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The Somme machineguns rattled in Middle-earth and rattle us still

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As the centenary of the worst day in British military history approaches, Simon Tolkien tells Josh Glancy how the battle that remains seared in the national memory helped give birth to his grandfather's epic *The Lord of the Rings*

Josh Glancy

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The Battle of the Somme as depicted by WB Wollen. Tolkien described being in action there as 'animal horror'

For Simon Tolkien the legacy of the Somme, which began 100 years ago on July 1 and lasted nearly five months, has always been part of his family inheritance. His grandfather, JRR Tolkien, fought there and lost two of his best friends on the battlefield. Like many who experienced such horrors, his grandfather didn't speak of them much. But it all filtered into his imagination with great effect. For Simon Tolkien the war was not just his grandfather's experience but the basis for one of the most popular pieces of fiction ever written: The Lord of the Rings. It defines his family still.

Tolkien was 22 when the First World War broke out, looking ahead to marriage and a comfortable life as an Oxford don, burying his vast mind in Old English sagas. But in 1915, as a young man with "too much imagination and little physical courage", he joined up. The following summer he saw action on the Somme with the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, which he described as "animal horror".

It was while convalescing in hospital after the battle that Tolkien wrote the first story in what became his Middle-earth epic. It was called The Fall of Gondolin, a tale of machinery, fire and war. Critics debate the extent to which his later work reflects the catastrophic conflicts of the 20th century, but one thing is clear: Tolkien's war changed his mind for ever. Without the Somme there would have been no Mordor.

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For Simon Tolkien, a criminal barrister turned novelist, the legacy of his grandfather's work has often been crushing. His father was Christopher Tolkien, a stern critic who edited and developed JRR's work. Simon had his own literary aspirations, but his sense of individual identity was all but destroyed by Peter Jackson's film adaptations of the books, which turned Tolkien into a global phenomenon.

"It was like this juggernaut in our lives," he says. "It had an effect on what I thought of myself, who I was. I wanted to be someone in my own right, to be able to look in the mirror and say: this is you."

How the Battle of the Somme unfolded

The films led to a falling out with Christopher, as father and son disagreed on whether the family should co-operate with Jackson or not. They spent years not speaking, communicating mostly through lawyers. In order to find his own way, Simon started writing. No Man's Land is his fifth novel, but crucially his first about the First World War. It follows a young man who leaves Oxford and fights on the Somme; the parallels with his grandfather are clear and conscious.

"I wanted to write so that I would have a sense of my own identity," he says.

"But the irony is the whole thing has been a long journey back to being comfortable with my heritage and my legacy. Now I feel comfortable with my relationship to my grandfather. It's kind of wonderful that I've been able to write a book about the First World War, which is something he never did, but was so much a part of his life. I feel a sense of kinship with him having gone through that journey."

Christopher Tolkien is 91 now and has made up with his son. “It’s wonderful for me that he’s been able to read all my books,” says Simon. “I remember sitting down outside his house in the south of France, two years back, and him saying, ‘What I really want is for you to bring to life the First World War, to write about the Somme. That’s what I really want.’”

Not everyone in Britain carries with them such a personal connection to the Somme, but when the centenary of its fateful first day is commemorated we will all feel the weight of its legacy. Even today, as the author AP Herbert said, “every Englishman has a picture of the Somme in his mind”.

The First World War has become a byword for the futility of conflict, the pity of war. For Britain, the Battle of the Somme symbolises this futility — the Empire suffered 420,000 casualties for questionable gains on the field. That loss has a symbol too: the first day, the first moments, when the whistles blew and tens of thousands of men went over the top to their deaths.

The numbers still have the power to shock. The British Army had 57,470 casualties that day, including 19,240 killed. It was and likely always will be its darkest and bloodiest moment. Pals’ battalions drawn from mining communities and mill towns were decimated. The Newfoundland Regiment went over the top with 780 men. Only 68 appeared at roll call the next morning.

“Idealism perished on the Somme,” said the historian AJP Taylor. Others describe it as the day deference died, the end of the Victorian age, the modernist shattering of certainty and truth. It was the place where Tolkien discovered the evil that haunts *The Lord of the Rings* and where *Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori* became the old lie. If these things are true, then it was likely the whole war was responsible rather than one battle or one day. But in Britain it is the Somme we return to as the symbol of what changed and what was lost.

“Unlike the Second World War, when we talk of Stalingrad and Hiroshima, the First World War is remembered incredibly locally,” says Geoff Dyer, author of *The Missing of the Somme*, a book about how we remember the war.

“Each nation takes a little bit of it, each nation remembers the site of its greatest calamity. For the French it is Verdun, for the Australians and New Zealanders it is Gallipoli, for us it is the Somme. It expresses that crucial sense of appalling, catastrophic loss in miniature.”

Dyer’s book became famous because it argued that unlike other wars, the Great War was memorialised as it was happening. He analyses Laurence Binyon’s famous poem, *For the Fallen*. “At the going down of the sun and in the morning / We will remember them,” Binyon wrote. Yet these words were published in *The Times* in September 1914, before the fallen actually fell. The poem, which has become a staple of Remembrance Day services, was already anticipating the act of memorial.

“All around, everything about the war was to do with memory,” says Dyer. “Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, they were agonising about how it would be remembered while it was happening.”

This perhaps helps to explain why memories of the First World War, often immortalised in poetry, stay with us so closely 100 years later when all who fought in it are dead. But why the

Somme? Why that first day? Partly, of course, it is the sheer scale of the loss, the devastation wreaked on local communities by the losses of the pals' battalions, many of which were disbanded after the Somme (or the "great f*** up" as it was called in the ranks). Partly it is the propaganda film of the battle that was watched by 20m people in Britain later that summer, connecting the home front with the battlefield.

But also the futility of the day stays with us. We think of the Second World War as "the good war". Whatever losses Britain suffered then were necessary, lives given in a valiant cause. Similarly at Waterloo, where Wellington's army suffered proportionally similar losses to the Somme, we do not question them in the same way because the day ended in clear victory.

We do not have a convincing story to tell ourselves about the First World War. We still argue over what caused it, why we sacrificed the flower of our youth in Flanders fields. And we certainly do not have a convincing story to tell ourselves about the Battle of the Somme or what its purpose was. Without such a story the losses will seem unbearable, the waste unimaginable.



Simon Tolkien as a boy with grandparents JRR and Edith Tolkien. JRR died in 1973

The reputation of the British Army's commander on the Somme, General Douglas Haig, has been revived somewhat by historians in recent years. But it is still difficult to discern what his battle plan was.

"The strategy of the battle is unclear and it shifts," says Sir Hew Strachan, professor of international relations at St Andrews University. "On the ground itself there isn't an obvious objective. So how do you rationalise what happened?"

Strachan points out that Haig's initial stated aim was a breakthrough. When that failed, he explained the battle in terms of attrition, that the German army suffered heavier losses. But in fact losses were broadly similar on both sides.

It was also argued that by attacking on the Somme the British were relieving the French at Verdun. But by July 1916 the French were holding fine at Verdun, their crisis had passed. “The purpose was unclear at the time and remains disputed thereafter,” says Strachan. “The ultimate absurdity is that we’re still not sure what the outcome of this battle was.”

Perhaps this is why JRR Tolkien, despite his vast literary output, never wrote directly about the First World War — because what he saw was so hard to rationalise. Perhaps that’s why his imaginary wars have purpose — grand struggles between good and evil that must be won no matter the cost. Perhaps he was trying to prove to himself that “not all tears are an evil”.

But it is difficult to find such meaning in that first day of July 1916. The closest I have come is in the comradely pathos of an inscription at a cemetery near Mansell Copse on the Somme. Here 161 members of the Devonshire Regiment were laid to rest by their comrades, three days after the battle began. On a wooden cross they wrote: “The Devonshires held this trench. The Devonshires hold it still.”

No Man’s Land by Simon Tolkien will be published by HarperCollins on June 30 at £20



Tolkien in 1916, aged 24

Tolkien on the front line

JRR Tolkien initially resisted joining the army when war broke out in 1914, “enduring the obloquy” of tutting relatives in order to finish his degree at Oxford University. Once he had

done so, receiving first-class honours in English language and literature in 1915, he joined up and was commissioned as a temporary second lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers. He trained for 11 months, eventually becoming a signals officer.

While waiting for deployment, he alleviated his boredom by writing poetry and also inventing a secret code of dots so that his wife Edith could track his movements on a map. Authority did not suit Tolkien, he later complained that “the most improper job of any man . . . is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it and least of all those who seek the opportunity.” Still, he admired the men in his ranks and they partly inspired the character of Samwise Gamgee, the most stalwart of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien participated in two assaults during the Battle of the Somme, but soon after contracted trench fever and was invalided home. Weakened by his illness, he spent the rest of the war either in hospital or on garrison duty. Two of his best friends from school, Rob Gilson and Geoffrey Smith, died at the Somme. Tolkien wrote later that “by 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead”.

An international commemorative service will take place on July 1 at the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme in France.

Several events commemorating the centenary will also be held in the UK on June 30 and July 1, including a vigil at Westminster Abbey and a service at Manchester Cathedral.