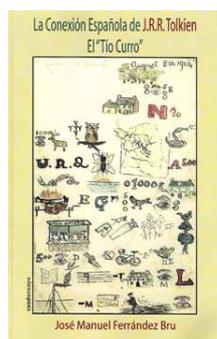


## Father Francis Morgan, Tolkien, and SpainTolkien

Posted by [Morgan Thomsen](#) Mon, April 22, 2013 23:42:46

**Acknowledgements:** I'm grateful to David Bratman and Daniel Helen for reading the draft and providing me with comments and corrections. **Update** (28 May 2013): I would like to thank Beregond, Anders Stenström for pointing out an error and for giving a linguistic insight (the text has been amended accordingly).



### 1. Introduction

In March 2013, the Spanish Tolkien scholar José Manuel Ferrández Bru published *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien: El "Tío Curro"* (Astorga, León: Editorial CSED). Ferrández Bru's book, which is both the first biography about Father Francis Xavier Morgan Osborne (henceforth Father Francis) and the first book-length study of connections between Father Francis, Spain, and J.R.R. Tolkien, could be placed in at least two categories of texts dealing with Tolkien.

Firstly, it joins a handful of books, having appeared in the last decade, which focus on a particular aspect of Tolkien's life – I'm thinking of such works as John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003), Andrew H. Morton's *Tolkien's Gedling* (2008) and *Tolkien's Bag End* (2009), and Phil Mathison's *Tolkien in East Yorkshire 1917–1918* (2012).

Secondly, it is one of quite few original publications in languages other than English that include formerly unknown biographical information (albeit being bits and pieces) about Tolkien. Of such, there are for example Arne Zettersten's *Tolkien - min vän Ronald och hans världar* (2007; eventually appearing in an English edition in 2011), an interview in Polish with Tolkien's friend Przemyslaw Mroczkowski (*Tygodnik Powszechny*, No. 14, 1994), and an interview with Tolkien's former au-pair Arndís Þorbjarnardóttir, published in the Icelandic newspaper *Morgunblaðið* (28 February 1999).

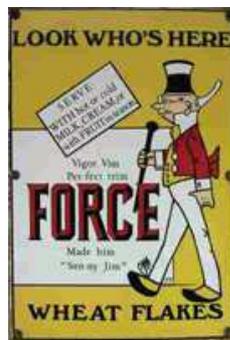
My personal interest in reading Ferrández Bru's biography lies in gaining a deeper understanding of the connection between Father Francis and Tolkien and his family (and the chosen title of his book reveals that Ferrández Bru is aware that this will be the case for a majority his readers). I will therefore proceed below by mainly noting such details which appear to be hitherto unknown concerning this relationship.

### 2. Anecdotes and reminiscences

Ferrández Bru has to date published two articles in English about his particular field of research in Tolkien scholarship: 'J.R.R. Tolkien and the Spanish Civil War' in *Mallorn* 51 (2011), and "'Wingless fluttering': Some Personal Connections in Tolkien's Formative Years' in *Tolkien Studies*, vol. VIII (2011). To these should also be added the articles about Father Francis that Ferrández Bru has published in English on [his website](#).

In *Tolkien Studies*, Ferrández Bru noted that he “obtained invaluable data in interviews and letters exchanged with Priscilla Tolkien” (p. 59). While Priscilla Tolkien’s contribution remained implicit in that particular text, the *Mallorn* article provided two brief quotations by Priscilla, both concerned with reminiscences of Tolkien’s views on the Spanish Civil War. These two quotations also appear in *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien* (pp. 231-2), and the book includes several additional quotations and references to his correspondence with Priscilla: such are reminiscences by Priscilla about her father’s great interest in the Spanish language owing to his close connection to Father Francis (p. 159), a brief description of Father Francis and his relationship to her (pp. 193-4), and how the death of Father Francis affected her father (p. 198). Moreover, *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien* contains the following anecdotes recorded by Priscilla Tolkien:

**A ceremonial ”good afternoon”:** In the early 1920s in Leeds, J.R.R. Tolkien stepped out of a tram in the company of Father Francis. The latter had a powerful presence and made a deep impression on a girl standing next to the tram, who kept staring at the Father intensely. Taking notice of the girl, Francis Morgan “removed his large-brimmed hat and turning towards the girl said ‘good afternoon’ with great ceremony” (p. 194).[1] The surprised girl became terrified and started to run away from Father Francis. Afterwards, J.R.R. Tolkien was fond of telling this amusing story to his children.



**Tears for wheat flakes** (p. 198): In the early 1930s at Tolkien’s home at 20 Northmoor Road in Oxford, the elderly Father Francis (who died on 11 June 1935, 78 years old), was sitting by the table while Edith Tolkien kept asking what kind of cereals he might be wanting for breakfast. At last he chose a brand called Force, but noticed that the young Priscilla had started crying – it was her favourite cereals and she regarded them as belonging to her. Father Francis, who guessed why she was crying, handed her the package of cereals and apologized, thereby winning her confidence and stopping her tears.

**The smelly Camembert** (pp. 195, 197): Travelling on a train, Edith Tolkien and Father Francis were bringing a gift to Ronald, a Camembert cheese (of which he was especially fond). Having reached its maturity, the cheese omitted such a strong smell that fellow travellers started leaving the wagon, which eventually became empty except for Edith and Father Francis. According to Priscilla, this memory has been kept throughout the years within the Tolkien family. While I have found no other reference to this incident, it bears likeness to the anecdote about the greasy Banbury cake: “Father Francis sometimes came to visit from Birmingham, once chaperoning Edith. She remembered the train stopping at Banbury and Father Francis insisting on buying Banbury cakes – the local delicacy – which were very greasy. The grease got everywhere and caused considerable confusion.” (*The Tolkien Family Album*, p. 35).

**The “flip-flap” clock:** The heritage of Father Francis’s brother Augusto Morgan contained a certain clock being a family heirloom. After struggling with administrative hindrances, Father Francis brought the clock to England from Spain, and upon his own death, he bequeathed it to Tolkien, who “kept it in his study throughout his whole life and who more than once managed to get it repaired even though its machinery was antique” (p. 208).[2] In a footnote, Ferrández Bru comments that the Tolkien family called the clock by the name “the flip-flap”,[3] and that it passed on to John Tolkien, Ronald’s eldest son. The clock appears to have been lost after John’s death.

### 3. Possible influences

#### 3.1 Father Francis

**The Saviour in the *Gnomish Lexicon*:** Ferrández Bru points to an entry appearing in Tolkien's *Gnomish Lexicon* (dating from 1917 and published in its entirety in *Parma Eldalamberon*, vol. 11): "**Faidron** or **Faithron** = Francis". By observing the usage in the *Gnomish Lexicon* of proper names being denoted by capital letters and the equality sign denoting names in other languages, in addition to the occurrence of names of other figures in the life of Tolkien in the corresponding *Qenya Lexicon* (*Parma Eldalamberon*, vol. 12), Ferrández Bru concludes that "Francis" here very likely refers to Father Francis (in his Foreword, Ferrández Bru thanks John Garth for suggesting this lead).[4] He then looks at the Elvish cognates, finding English glosses such as freedom, set free, liberation, liberty, liberator, and Saviour. Ferrández Bru admits that it is impossible to tell if Tolkien actually intended these concepts to be characteristic of Father Francis, but suggests that it's "very revealing that [Tolkien], in his private world and creation, composes the name of his tutor through terms connected with freedom and liberation" (p. 182).[5]

**In the guise of Thingol** (pp. 242-3): It is well-known that Tolkien's relationship to Edith served as an inspiration for the story of Beren and Lúthien. Ferrández Bru suggests that the character of Thingol, who opposed the love of Beren and Lúthien, might be owing something to Francis Morgan, who likewise opposed the love between Ronald and Edith.

**The ceremonial Troll** (pp. 194-5): In connection with the anecdote of Father Francis's ceremonial "good-bye" mentioned above, Ferrández Bru suggests that this event might have influenced Tolkien when composing the poem 'Perry-the-Winkle'. In the poem, the Lonely Troll tries to find a friend and encounters Mrs Bunce, a hobbit. The well-meaning troll greets her with a smile and a "Good-morning, ma'm! Good day to you!", but the hobbit "yelled a frightful yell" and "ran home like mad".

### 3.2 Spanish influence

The young Tolkien had access to Father Francis's library containing many Spanish books (the library is unfortunately no longer existent),[6] possibly including works written by his relatives (see below), and that he surely used to recount anecdotes about Spain for Tolkien. Ferrández Bru says that one can therefore find "an interesting line of speculation about an unknown influence in Tolkien's works" (p. 159),[7] and suggests a number of such possible influences.

**Romanticism (pp. 211ff):** Among Father Francis's older relatives were found quite a few prominent authors, such as Juan Nicolás Böhl de Faber, Frasquita Larrea, and Cecilia Böhl de Faber. Ferrández Bru analyses romantic and traditional themes ("progress contra nature") in the writings of these authors, and notes a similarity in the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, perhaps suggesting that Tolkien was aware of their works or possibly having been influenced by their ideas through Francis Morgan.

**Landscape and places in Spain:** While admitting the inherent danger of guesswork concerning relationships between locations appearing in the *legendarium* and the real world (p. 241),[8] Ferrández Bru proposes that the transportation of wine barrels on the river between Lake-town and the Elf-king's cave in *The Hobbit* is reminiscent of the transportation of goods on the river Guadalete from Jerez and El Puerto de Santa María (from where hailed the family of Father Francis). He further notes that Gondor and Minas Tirith might owe something to the white facades of certain Andalucian houses, "los pueblos blancos", and discusses an etymological similarity between the river Anduin, the Great River, and the rivers Guadalete and Guadalquivir, the latter deriving from an Arabic name meaning "great river" and both referred to as "Río Grande" in everyday speech (pp. 242ff).

### 4. Some critical points

When writing a biography about or closely related to Tolkien, one can nowadays hardly escape from consulting *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (2006). I was therefore somewhat surprised to find that *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien* did not include Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond's magisterial reference work in its list of references.[9] A passage where Ferrández Bru's exposition would have benefited from such a reading concerns the funeral of Father Francis. Based on a recollection by Priscilla Tolkien, Scull and Hammond note that while Tolkien himself could not attend the funeral, his eldest son John possibly went there

to represent his father (*Chronology*, p. 788). Ferrández Bru appears not to include this piece of information. Another example is the dating of the poem ‘Perry-the-Winkle’: Ferrández Bru places the composition of the poem to between 1920 and 1930 (citing Humphrey Carpenter’s biography as his authority), but a quick glance in the *Companion and Guide* reveals a more exact year of composition in addition to providing more information about its background (see *Reader’s Guide*, p. 997).[10]

In some cases Ferrández Bru has instead consulted Daniel Grotta, both through correspondence and the Spanish translation of his *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle-earth*, for biographical information about Tolkien. Grotta’s biography about Tolkien is regarded as problematic by many Tolkien scholars,[11] and questions about credibility therefore arise when Ferrández Bru, attributing Grotta, writes that Father Francis soon after the death of Mabel Tolkien took the Tolkien brothers on a railroad trip to Wales for fifteen days (p. 164). From what I can find, no mention of this event has occurred elsewhere.[12]

These critical points notwithstanding, I consider *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien* to be a valuable contribution to Tolkien scholarship. Ferrández Bru writes lucidly and cogently, and for anyone seeking to find out more about Father Francis’s ancestors there is a wealth of information (which I have not covered here). Furthermore, the neat division of the book into clearly separated parts makes it useful as a reference work (although it regrettably lacks an index). Like Zettersten’s book, I’m eager to see an English edition of *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien* in a near future, hopefully revised and expanded on a few points through consulting *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*. A not-so-distant English edition would additionally ensure that the quoted excerpts of Priscilla Tolkien’s reminiscences (which I surmise are written in English) will be available in their original form.

## Works consulted

Carpenter, Humphrey (1977). *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

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## Notes

The photograph of the “Force Enamel Advertising Sign” is copyrighted by [CameraSnaps.org.uk](http://CameraSnaps.org.uk) (reproduced in accordance with the terms and limitations of use).

[1] “... se quitó su sombrero de ala ancha y girándose hacia la niña le dijo *buenas tardes* con gran ceremonia.”

[2] “... lo conservó en su estudio durante toda su vida y en más de una ocasión fue capaz de repararlo a pesar de la antigüedad de su maquinaria.”

[3] The onomatopoeic name “flip-flap” is used in the Spanish text; I’m uncertain if Ferrández Bru used a Spanish expression to translate an English variant.

[4] Suggesting a different (or supplementary) interpretation, Beregond, Anders Stenström has commented that while “the presence of *Francis* in the *Gnomish Lexicon* obviously reflects the presence of Francis Morgan in Tolkien’s life, its translation is probably simply etymological: the basis of the name is the same as in *Frank* and *French*, but this also came to refer to liberty, being a free man, as in *frank* and *franchise*” ([comments field to this article](#), accessed 28 May 2013).

[5] “... es muy revelador que en su mundo privado, en su creación personal, componga el nombre de su tutor usando raíces relacionadas con la libertad y la liberación.”

[6] Ferrández Bru writes (p. 163) that he found an online post, at a Tolkien forum, providing some information

about books from Father Francis's library. He doesn't give a link to the post, but it can be accessed at [http://www.tolkienguide.com/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?viewmode=compact&order=DESC&topic\\_id=512&forum=9](http://www.tolkienguide.com/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?viewmode=compact&order=DESC&topic_id=512&forum=9) (as of 19 April 2013).

[7] "... una interesante línea de especulación sobre una desconocida influencia en la obra de Tolkien".

[8] A tendency discussed by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull in their blog article 'Tolkien, Leek, and the Moorlands' (4 September 2012; <http://wayneandchristina.wordpress.com/2012/09/04/tolkien-slept-here-leek/>).

[9] In his article in *Tolkien Studies*, though, Ferrández Bru does mention *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* as well as the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* edited by Michael D.C. Drout, which he regards as "useful resources which provide new sources of data beyond the information available in the Carpenter biography" (p. 59, note 1). However, neither of these works is cited as a source in the article or in *La Conexión Española de J.R.R. Tolkien*.

[10] The precursor of 'Perry-the-Winkle', a poem called 'The Bumpus', belongs to a series of unpublished poems called *Tales and Songs of Bimble Bay*. These poems are "centred on an imaginary English coastal town and harbour" and date from ca. 1928. Thus, the "real-world" background of 'Perry-the-Winkle' might actually corroborate Ferrández Bru's theory that Father Francis's "ceremonial 'good afternoon'" served as an inspiration for the "ceremonial Troll".

[11] See Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, 'Truth or Consequences: A Cautionary Tale of Tolkien Studies' (<http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?16905-Truth-or-Consequences-Hammond-amp-Scull>), and the comments field to Jason Fisher's blog post "Shadows of the past" (<http://lingwe.blogspot.se/2012/08/shadows-of-past.html>).

[12] It is possible that Grotta's notes about Tolkien's trip to Wales with Father Francis (which can be found in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect*, p. 27) derive from his interviews with some of "Tolkien's friends and associates" (p. 8). It should also be made clear that Ferrández Bru does state that the version of the trip to Wales included in his book is given "according to Daniel Grotta" ("[s]egún Daniel Grotta") and that it is not known if the trip "actually took place" ("si realmente se produjo"; p. 164). However, since Humphrey Carpenter only says that "[l]ater in childhood [Tolkien] went on a railway journey to Wales" (*J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, p. 26), providing no further details (and neither are such found in Scull and Hammond's entry for Wales, in their *Reader's Guide*, p. 1085), Grotta's version lacks supporting evidence – a critical point which I wish Ferrández Bru could have emphasized even more strongly.