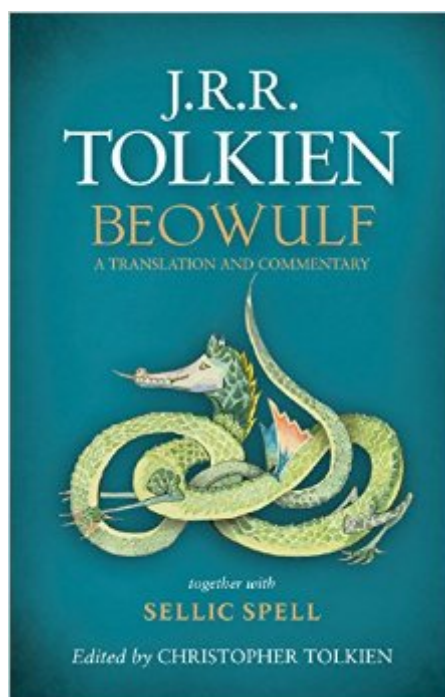


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Beowulf: A Translation And Commentary



Synopsis

The translation of Beowulf by J.R.R. Tolkien was an early work, very distinctive in its mode, completed in 1926: he returned to it later to make hasty corrections, but seems never to have considered its publication. This edition is twofold, for there exists an illuminating commentary on the text of the poem by the translator himself, in the written form of a series of lectures given at Oxford in the 1930s; and from these lectures a substantial selection has been made, to form also a commentary on the translation in this book. From his creative attention to detail in these lectures there arises a sense of the immediacy and clarity of his vision. It is as if he entered into the imagined past: standing beside Beowulf and his men shaking out their mail-shirts as they beached their ship on the coast of Denmark, listening to the rising anger of Beowulf at the taunting of Unferth, or looking up in amazement at Grendel's terrible hand set under the roof of Heorot. But the commentary in this book includes also much from those lectures in which, while always anchored in the text, he expressed his wider perceptions. He looks closely at the dragon that would slay Beowulf "snuffling in baffled rage and injured greed when he discovers the theft of the cup"; but he rebuts the notion that this is "a mere treasure story", "just another dragon tale". He turns to the lines that tell of the burying of the golden things long ago, and observes that it is "the feeling for the treasure itself, this sad history" that raises it to another level. "The whole thing is sombre, tragic, sinister, curiously real. The "treasure" is not just some lucky wealth that will enable the finder to have a good time, or marry the princess. It is laden with history, leading back into the dark heathen ages beyond the memory of song, but not beyond the reach of imagination."

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Customer Reviews

The last few years has seen the release by the Tolkien Estate of several hybrid books that combined original retellings/translations of ancient hero legends (Sigurd, Arthur) with further commentary by J.R.R. Tolkien (on the source material) and Christopher Tolkien (on his father's work). The latest in this series is Tolkien's translation of Beowulf, which has perhaps incurred greater interest since outside of his fiction, Tolkien is perhaps best known for his famed essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." As with the prior two, one's enjoyment of this new work will be dependent on one's delight in /toleration of some pretty arcane scholarship. Personally, I enjoyed all of them, including this latest, but then, I'm a huge Tolkien fan, I'm an English teacher who owns several copies of Beowulf translations and teaches the legend every year, I love the song "Grendel" by Marillion and the book Grendel by John Gardner, and give me a good footnote or twenty and I'm alight with joy. I couldn't be more the target audience unless I threw myself into a dragon-prowed boat and laid waste to some English coastal towns. Your mileage therefore may vary. The book contains an introduction by Christopher (from now on I will use Tolkien to refer to the father and Christopher to the son), Tolkien's prose translation of Beowulf, "Notes on the text of the translation" (both Tolkien's and Christopher's), "Introductory note to the Commentary" (Christopher's explanation of his editing of this father's comments), "Commentary Accompanying the Translation of Beowulf" (drawn from Tolkien's lecture notes), "Sellic Spell" (three versions of Tolkien's attempt at telling what might have been the old source folktale for the legend as we have it), and "The Lay of Beowulf" (two short poems/songs by Tolkien).

Had J.R.R. Tolkien never written The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, or The Silmarillion his fame today would rest on his long career at Oxford University as professor of Anglo-Saxon. There he did pioneering work in philology, but his greatest renown would come from his life long labor of love: studying the great poem Beowulf. Much of Tolkien's work on Beowulf, especially his revolutionary essay "The Monsters and the Critics," has been widely available for many years. Now Christopher Tolkien, serving as his father's literary executor, has give us another treasure: J.R.R. Tolkien's own prose translation of Beowulf. Christopher Tolkien states in his Preface that the translation was completed by 1926, when his father was 34 and still in the early years of his career. Over the next twenty years Tolkien continued to study and reflect on Beowulf, writing essays and giving lectures

and classes. In preparing Tolkien's translation for publication his son had to choose between several different manuscripts and then deal with the truly arduous task of selecting from a vast body of work those notes and commentaries which would be most illuminating. The result is an amazing almost line by line analysis of the translation. As yet I've only had time to dip in here and there, but wherever I've looked I've found some fascinating insights and new information, such as that "Hwaet", the famous first word of Beowulf which Tolkien translated as "Lo!" is an anacrusis or "striking up" that derived from minstrels, or that Beowulf's "ice-bears" could not have been polar bears since that species was not known in Europe until much later.

There is such a variety of Beowulf-related material in here that I decided to break it down by section. The verse translation: Tolkien made an unfinished/fragmentary alliterative verse translation of "Beowulf", but you will not find it in this book other than a dozen lines on page 9 and seven more on page 130. Given that Christopher Tolkien has published other partial/fragmentary verse by his father (e.g. The Fall of Arthur and The Lays of Beleriand (The History of Middle-Earth, Vol. 3)), I find this omission both surprising and very disappointing. Preface & Introduction: These sections are fairly typical of Christopher Tolkien's work, featuring him describing/justifying his editorial process. Personally, I find his tendency to do this to be annoying, but maybe that is just me. Prose Translation: In prose translations of poetry, a degree of artistry is usually sacrificed for the sake of a more formal (i.e. word-for-word) translation. Tolkien's skill as a wordsmith keeps this loss of artistry to a minimum. His prose rendering does lose the original poem's alliteration, but it still flows with a pleasing rhythm that gives much the same feeling as the original. Notes on the text of the translation: In this section, Christopher Tolkien is back to pontificating about his editorial process and giving a number of readings from one of the early (i.e. rough draft) versions of the poem.

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