f’. To help, Tolkien suggested ‘the pronunciation of r as a main characterizing detail’ with ‘Hobbit-gentry’ speaking as we do ‘at our most unstudied’; Sam, ‘in addition to a rustic tone and vowel-colouring should use the burred (or reverted) r’; The Great, and the Elves, ‘should sound their rs as a trill (though not with a Scots extravagance) in all positions’ which he observed was ‘a great enhancement of English, as well as now having an archaic flavour.’

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<sup>12</sup> See *Chronology*, p.500. Tolkien obviously had an ear for such things— see his comments on the dialect tones in *Homecoming* in a letter (22/9/54) to Heppenstall – *Letters* #152, and also his ‘parlour game’ recorded in Quirke, 2016.

74 Sandford Road  
Reading  
Oxford

10 September 1955.

Dear Tiller,

Thank you, too, for your kind reply,  
for accepting my suggested alterations.  
"Distress", even if I use it, is too strong a  
word to apply to my feelings. Anyway, I  
now look forward with interest to the result  
of your efforts, and to the effect of the use  
of music.

You ask about "accents". I will say,  
therefore, what I think; though I quite  
understand that the need for character-  
ization, and making different speakers  
audibly recognizable, may well override  
my opinion. Also the skill of the actors  
may be inadequate to <sup>deal in</sup> nuances.

The relative passages are Vol iii p.  
408 and 411. From these, and from the  
actual characterization in my text, I  
think it can be seen that the Hobbit  
'Geahly' should not be made rustic in  
actual tones and accents. Merry and  
Pippin are the two young hobbits of the highest  
birth in the land (heirs of the Master and the  
Thain) and should at any rate not speak

12. OCT. 1955

This divergence from High Speech is not taken in favor  
of grammar and idiom: ~~the~~ ~~characters~~ ~~should~~  
~~not~~ just speak unskilled modern English.

Differently from Frodo. I am against anything more than the merest tinge of 'country' (if any) in their speech. (Frodo's superior linguistic skill would be exhibited only in Elvish). The difference between 'gentle hobbits' and the Great is envisaged rather as one of period (in our terms) than dialect. The Great use a more archaic language (when functioning as the Great), and speak with greater solemnity and precision. The Hobbits just use our own rather slack colloquial.

But Sam and Butterbur (for Brethlindens, Men and Hobbits, were in the same linguistic position) may well be characterized by speaking with a 'country accent' of some kind - faint but not too strongly marked.

As for what kind of accent - I don't think that matters very much, as long as it can be consistently maintained by the speakers. You say 'West-Country'. Well, even Elizabethan days that seems to have been favoured as 'stage dialect', though not often with any local or historical accuracy. Accuracy, fortunately, does not matter at all in this translation with modern terms of a vanished past, and as long as the 'accent' used is faint

consistent and such as to seem to the average  
 listener vaguely "countryified", that will do.  
 But you may note that I have deliberately  
 avoided making the dropping or misure of  
 h a feature of any kind of hobbit-speech.  
 I should prefer that this should be observed,  
 though it is not, of course, vital (in the case of  
 Sam and Butterbur). Also I personally should  
 prefer not to have any supposedly "Zunimerzath"  
 z/v for s/f initially.

\* If I might make a particular suggestion:  
 I should use the pronunciation of r as a  
 main characterizing detail. Hobbit-gentry  
 should speak more or less as we do (at our  
 most unstudied). Some, in addition to a  
 rustic tone and vowel-colouring, should use  
 the burr (or rhotic) r. The Great, and  
 especially the Elves, should sound their r  
 as a trill (though not with a Scots extravagance)  
 in all positions. This is a great enhancement  
 of English, as well as (now) bearing an archaic  
 flavour. However, that is by the way.  
 Some people find it difficult to do!

I am sure the whole matter is safe in  
 your hands; and only on the point of not  
 making Meriadoc or Pippin rustic (nor indeed  
 any of the ~~original~~ 144 gentry at the party) do  
 I place any final importance.

I shall certainly endeavour to come up  
 on Saturday 12 November.

Yours sincerely  
 J.R.R.

Figures 1-3: Letter from Tolkien to Tiller (10/9/55). © The Tolkien Estate.

Tiller sent Tolkien the scripts (21/9/55) with the news of enforced further compression as each episode had now been reduced to 30-minutes. He expected shock 'at the extent of the cutting' and noted that 'inevitably a great deal of the flavour of your work has been lost.' Tiller had therefore 'telescope[d]' incidents and simplified 'geographical details and similar intricacies' concluding – 'I hope that the main themes of your work have not been totally obscured or mutilated beyond reason'. Tolkien replied (27/9/55, see *Reader*, p. 13-14), remarking that 'I do not think that with the time at your disposal you could have done any better'. He admitted that 'a weakness of the books is the necessity of historical build-up concurrent with the tale of the events' and that this presents an even greater weakness in dramatic form. That said the script now read as 'much more of a "fairy tale" in the ordinary sense' and the Hobbits seemed 'sillier' and others 'more stilted'. As the author he now realised there were few, if any, 'unnecessary details in the long narrative' and their cutting deprived 'the story of significance at some later point.' Whilst it couldn't 'be helped' Tolkien provided suggestions for the abridgements in Episodes two and six<sup>13</sup>. In the archives the former survives, relating to the attack on Weathertop. Figure 4 shows Tolkien's suggestions and the subsequent script (note Director's timings) is in Figure 5. Tolkien offered two solutions (A and B) with 'A' preferred 'because F.[rodo] was in no condition to give a detailed description, and because Narrator can do it better anyway.' Someone has written 'Please Type' across Version A ('giving description of Wraiths to Narrator') and Figure 5 confirms that Tolkien's suggestions were used. A comparison with the original text in *FR* (*FR*, I, xi) shows that Tolkien also recognised the need, when dramatizing, to balance the Narrator with the characters, and to speed the action along.

Tiller replied (6/10/55) relieved at Tolkien's 'tolerant and understanding letter', and agreed that nothing in the books was 'superfluous' and cutting had been 'painful'. Tiller hoped it would not come across as a 'mere "fairy-tale"' or 'empty fantasy' but in an odd disregard for Tolkien's letter of the 10<sup>th</sup> September (above) suggested that Sam, Merry, and Pippin would have strong 'West-country accents'.

Scripts were then sent out to the actors, studios booked, and the production was in full swing. Rehearsals were on the weekend of broadcast (Tolkien was invited to attend these but never did). Tiller clearly recognised the importance of the work, and writing to Frank Phillips (11/11/55) he remarked:

The implications of *The Lord of the Rings* are far deeper than those of a fairy-tale. The trilogy has created a totally new mythology, with great relevance to the contemporary spiritual situation.

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<sup>13</sup> See also *Chronology*, p.501.

Suggestions for alterations of Script. Part III pp 19-20.

Version A. (giving all description of Wraiths to Narrator).

1. p. 19. after "four fingers of his left hand", continue Narrator —  
At once the shapes became terribly clear. He could see under their black mantles, in their white faces burned merciless eyes. They had long grey robes; on their grey hairs were helmets of silver, and in their haggard hands were swords of steel. Their keen eyes pierced him as they rushed toward him. The tallest was crowned like a King. He glowered with a pale light, and in his left hand he held a long pale knife. He strode up and towered above Frodo!
2. Frodo. O Elbereth! Gilthouriel! ....
3. Frodo. What has happened? Where is the pale King?
4. Sam. We lost you, Mr. Frodo. When did you get to?
5. Frodo. Didn't you see them? — the wraiths, and the King?
6. Aragorn. No, only their shadows. And now they are gone again. I couldn't see what it means. There was a King, you say? All we were!
7. Frodo. No! Oh, his cold eyes and cold knife! I struck at him, and called out; but there came a pain like poisoned ice in my shoulder and ... I fell into darkness. Shades! I am sorry. I should not have put it off [the King], but I did take it off again. Or, I think so. Oh, the cold knife!
- Aragorn. Ah. And here it is — the accused knife ✓.

PLEASE TYPE!

Version B. (with description given to Frodo.)

1. p. 19 (script.)
- 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 as above.
7. Frodo. I ... I put the Ring on. Then the shapes became terribly clear, and I could see under their black cloaks. Their faces were white with cruel bright eyes; but they were all in grey: with silver helmets on their grey hair, and they had grey hands with swords of steel. Their eyes pinned me down, as they rushed at me; but one was very tall, and he glowered with a pale light. He had a crown on like a King, and in one hand he held a long knife. I struck at him ... (continue as above, but omit [the King]).

I prefer A. Both because F. is in no condition to give a detailed description, and we become Narrator can do it better anyway.

Figure 4: Tolkien's suggestions for changes to the script. ©The Tolkien Estate

PART THREE

- 19 -

I. NARRATOR:  
1. NARRATOR:

Over the lip of the dell rose four tall shadows,  
seeming black holes in the deep shade behind them.  
Frodo thought he heard a faint hiss as of venomous  
breath, and felt a thin piercing chill. The shapes  
advanced.... Pippin and Merry threw themselves flat  
on the ground. Sam shrank to Frodo's side. Frodo  
was quaking as if he were bitter cold, but his terror  
was swallowed-up in a sudden temptation to put on  
the Ring, disregarding all warnings. Resistance  
became unbearable. He slowly drew out the chain,  
and slipped the Ring on the forefinger of his left  
hand. At once the shapes became terribly clear.

2. FRODO:

He could see under their black mantles. In their  
white faces burned merciless eyes. They had long  
grey robes; on their grey hairs were helmets of  
silver, and in their haggard hands were swords of  
steel. Their keen eyes pierced him as they rushed  
towards him. The tallest was crowned like a King.  
He gleamed with a pale light, and in his left hand  
he held a long pale knife. He strode up and  
towered above Frodo. But what is this of a

3. FRODO:

What happened?

4. SAM:

We lost you, Mr. Frodo, where did you get to?

5. FRODO:

Didn't you see them? The wraiths, and the King?

6. ARAGORN:

No, only their shadows. And now they are gone again.  
There was a King, you say?

7. FRODO:

Oh, his cold eyes and cold knife! I struck  
at him, and called out; but there came a pain like  
poisoned ice in my shoulder and ... I fell into

8. FRODO:

What happened?

9. SAM:

We lost you, Mr. Frodo, where did you get to?

10. FRODO:

Didn't you see them? The wraiths, and the King?

11. ARAGORN:

No, only their shadows. And now they are gone again.  
There was a King, you say?

12. FRODO:

Oh, his cold eyes and cold knife! I struck  
at him, and called out; but there came a pain like  
poisoned ice in my shoulder and ... I fell into

cont. over...

Figure 5: Extract from Director's script. ©BBC.

## Series One: Episode Summaries

The following presents a brief description and commentary on each episode. The timings are from the paper scripts assumed to be the Director's (as they contains notes such as 'check pronunciation of Gloin'). Numbers in parenthesis are the script page numbers – each page would have taken on average around 90 seconds to read.

1. 'The Meaning of the Ring'. The Narrator introduces 'Hobbits', cutting to Bilbo (2-3) who summarises *The Hobbit* and the episode with Gollum. Bilbo invites Frodo to stay (3-4) and we move quickly to the Birthday party. The Narrator explains Bilbo's vanishing (4-6), Bilbo discusses his plans with Gandalf, departs, and Gandalf meets Frodo (7-9). The Narrator is used to summarise Frodo's time in The Shire, and then introduces 'strange happenings' linked to 'Mordor'. Gandalf comments 'Mordor. There it was said, the Dark Tower had been rebuilt ...', he returns and discusses the Ring with Frodo (11-19, c.14 minutes). Sam is discovered eavesdropping, and Frodo resolves to go to Rivendell.
2. 'Black Riders and Others'. The Narrator describes the selling of Bag End, and the departure from the Shire. The Hobbits hide from the Nazgûl (2-3) and the action is conveyed through dialogue<sup>14</sup>:

Pippin: *That's not Gandalf! Look at Him.*

Sam: *Not in that black hood. You can't see his face, even; only his boots.*

Pippin: *He's not looking for us – he's – smelling for us. Sniffing ...*

Frodo: *Don't let him see us. Don't breathe.*

Gildor and the Elves arrive (3-5), the Hobbits then meet Farmer Maggot (6), and then Merry at the river-ferry (8). They discuss plans (9-11) and set off into the Old Forest. They encounter Old Man Willow (13), are saved by Tom Bombadil and taken to his house to meet Goldberry (13-16). They spend time with Tom (c.6 minutes).

3. 'Aragorn'. The Hobbits leave Tom but fall asleep on the Downs. Frodo gets lost, wakes in a Barrow (2), and a Wight calls to him. The Narrator provides the description (drawn from *FR*, I, viii):

A tall figure ... like a shadow against the stars. He [Frodo] thought there were two eyes, very cold though lit with a pale light that seemed to come from some remote distance.

Frodo sees the other Hobbits asleep. The directions note this should be accompanied by a song 'immeasurably sad and dreary, cold and miserable and horrible, sometimes high in the air and thin, sometimes like a low moan from the ground'. The Barrow-wight sings: 'Cold be hand and heart and bone ...' (*FR*, I, viii), and Frodo sees the moving dismembered arm (4) and strikes it. Frodo (clumsily) remarks '*Oh dear! I still haven't killed the Barrow-Wight ...*'. He summons Tom, who

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<sup>14</sup> Italics indicates this dialogue is not in the original text.

arrives ('Frodo: *Daylight! And the barrow has fallen wide open! And here's Tom Bombadil himself!*'). Tom dismisses the Wight, frees the Hobbits, and gives them daggers from the hoard. The Hobbits leave (7) and arrive at The Prancing Pony (8) where they meet Aragorn (8-15) ending with Merry saying he has seen the Black Riders. They leave Bree after the attack by the Nazgûl and arrive at Weathertop. The fight on Weathertop is described by the Narrator (19 – see above). They fly to Rivendell, meet Glorfindel, and Frodo encounters the Nazgûl at the Ford (24).

4. 'Many Meetings' –Frodo wakes and discusses events with Gandalf (c. 7 minutes). He meets Sam, Glóin, and Bilbo (5-9) and the rest of the episode covers the Council of Elrond (see below). Characters such as Galdor and Glorfindel are given speaking parts, and the episode ends with Frodo volunteering to take the Ring.
5. 'The Moria Gate' – The Fellowship forms and departs Rivendell (1-4). They journey to Caradhras, are attacked by Wargs (5-7), then go to Moria (9) and are attacked by the lake creature before entering the gates (11). The remainder of the episode is the journey through Moria but the whole Chamber of Mazarbul scene is omitted. They arrive at bridge of Khazad-dûm, Gandalf fights the Balrog, and the remnants of the Fellowship escape.
6. 'The Breaking of the Fellowship' – The Fellowship arrives at Lórien (1), they meet Haldir (1-5), and then Galadriel and Celeborn. The scenes of the Mirror of Galadriel (6-7), Galadriel's gift-giving (9), and the departure (10) are covered. Legolas shoots at the Winged Beast (11), and then the Fellowship rests. Boromir attempts to take Ring (13), but Frodo escapes and he departs with Sam. The episode ends with the Narrator saying:

So Frodo and Sam set off on the last stage of the Quest together; and the River bore them swiftly away. At length they came to the southern slope of the dividing mountains. They drew their boat out, shouldered their burdens, and set off – down into the Land of Shadow.

Directions indicate 'Ring music' at the close, which changes to 'Mordor music' but ends on 'hopeful fade'.

### *The Lord of the Rings: Series Two*

The idea of commissioning a dramatization of the remaining two volumes appeared relatively early on. In a note from Tiller to the composer Smith-Masters (11/1/56) he observed 'Tolkien was not wildly enthusiastic about the programmes, but he is at least willing to let me adapt Volumes 2 and 3 ... so he can't have been really displeased.' A week later C. Holme (Chief Assistant, Third Programme) wrote to Tiller, commenting on the success of Series One (though he noted he was 'the only enthusiast over here for Tolkien's book'), but that the chances of securing another 12 programmes were slim. Holme asked if 'the rest cannot be done in six of 30 minutes each' observing that:

Volume 2 is more homogeneous than Volume 1, and could therefore be represented by fewer episodes, whereas Volume 3 is not only shorter in itself than the other two,

but could be shorter still in adaptation by ending it with the victory and restoration of Gondor ...<sup>15</sup>

He suggested the return to the Shire and final departure to the West could be treated as an epilogue, omitted altogether, or 'disposed of in a few lines of narration'.

Tiller (25/1/56) was 'appalled at the cutting that would be necessary' but agreed six programmes would be better than leaving the whole thing unfinished. Approval was gained in March, but in the archives all that then survives is a letter from Tiller to Tolkien (17/9/56) where the former admits 'cuts would have to be more drastic'. The first three scripts were sent to Tolkien (1/11/56) with Tiller noting the task had been 'formidable', as he felt he could not simply concentrate on Frodo and Sam, and he was therefore forced to 'script-in' his own narration more than in the first series. Tiller concluded by asking about the accents of the Rohirrim, Orcs, and the people of Minas Tirith. Tolkien replied on the matter of the accents the next day (*Letters* #193, and *Reader*, pp.16-17); and on 6<sup>th</sup> November he followed up with comments on the three scripts (*Letters* #194, *Reader*, p. 17). Tolkien resignedly accepted that Tiller had done his best, but asked 'why this sort of treatment was allowed' as he felt the text now came across as 'simple-minded' and would be confusing (exactly the reaction recorded by listeners – see below). Whilst he admitted he lacked experience 'in the medium' he felt more could be made of the Narrator through the reading of longer descriptive passages. Fundamentally Tolkien clearly was having second thoughts as to whether the books could be dramatized at all – even though he had been reasonably complementary about Series One to Tiller. The epic scale of the text suggested to him that it could not, but he concluded by noting Tiller 'had a very hard task'.

### Series Two: Episode Summaries<sup>16</sup>

1. 'Fangorn'. The Narrator summarises Series One and then cuts to Boromir's death (who dies without speaking to Aragorn). The hunt for Merry and Pippin is described in a single paragraph and by p.3 the Riders of Rohan have appeared followed by a conversation with Éomer. Pippin and Merry are held by the Orcs until the attack by the Riders (7-8). The Hobbits escape and meet Treebeard, followed swiftly by the Moot (9-14). The episode closes with Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli meeting Gandalf who describes his fight with the Balrog.
2. 'Rohan and Isengard'. The Narrator describes the approach to Edoras, and the meeting with Théoden and Wormtongue (1-3). Within two pages (4-5) Théoden has escaped his bewitchment, the Rohirrim have ridden to Helm's deep, and the battle is waged and completed. Pages 6-13 give more time to the ride to Isengard, meeting Merry and Pippin, and the exchanges with Saruman. The company return to Helm's Deep and Pippin looks into the Palantir (14-15). Aragorn takes the Palantir and a winged Nazgûl is sighted.

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<sup>15</sup> See *Reader*, pp.15-16. It is worth noting that this is the ending, in a sense, that Peter Jackson also chose, i.e. omitting The Scouring of the Shire.

<sup>16</sup> Scripts only survive on Microfilm.

3. 'Into the Dark'. The Narrator begins by describing Frodo and Sam 'on the brink of a tall cliff'. Sam remarks (1):

What a fix! That's the one place, in all the lands we've heard of, that we don't want to see any closer; and that's the one place we're trying to get to. (*TT*, IV, I)

With Frodo supplying 'Mordor!'. They meet Gollum and then journey (4-5) to Cirith Gorgor where Gollum reveals there is 'another way'. The Narrator quickly covers the journey and adds bluntly 'And there they were captured by a band of tall men'. Faramir, Mablung, and Frodo talk (7-10) and Gollum is discovered at the waterfall. The Hobbits depart, fight Shelob (12-16), and Frodo is taken by Gorbag and Shagrat (17). The episode ends with Sam beating at the doors (in effect the end of *The Two Towers*) and the Narrator saying 'Frodo was alive but taken by the Enemy'.

4. 'The Siege of Gondor'. Gandalf and Pippin ride to Minas Tirith, meet Denethor, and Pippin swears his oath of allegiance (2). Pippin meets Beregon (3), and plays with Bergil (4-5). The Narrator cuts back to the Rohirrim, where the troops meet Halbarad and the Rangers who remind Aragorn 'If thou art in haste, remember the Paths of the Dead'. They ride to Dunharrow and enter the Paths of Dead (7-8). The Narrator describes Théoden meeting Hirgon, the messenger from Minas Tirith with the Red Arrow, and Éowyn/Dernhelm equips Merry (10). In Gondor Pippin and Beregon see the Nazgûl (11), there is Faramir's flight and Gandalf's intervention (described by the Narrator). Faramir, Gandalf, and Denethor meet with the latter becoming more sinister ('witless halfling'). The Narrator says that 'battle was joined beneath the walls of the City itself' and Faramir is wounded (13). Denethor builds his pyre, and the Lord of the Nazgûl enters the city at which point Rohan arrives (14-16).
5. 'Minas Tirith & Mount Doom'. The Narrator summarises the action so far, followed by the dramatized death of Théoden, and a narrated end of the battle. We move to the Houses of Healing (4-5), and Gimli and Legolas tell Merry and Pippin of their journey. The Council (in effect a short speech by Gandalf) meets and then the Narrator describes the approach to the Gates of Mordor (6), the Mouth of Sauron (7), followed by a description of the battle and Pippin's fight with the Troll. We return to Sam (8), and the action in the tower and discovery of Frodo (9-11). The two dress as Orcs with a suggestion that Frodo and Sam hear the death of the Witch King (11-12). They arrive at Mount Doom and the Ring is destroyed (13-14); the whole action with Gollum is covered in a less than a minute. The episode concludes with Frodo's 'Here at the end of all things'.
6. 'Many Partings'. The Narrator describes the end of the battle and the fall of Sauron (2). Sam wakes to find Gandalf and Frodo (2). Aragorn is crowned at the Fields of Cormallen (3-4); then Aragorn and Arwen, and Éowyn and Faramir are married (narrated). This is followed by the departure of the company for Isengard where they meet Treebeard (5). Aragorn, Galadriel, and Celeborn depart (6) and the remainder arrive at Rivendell. They head for Bree and meet Butterbur (7); and then we have the Scouring of the Shire and death of Saruman (8-13). The Narrator describes the rebuilding process, the marriage of Sam and Rosie, and Frodo asking Sam to join him

(14). They journey to the Grey Havens, Frodo departs (15-16), and Sam returns to the Shire. The episode closes with Sam's 'Well, I'm back ...'.

## Reception

The broadcast of the two series was without publicity (certainly compared with 1981<sup>17</sup>). The *Radio Times* ran no feature, and the shows were simply listed with a tagline, and credits. Both series also suffered from inconsistent broadcast times and were up against stiff competition – Series One went out at the same time as 'Quatermass II' and 'What's my line?' on television, and 'The Archers' and other shows on radio; whilst Series Two coincided with the opening of the Melbourne Olympics.

But how were they received by critics, Tolkien, and listeners? Beginning with the 1955 broadcasts Paul Ferris of *The Observer* (20/11/55, p.10) described it as 'the best light listening for the next five weeks' having the 'pure quality of fairy-tale ... charming without being slight'. In an uncatalogued newspaper clipping in Caversham another review ('The Meaning of the Ring' 15/11/55) noted Tolkien's 'relaxed, vivid, and masculine style with its rich coinages in the names of the creatures' adapted naturally to radio and his 'power of unfolding the matter holds the attention even when he is being expository.'

Tolkien himself appeared balanced in his views (at least to Tiller). In a letter (8/12/55) he observed *The Times* 'was appreciative'<sup>18</sup>, but he was angered by the BBC show 'The Critics' ('they were intolerable with a superiority that only ignorance can maintain'<sup>19</sup>). He noted he had received many letters expressing enjoyment with the production and that 'non-readers got a great deal out of it'. It had gone down especially well with older children with the only complaint being the late time of broadcast<sup>20</sup>. Tolkien thought most of the criticism he had seen was 'silly' (especially that the Hobbits should 'pipe and squeak' asking rhetorically 'Why should tones rise with fall in stature?'). He felt the Elves were 'managed excellently' as was the Council of Elrond ('masterly'), but criticised Bilbo (he sounded 'bored'), and the announcer's mistake in stating Goldberry was Tom's daughter and that Old Man Willow was an ally of Mordor<sup>21</sup>. He liked Glóin's accent but added it was a bit 'heavily laid on' noting 'dwarves spoke the Common Tongue natively, like Jews, but they had a uvular back R'. He pondered about another series suggesting 'Vol ii might go even better in this form.'

Tiller replied (12/12/55) taking full responsibility for the Announcer's mistake over Goldberry's relationship with Tom Bombadil, but he noted it was never fully explained in the

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Eric Fraser's specially designed cover for the Radio Times - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01h96nf/p01gz0qt>.

<sup>18</sup> Though this may be referring to the review in *The Times* on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November for *RK*. See *Reader*, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Critics' seemingly discussed the dramatization (20/11/55) but no recording survives. See also *Letters* #177 where, writing to Rayner Unwin, Tolkien notes he agreed with their view of the dramatization (but no indication of whether this was positive or negative) but was annoyed when they admitted they had not read the book.

<sup>20</sup> Other correspondences to Tiller from listeners make the same complaint. For timings see 'Programme Details' below.

<sup>21</sup> The offending lines were 'Opening Announcement: ... He [Sauron] has other allies too, from one of which the hobbits have been rescued by the strange and ancient power of Tom Bombadil. With Bombadil and his daughter Goldberry, the hobbits find temporary shelter.'

book asking 'Who is she?'. Tiller also agreed that the reaction 'without the BBC' had been very positive and he would submit a proposal for 'Volume Two'. Tolkien replied (15/12/55) acknowledging 'that not all is in the 'book'' and that he had quite forgotten 'that Bombadil's adventures as set out in the Oxford Magazine of 1934 (!) were not included' (in effect excusing Tiller of the Goldberry mistake). He added that 'Gimli was v. good, and C. S. Lewis who heard the last 'fit' agreed'. Again, positively, he concluded he would 'like to have the thing continued – if you are the producer.' This balanced praise does seem at odds, however, with Tolkien's more private criticisms in his letters noted earlier.

When it comes to the reaction of listeners there are full reports attached to the scripts – results of surveys by the BBC's Audience Research Department. Four survive for Series One (episodes 1, 2, 3, and 6) and two for Series Two (episodes 1 and 6). These list audience size, an 'appreciation index', and a summary description complete with anonymised feedback. For both series it was estimated that 0.1% of the adult population heard them, and the appreciation index for Series One began at 56 rising to 64 by episode six (against an average for a Third Programme drama of 65), but Series Two never rose above 59.

Considering the direct feedback recorded there is a clear difference between Series One and Two. With Series One, whilst compression was commented on it (especially in terms of reducing the atmosphere) it is notable how positive most comments were especially around the performances. One reader, in a direct letter to Tiller, described it as "The Archers' of the Third Programme, a milestone in BBC history'. Some expected the Hobbits to have 'high pitch voices' though (see Tolkien's comments on this noted earlier) and a few objected to Victor Platt's Sam (with his 'BBC Mommersetshire' accent). Most interestingly though was the clear divide the programme engendered. There were those who simply objected to time wasted on a 'children's story' ('if we must occupy the Third Programme with fairy tales then let us have Enid Blyton' – 'Chemical Manager'). Then there were the comments from listeners who were frustrated because they simply did not 'get it'. Was it an allegory, for example? 'One expected satire, or recognisable symbolism' complained a 'Lecturer in English' and a 'Clerk in Holy Orders' found it without 'mythological overtones, or anything, so far as I could see.' As the series closed it was noted as a 'brave effort', with some listeners having now found 'a pertinent allegorical meaning' (good versus evil) and wanting more ('You just can't leave it at this point!'). But again there were criticisms. The summary reports some listeners disliking 'the naive acceptance of witchcraft and the convenient intervention of various 'Dei ex machine' at crucial points' and, as they saw it, 'stereotyped characters of the conventional fairy-story'.

Series Two was criticized much more. Added to those who saw it as childish, were non-readers of the book who were just confused, or fans of Tolkien who described it as an 'absolute ruin', 'a farce', with 'ignominious' compression that resulted in a 'juvenile adventure story'. As one reader commented (a 'Civil Servant') 'The result was the conversion of a glorious, rich, detailed, and self-consistent narrative into a footling and ridiculous sounding adventure story of the "with one bound Jack was free" type.'

### 1981 and all that

Is it possible to compare the 1955-56 dramatization with Sibley and Bakewell's or, indeed, the films of Peter Jackson? At first, due to the lack of recordings this may seem pointless – outside of the reader reports we have no way to compare Ian Holm's 1981 Frodo, for example, with that of Oliver Burt; or Ian McKellen's Gandalf with Norman Shelley's.

Furthermore, the enforced compression of Series Two that so enraged listeners would suggest any comparison would be aligning apples with pears. However, considering Series One alongside the equivalent episodes from 1981 and the 2001 film is more fruitful. In terms of running time the six episodes in 1955 equated to just under three hours in total before Frodo and Sam's departure at the end of the first volume. In 1981 'The Breaking of the Fellowship' was the tenth episode (of 26 thirty-minute broadcasts, or in the one-hour episode versions the sixth episode of thirteen). So 1981 allotted five hours to what was covered in three hours in 1955. Interestingly, Jackson covered the same in 2 hours 58 minutes in 2001 (cinema version).

As noted Tolkien singled out for praise the 1955 dramatization of The Council of Elrond which when reading feels more like a play cutting back and forth between dialogue. In the dramatization this begins in effect with the Narrator stating 'Next morning, the Council of Elrond assembled' at just around 16 minutes in, and ended (28'15") with Sam's 'A nice little pickle we have landed ourselves in, Mr Frodo!' – so running to 12'15". In 1981 the 'Council' began with Elrond's 'Welcome, welcome ...' and again ran until Sam's comment (total length 16'14"). In the film, however, the scene only runs for 6'30" (although some of the back-story of the Ring covered during the Council in the book had appeared in earlier scenes).

As a rule of thumb then Series One in the 1955 dramatization was compressed by about two-thirds compared with 1981, but tended to match the filmed version in length (though lengthy descriptions of landscape and action can, of course, be dispensed with through images and pan shots). Notably though 1955 did include the dramatization of Tom Bombadil and the Barrow-wights which, despite Tolkien's criticism of Shelley's performance, still reads reasonably well (but, as a consequence, gave even less time for the rest of the book). Bombadil was cut in the 2001 film, and also in 1981 (though Sibley did offer a dramatisation in 'Tales from the Perilous Realm' for Radio 4, 1992). Sibley (2019) noted that Bombadil had been omitted partly out of necessity (he felt to do it properly would have required one hour), partly because it was possible to do so without affecting the text, but most importantly because from the point where the Black Riders appear in the Shire the 'story is set and running' and there is a 'sense of chase' up to Rivendell. Bombadil would have felt like a lull in this. Moreover with the 30-minute episode format each one required a cliff-hanger ending and it was not clear how to do this.

In summary, 1955-56 should certainly be seen as a first 'brave attempt' (noted by a listener) but also a lost opportunity. The performances, on the whole, were well received and the script (apart from a few clumsy interventions) showed signs of promise dashed mainly by the need for compression. Had the books been out longer and become more established then perhaps the BBC senior managers would have agreed to each episode lasting 45 minutes, and even running to three series. This in turn may have encouraged Tolkien to be more engaged with the process and to have led to more insights from him on the adaptation; but alas, it was not to be. Even then Tolkien, despite some obvious reservations, found Series One well done in places. One can only imagine the delight he would have had in hearing the 1981 version with its much longer running time, better writing, and better production quality.

### [Programme Details](#)

For cast list see -

[http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/The\\_Lord\\_of\\_the\\_Rings\\_\(1955\\_radio\\_series\)](http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/The_Lord_of_the_Rings_(1955_radio_series)).



Figure 6: The *Radio Times* entry for 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1955

#### First Series (1955)

Broadcast BBC Third Programme: 14/11, 21/11, 29/11, 4/12, 11/12, 18/12 (10.10pm, 9.50pm, 7.10pm, 9.30pm, 8.00pm, 7.20pm; repeated 15/11, 23/11, 30/11, 5/12, 12/12, 21/12 (6.40pm, 7.00pm, 9.40pm, 6.35pm, 6.20pm, 7.20pm)

#### Second Series (cast as First Series but with additions) (1956)

Broadcast BBC Third Programme: 19/11, 26/11, 2/12, 9/12, 16/12, 23/12 (10.30pm, 10.40pm, 8.45pm, 8.05pm, 5.25pm, 10.05pm); repeated 22/11, 29/11, 7/12, 12/12, 18/12, 27/12 (7.50pm, 6.45pm, 7.20pm, 6.15pm, 7.10pm, 6.00pm).

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