Tolkien's literary career spans almost sixty years, from shortly after the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, when he was twenty-two, until shortly before his death in 1973. Roughly the middle third of his creative life (1937–1955) is dominated by the composition of The Lord of the Rings. But the first third was a period of apprenticeship, of scholarly eminence and literary obscurity. Tolkien's most influential contributions to scholarship and criticism – notably the edition (with E. V. Gordon) of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the essay on Beowulf – date from this period, and the essays 'On Fairy Stories' and 'On Translating Beowulf' followed only a little later. The only literary compositions to achieve publication before 1937 were a handful of poems, printed in obscure magazines: one, 'Goblin Feet', which Tolkien came to dislike intensely for its prettified and diminutive 'fairy' imagery, appeared in a couple of anthologies in the early twenties. But Tolkien was writing prolifically during this period, as is abundantly demonstrated by the five posthumous volumes of work edited by Christopher Tolkien: The Book of Lost Tales (two volumes), The Lays of Beleriand, The Shaping of Middle-earth, and The Lost Road.

In these writings, which often take the form of multiple versions of an evolving tale, Tolkien strove to construct a unified corpus of myth and legend – a process he continued until the end of his life. This mythical 'history', which never assumed a completely fixed form, stands in the position of a remote background to the events of The Lord of The Rings, which are dated several thousand years later. The numerous allusions to the earlier history in that work are internally consistent, and indeed contribute greatly to its exhilarating sense of wide expanses of time; but there is not complete consistency – even on matters of detail, let alone in
overall aesthetic character – between *The Lord of the Rings* and any other version of the history. Tolkien hoped during the late 1940s to publish the entire historical sequence as a unified narrative, but for reasons which will be discussed later I am confident that this would not have worked. A reader who wishes to enjoy Tolkien’s work to the fullest is best advised to treat the various tales and poems of the (fictionally) earlier epochs essentially as discrete inventions, and not as ‘extensions’ to *The Lord of the Rings*.

The early writings are difficult, often fragmentary and contradictory, and, it must be said, only intermittently rewarding. The earliest works of all are lyrical poems, written around the time of Tolkien’s graduation from Oxford and enlistment in the Lancashire Fusiliers; in the more effective of these, the impact on the emerging ‘history’ of the peculiar poignancy of youthful experience is touchingly visible, in spite of a highly derivative style. These poems of Tolkien show beyond doubt that Humphrey Carpenter’s assertion that ‘for him English literature ended with Chaucer’ is an overstatement. Among a number of post-medieval, mainly nineteenth-century, influences, the shadows of Keats and early Tennyson, and of Milton’s ‘Lycidas’, fall particularly heavily across them.

Now are thy trees, old, old Kortirion,
Seen rising up through pallid mists and wan,
Like vessels floating vague and long afar
Down opal seas beyond the shadowy bar
Of cloudy ports forlorn . . . .
Bare are thy trees become, Kortirion,
And all their summer glory swiftly gone.
The seven lampads of the Silver Bear
Are waxen to a wondrous flare
That flames above the fallen year.


Winter (personified) comes in with ‘icy shears’ and ‘blue-tipped spears’, and the melodious phrasing ranges from Tennysonian sonorousness (‘sunlight dripping on long lawns’) to Keatsian airiness (‘whirl ye with the sapphire-winged winds’). If we strip away the surface of conventional romantic style, we find above all the aching intensity of a young man’s response to place. ‘Kortirion’ is a town