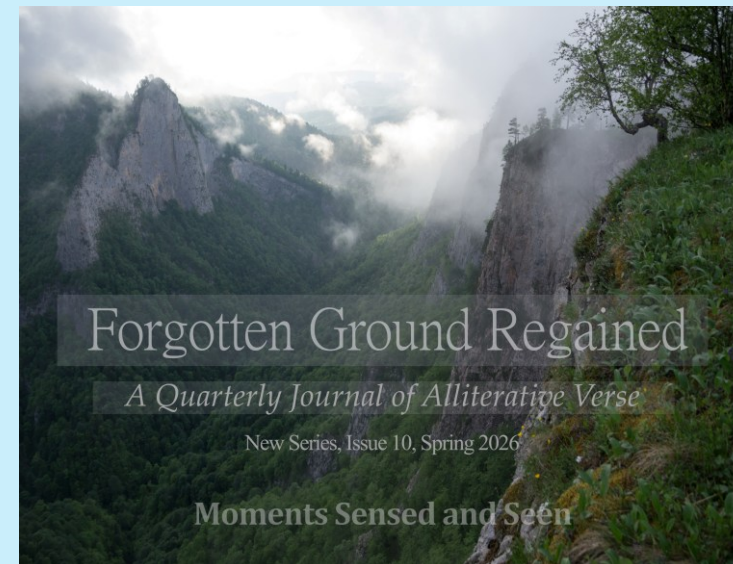


Tolkien's Generation and Alliterative Verse

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A Westmoot 2026 Presentation



Let's start with a definition!

J.R.R. Tolkien was a **philologist**.

What's that?

Philology (from Ancient Greek φιλολογία (philología) 'love of word') is the study of language in oral and written historical sources. It is the intersection of textual criticism, literary criticism, history, and linguistics with strong ties to etymology. Philology is also defined as the study of literary texts and oral and written records, the establishment of their authenticity and their original form, and the determination of their meaning. A person who pursues this kind of study is known as a philologist. In older usage, especially British, philology is more general, covering comparative and historical linguistics.

-- Wikipedia

18th Century: Philology Goes on Steroids

The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists

--Sir William Jones,
Third Anniversary Discourse, 1786

EVIDENCE OF GENETIC RELATIONS AMONG LANGUAGES

English	Old Eng.	Gothic	Old Norse	An. Greek	Latin	Old Irish	Russian	Lithuan.	Sanskrit	Persian	IndoEur
1. one	ān	ains	einn	heis	ūnum	óen	odin	vienas	ekam	yak	*oinos
2. two	twā	twai	tveir	duo	duo	da	dva	du	duvā	do	*dwo
3. three	þrē	þrija	þrír	treis	trēs	trí	tri	trys	trayas	se	*treyes
4. four	fower	fidwōr	fífrer	tettares	quattuor	cethir	chetyre	keturi	catvāras	chahār	*k ^w etwōr
5. five	fīf	fimf	fim	pente	quīnque	cóic	pyat´	penki	pañča	panj	*penk ^w e
6. hundred	hund	hund	hundrað	hekaton	centum	cét	sto	šimtas	sátam	sad	*kptom
7. I	ic	ic	ek	egð	ego	mé	ya	aš	aham	man	*eg
8. me	mē	mik, miz	mik, mér	me	mē	mé	menja		mām	man	*me
9. thou	þū	þu	þú	su	tū	tú	ty	tu	tuvam	to	*tū
10. thee	þē	þuk	þik, þér	se	tē	tú	tebja		tvām	torā	*twe
11. who	hwā	hwas	hverr	tis	quis	cía	kto	kas	kas	ke	*k ^w is
12. hand	hand	handus	hōnd		manum	lám	ruka		hastam	dast	*man-
13. foot	fōt	fōtus	fótr	poda	pedem	cos	noga	pédo	pādam	pā	*ped-, pod-
14. head	hafod	haubiþ	hōfuð		caput	cenn	golova		kapālam	sar	*kaput-
15. heart	heorte	hairtō	hjarta	kardiā	cordis	cride	serdtse	širdis		del	*kerd-
16. father	fæder	fader	faðir	patēr	patrem	athir	otets		pitāram	pedar	*pāter-
17. mother	mōdor		móðir	mētēr	mātre	máthair	mat´	moté	mātāram	māder	*māter-
18. brother	brōðor	brōþar	bróðir	phrātēr	frātre	brátháir	brat	brolis	bhrātaram	barādar	*bhrāter-
19. sister	sweostor	swistar	systir		sorōrem	siur	sestra	sesuo	svasāram	shāhar	*swesor-
20. mead	meodu		mjoðr	methu		meda	mjud	medus	madhu		*medhu-
21. corn	corn	kaurn	korn	gerōn "old man"	grānum	grān	zerno	žirnis	jīrnam "worn down"		*ērno-

Late 18th to end of 19th Century: Philology Rediscovered Medieval Language and Literature

- **Departments of Comparative Philology** set up, starting in Germany (Heidelberg, 1807; Leipzig, 1809; Berlin, 1810)
- **Chairs of Anglo-Saxon studies** in England & US (Oxford, 1795; Cambridge, and most other major British and US universities, by late 19th century)
- **Scholarly editions** of medieval manuscripts were rapidly followed by **translations in the vernacular**:
 - *Völsunga saga* (German translation, 1815, English translation 1870)
 - *Poetic Edda* (German translation, 1851; English translation 1866)
 - *Beowulf* (English translation, 1837)
 - *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (English translation, 1898)

Wagner's Ring: Alliterative Verse Takes the World by Storm

A magazine called *The Soundbox* was doing a synopsis of great operas week by week, and it now did the whole *Ring*. I read in a rapture and discovered and discovered who Siegfried was and what was the “twilight” of the gods. I could contain myself no longer—I began a poem, a heroic poem on the Wagnerian version of the Niblung story ...

All this time I had still not heard a note of Wagner's music, though the very shape of the printed letters of his name had become to me a magical symbol. Next holidays ... I first heard a record of the *Ride of the Valkyries* ... To a boy already crazed with “the Northernness,” whose highest musical experience had been Sullivan, the *Ride* came like a thunderbolt.

-- C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*



Sir Walter Scott, William Morris, Lord Tennyson, etc.: Medieval England Takes Center Stage

In the late Victorian and Edwardian Eras, Anglo-Saxon England was everywhere.

Anglo-Saxon kings and poets were honored in all kinds of ways. Part of it was nationalism. But it was also a genuine response to the discovery of a legacy the English-speaking world hadn't known it had.

By 1918, most of the Old English alliterative poems, and a few important Middle English poems had been translated “into the original meter”.

- Battle of Brunanburh (1880)
- Judith (1888)
- Battle of Maldon (1908)
- Pearl (1908)
- Beowulf (1909)
- The Seafarer (1911)
- Faust & Thompson's *Old English Poems* (1918)



*Cædmon Memorial
in Whitby*



*Statue of King Alfred in
Wantage*



*Statue of Edith Swanneck grieving over the body of
King Harold after the Battle of Hastings.*



*Sir Walter Scott's fictional character Ivanhoe depicted on
the Scott Monument in Edinburgh*

... And some poets took notice!

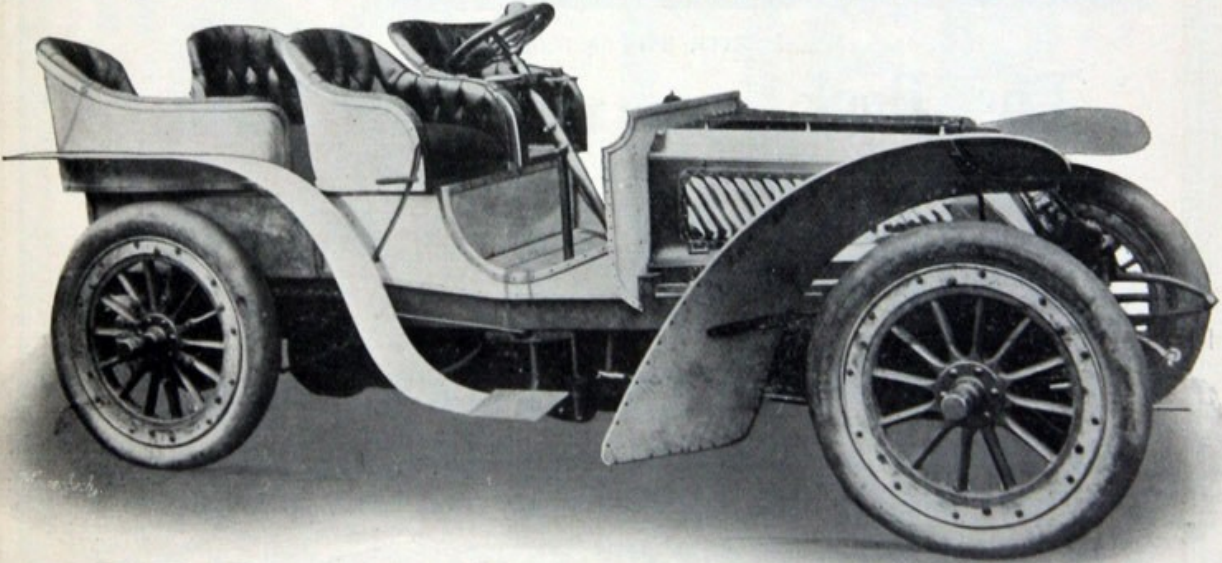
The Advertisement

In the Manner of the Earlier English

Whether to wend through straight streets strictly,
Trimly by towns perfectly paved;
Or after office, as fitteth thy fancy,
Faring with friends far among fields;
There is none other equal in action,
Sith she is silent, nimble, unnoisome,
Lordly of leather, gaudily gilded,
Burgeoning brightly in a brass bonnet,
Certain to steer well between wains.

-- Rudyard Kipling, in *The Daily Mail*, 1904

THE "WELLER" 20, 15, 10, and 8 h.p. TOURING CARS.
Manufactured throughout at WEST NORWOOD.

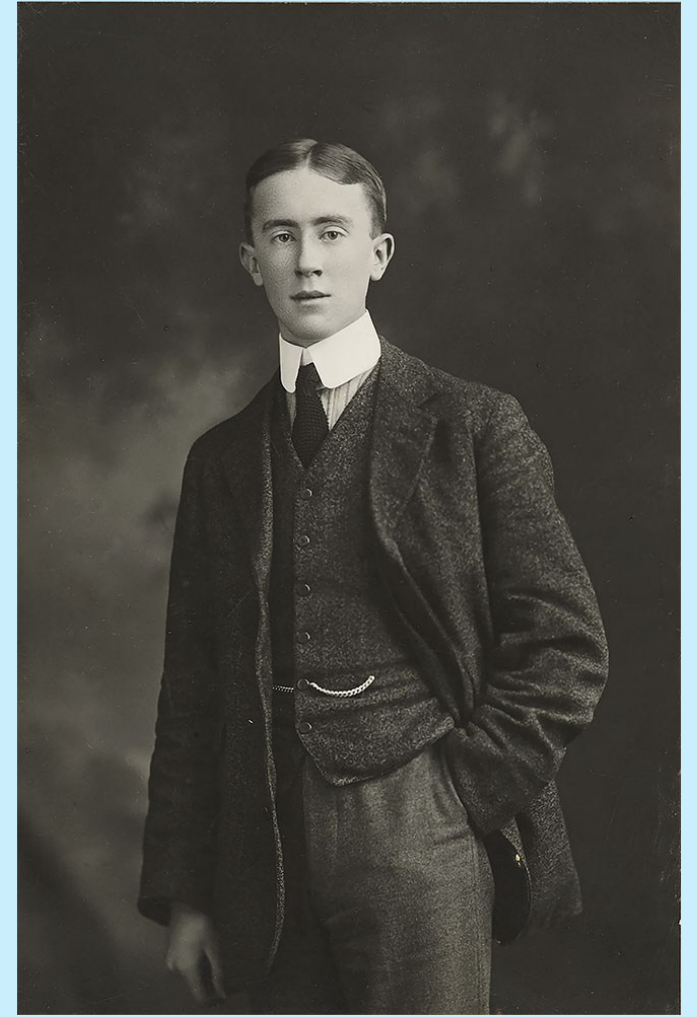


The "CAR," of Feb. 11th, 1903, says, concerning the Crystal Palace Show:
"A 20 h.p. car . . . built by Weller Brothers, Ltd., struck perhaps the only dominant note of all-round originality to be found in the exhibition. It contains many features of new and exceptional interest, and displays a number of leading characteristics which augur well for its future success. . . ."

Tolkien's Generation (born 1882-1912)

The generation that loved alliterative verse

- Ezra Pound (1885-1972)
- (Mary) Cosette Faust-Newton (1889-1975)
- Agatha Christie (1890-1976)
- C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)
- Earl Birney (1904-1995)
- Richard Eberhart (1904-2005)
- Cecil Day Lewis (1904-1972)
- W.H. Auden (1907-1973)
- Arthur Sale (1912-2000)



*J.R.R. Tolkien in 1911
(age 19)*

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Pioneer of Modernist poetry, by way of alliterative verse.

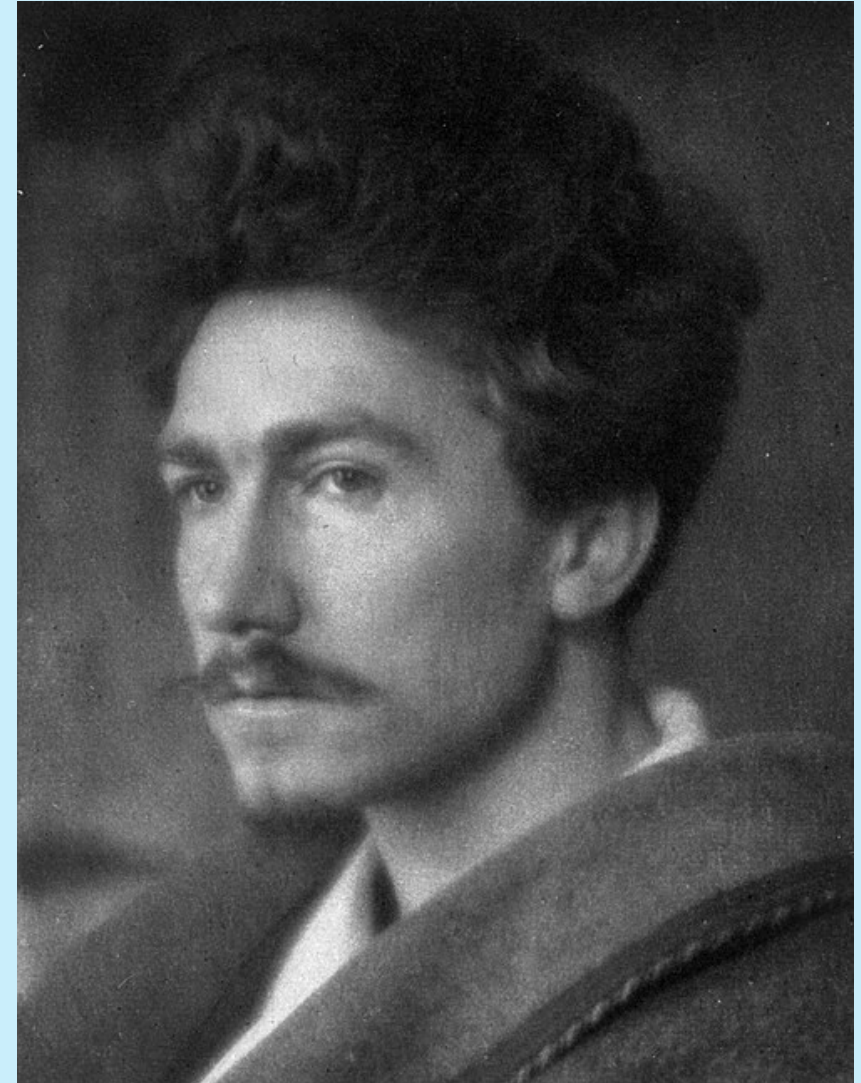
*And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly seas, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess ...*

-- Ezra Pound, start of "Canto I", from *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*

Canto I can be read in full at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54314/canto-i>

For more background, read Chris Jones: *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in 20th Century Poetry* (Oxford University Press), pp. 17-22.



Cosette Faust-Newton (1889–1975)

First woman to translate most of the Old English poetic corpus into modern alliterative verse.

*... Alas, in this land my loved ones are few,
My faithful friends! Hence I feel great sorrow
That the man well-matched with me I have found
To be sad in soul and sorrowful in mind,
Concealing his thoughts and thinking of murder,
Though blithe in his bearing ...*

-- from the Faust and Thompson translation of "The Wife's Lament"

Cosette Faust and Stith Thompson, *Old English Poems Translated into the Original Meter, Together with Short Selections from Old English Prose* (1918)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/31172>

For more background, read Cynthia Shearer (2014). Cosette Faust-Newton's Garden Ship of Dreams. *Legacies: A History Journal for Dallas and North Texas*, Spring 2014, pp. 27-41.

https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth586972/m2/1/high_res_d/Legacies Spring 2014.pdf



Agatha Christie (1890-1976)

Upper class. Taught at Home. Divorcee. Bestselling mystery writer. One-time alliterative poet.

*Bare brown branches against a blue sky
(And silence within the wood),
Leaves that, listless, lie under your feet,
Bold brown boles that are biding their time
(And silence within the wood) ...*

-- from Agatha Christie's "Down in the Wood"

"Down in the Wood" appears in Agatha Christie's 1925 poetry collection, *Road of Dreams*. The full poem also appeared in the Burnie, Tasmania, *Advocate* in 1945, and can be read at this url:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/69081877>

For more background, read:

Agatha Christie (1977). *An Autobiography*. Collins (UK), Dodd, Mead & Company (U.S.)



C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Oxford don. Renaissance scholar. Christian apologist. Tolkien's friend & fellow Inkling

*... And every day
We had weather at will. White-topped the seas
Rolled, and the rigging rang like music
While fast and fair the unfettered wind
followed. Sometimes fine-sprinkling rain
Over our ship scudding sparkled for a moment
and was gone in a glance ...*

-- from C.S. Lewis' poem *The Nameless Isle*

The Nameless Isle can be found in C.S. Lewis' *Narrative Poems* and Dennis Wise (ed.), *Speculative Poetry and the Modern Alliterative Revival: A Critical Anthology*
Also read: C.S. Lewis (1939). "[The Alliterative Metre](#)", in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, pp. 119-184.

https://www.csub.edu/~cmacquarrie/isle_of_man/documents/texts/cs_lewis.pdf

For more background, read:

C.S. Lewis (1953). *Surprised by Joy* (Harvest: Harcourt, Brace & World)



Earl Birney (1904-1995)

Farmer. Worker. Intellectual. Professor. One of the great Canadian poets.

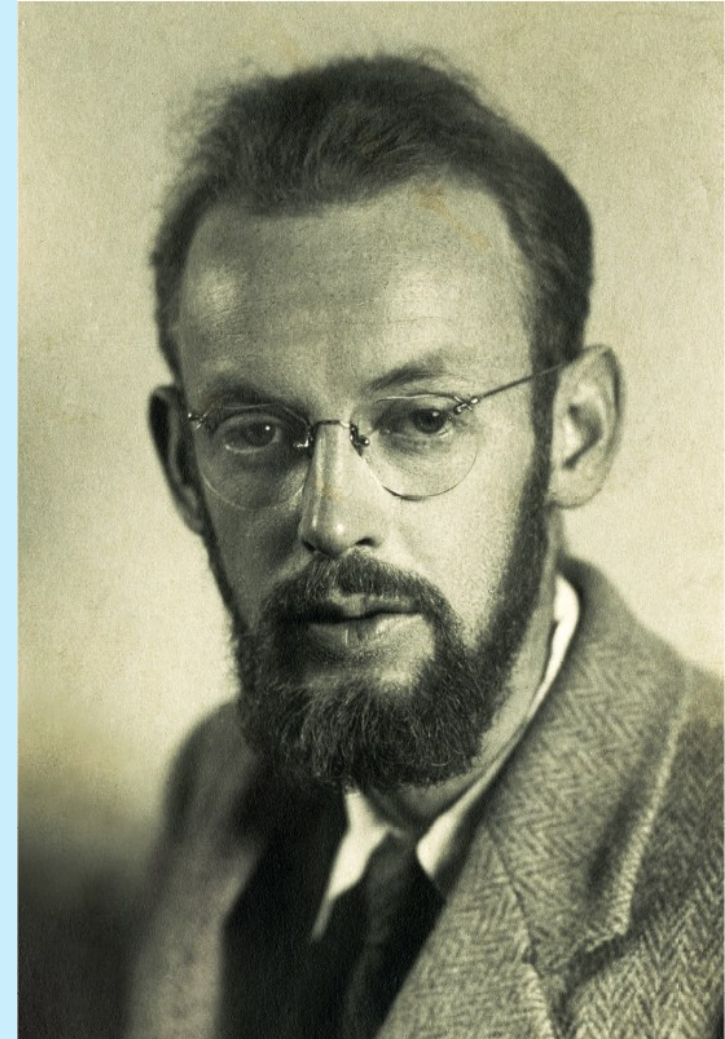
*... Hwæt! He is quick again that thousand-tongued Queller
whirls his ghosts in our wheels unleashes or locks them
Yea he lives again in our new graveloot
breath of the sly snake stifles and clings
slides from our long ships coils round our steadings
Eala! We are lost in the spell of his loopings ...*

-- from Earle Birney's poem "Oil Refinery"

From Earle Birney, *Collected Poetry* (1975), vol. 2. The poem is also reprinted in Dennis Wise's *Speculative Poetry and the Modern Alliterative Revival: A Critical Anthology*.

For more background, read:

Espet Cameron (1994), *Earle Birney: A Life* (Viking)



Richard Eberhart (1904-2005)

Pulitzer-prize winning poet

*... Rings have I, watches, tokens, a dog tag
to take back to the land of the living,
From the dead to deliver to fathers or sisters,
cherished possessions of my luckless companions
Lost in four years of staggering warfare ...*

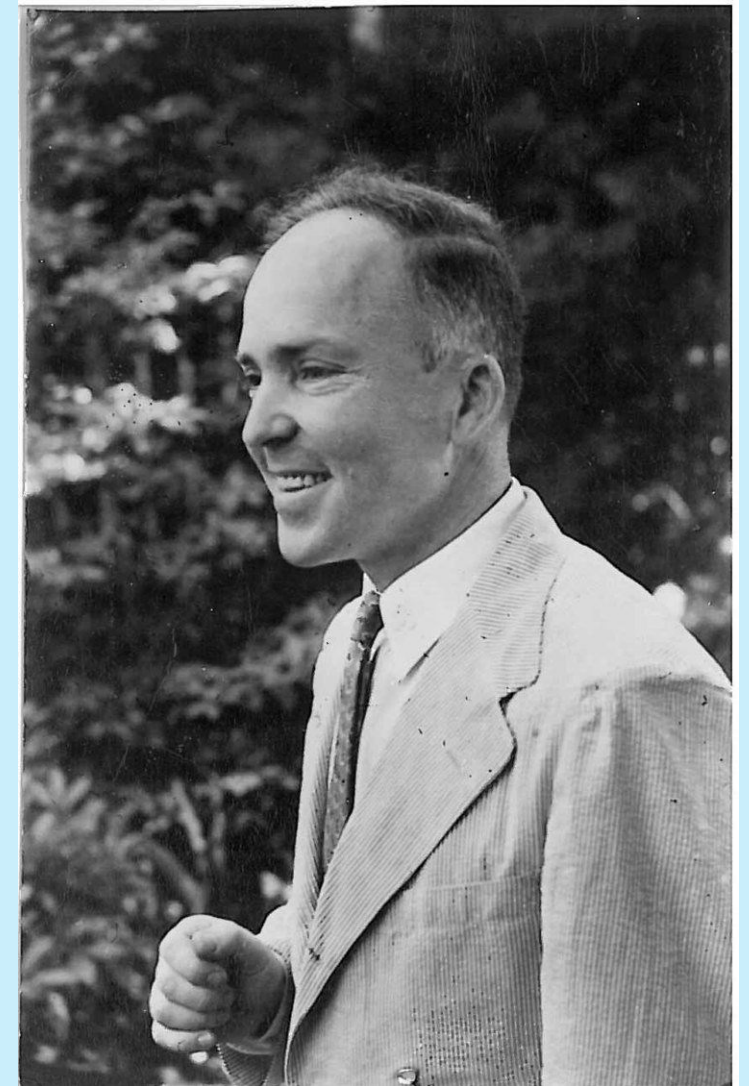
-- from Richard Eberhart's poem "*Brotherhood of Men*"

The poem is available on Forgotten Ground Regained:

<https://alliteration.net/poetry/brotherhood-of-men/>

For more background, read:

Gretchen Eberhart Cherington, *Poetic License: A Memoir* (She Writes Press)



Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-1972)

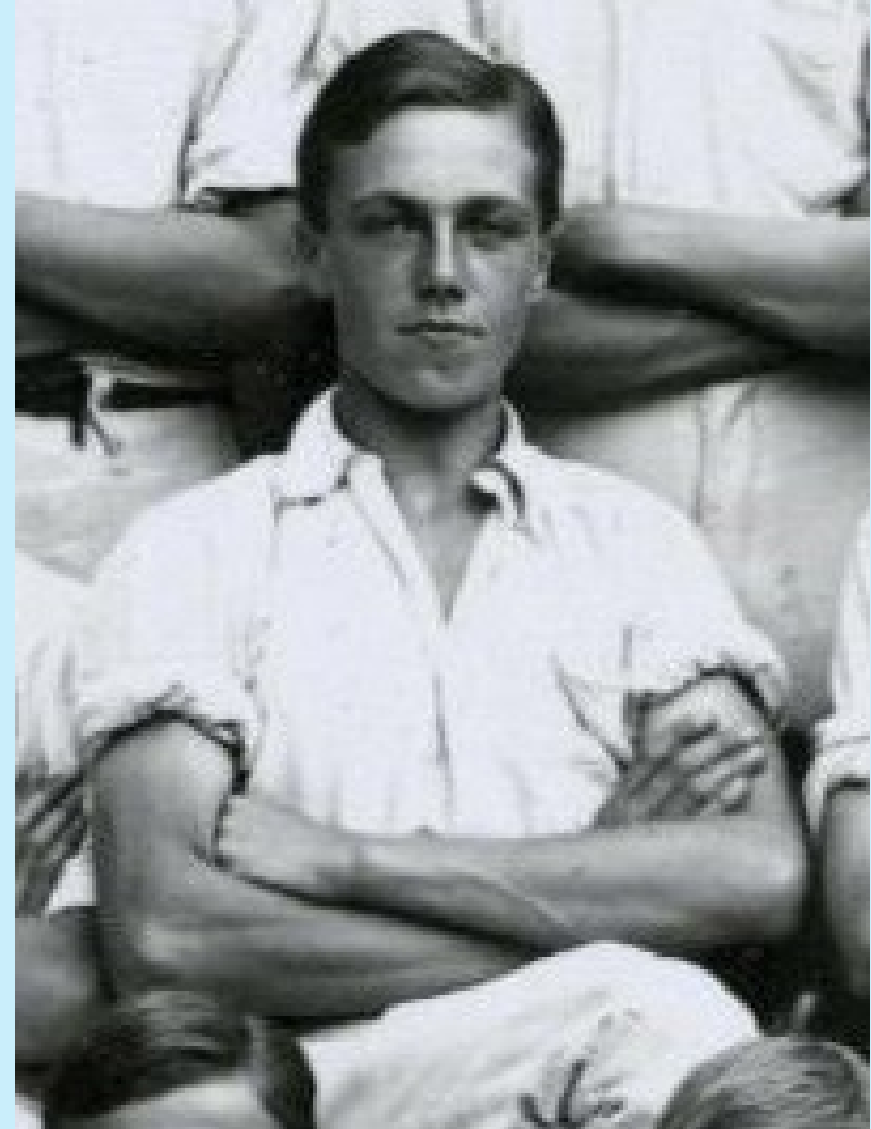
British Poet Laureate, 1968-1972

*The winged bull trundles to the wired perimeter,
Cumbrously turns. Shivers, brakes clamped,
Bellowing four times, each engine tested
With routine ritual. Advances to the runway,
Halts again as if gathering heart
Or warily snuffing for picador cross-winds.
Then, then, a roar open-throated
Affronts the arena ...*

-- from his poem "*Flight to Italy*"

Also see his alliterative poem "As One Who Wanders in Old Workings":
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Complete_Poems/fhvC6c7xXhIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22day+lewis%22+%22wanders+into+old+workings%22&pg=PT149&printsec=frontcover

For more background, read: Cecil Day-Lewis (1993), *An Autobiography* (Element Books)



W.H. Auden (1907-1973)

Winner of the Pulitzer prize for a poem in alliterative verse

*... For the others, like me, there is only the flash
Of negative knowledge, the night when, drunk, one
Staggeres to the bathroom and stares in the glass
To meet one's madness, when what mother said seems
Such darling rubbish and the decent advice
Of the liberal weeklies as lost an art
As peasant pottery, for plainly it is not. ...*

-- from his poem "Age of Anxiety"

Auden's book-length alliterative poem *The Age of Anxiety* won the Pulitzer prize in 1947. He studied Old English under Tolkien, and wrote an early influential review praising *The Lord of the Rings*.

For more background, read: Charles Osborne's (1979) biography *W.H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)



Arthur Sale (1912-2000)

Cambridge tutor and poet

*After daywalking weary separate
One abandoned at crossroads homes across land
conscious of nails now only noticed
Second ascended to empty city
quartered in barracks coldest of fares
alone by difficult fire Limping third
northward travels on trolleybus top
Smiles of farewell have set in face grooves
Forgotten outposts to aching hearts*

-- from Sale's personal papers (courtesy of Robert Rickard)

For more background, read my article "Arthur Sale and Noël Grudgings: Two Early Revivalists" In *Forgotten Ground Regained*:

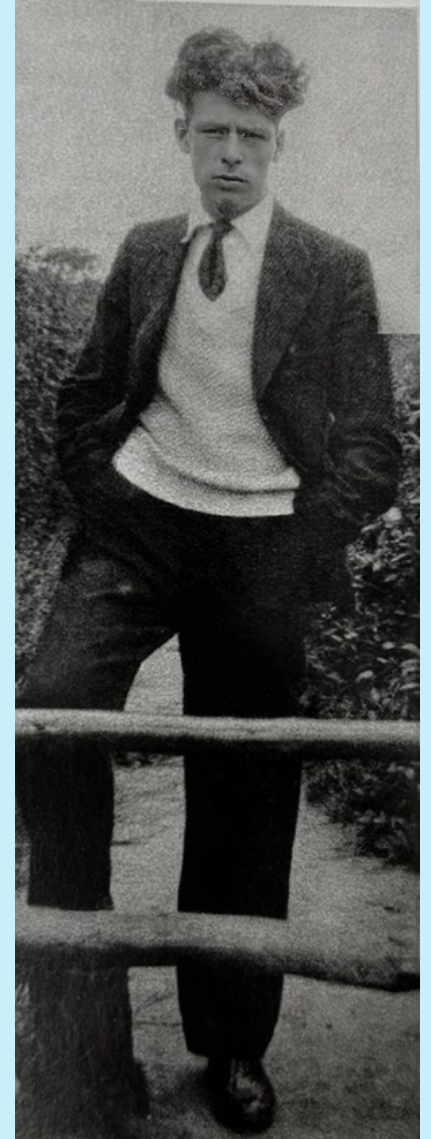
<https://alliteration.net/info/arthur-sale-and-noel-grudgings/>

1938 Letter from modernist poet & editor TS Eliot to poet George Herbert Read:

Dear Herbert:

I think I had better return your poet Arthur Sale's stuff to you, as I don't see that I can use any of this. He is a hopeful young man as soon as he works out of his imitative stage. His alliterative verse seems to me the best so far, but that I think it is only a useful exercise. I will leave the nursing of him to you, as you have taken him on already.

Yours ever, Tom https://tseliot.com/letters/volumes/letters_volume_8_unpublished/by-date/lv8-1268



Taking Stock of Tolkien in the Light of His Generation

People of his generation approached alliterative verse in different ways

- Imitation of Old English verse style **based on general reading:**
C.S. Lewis, Agatha Christie, Richard Eberhart
- Imitation of Old English verse **based on exposure to Old English language and literature as undergraduates:**
Cecil Day-Lewis, Ezra Pound, Arthur Sale
- Imitation of Old English verse **based on graduate training in Old English language and literature:**
Cosette Faust-Newton, C.S. Lewis, Earle Birney, W.H. Auden

All of them (except Tolkien) went on to careers in which alliterative verse played little or no part.

**Most of them published little to no alliterative poetry in their lifetimes.
Not even Tolkien!**

How was Tolkien Different?

Persistence – even if he did abandon most of his alliterative poems, he kept writing more!

His alliterative verse production came in bursts, linked to other projects he was actively working on at the time (see his *Collected Poems* for dates).

- Earliest (around 1919): “Narquelson”, “The Motorcyclists”
- Lays of Beleriand (early 1920s): fragments including alliterative introduction to “Lay of Leithian”, “Children of Hurin”, “Flight of the Noldoli”
- Works inspired by Old English and Old Norse studies, mostly in the 1930s: *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtholm’s Son*, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, *The Fall of Arthur*
- Works included in *Lord of the Rings*, mostly in the 1940s: “Where Now the Horse and the Rider?”, “From Dark Dunharrow in the Dim Morning”, “We Heard of Horns in the Hills Ringing”, “Wilt Thou Learn the Lore”

The Alliterative Silmarillion that Never Was

In the Lay of Leithian, Release from Bondage,

In linkéd words has long been wrought

of Beren Ermabwed, brave, undaunted;

how Lúthien the lissom he loved of yore

in the enchanted forest chained with wonder.

-- Alliterative Preface to *Tale of Tinuviel (Lays of Beleriand)*

By locking of letters that left were of old

-- Alliterative Destruction of Troy

*Thus linked and truly lettered as it was in
this land of old*

-- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
(Tolkien translation)

Be he friend or foe or foul offspring

of Morgoth Bauglir, be he mortal dark

that in after days on earth shall dwell,

shall no law nor love nor league of Gods,

no might nor mercy, nor moveless fate

defend him for ever from the fierce vengeance

of the sons of Fëanor, whoso seize or steal

or finding keep the fair enchanted

globes of crystal whoso glory dies not,

the Silmarils. We have sworn for ever!

-- From *Flight of the Noldoli (Lays of Beleriand)*

What if Tolkien had kept
going and published the
Silmarillion as a cycle of
alliterative poems in the
1920s?

**What a might-have-
been!**

By the way ... !

I run a website and quarterly poetry journal devoted to alliterative poetry:

Forgotten Ground Regained (<https://alliteration.net>)

This summer I will be putting out an issue of my journal devoted to **Tolkien fan poetry in alliterative verse**.

Submissions are welcome! Deadline is July 1st.

<https://alliteration.net/call-for-submissions/>