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opening extract from

Lost Worlds

written by

John Howe

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John Howe's illustrations of *The Lord of the Rings* are beloved by J R R Tolkien's readers and, with Alan Lee's work, were the basis of the film trilogy's imagery. In devising the on-screen look for Gandalf, both Grey and White, we had John's version to measure up to. After all, the books' old wizard with 'bushy eyebrows that stuck out beyond the brim of his hat' would have looked ridiculous on screen. So when enthusiasts praised me for being 'exactly as I'd always imagined Gandalf to be', they were surely remembering John Howe's pictures rather than Tolkien's text.

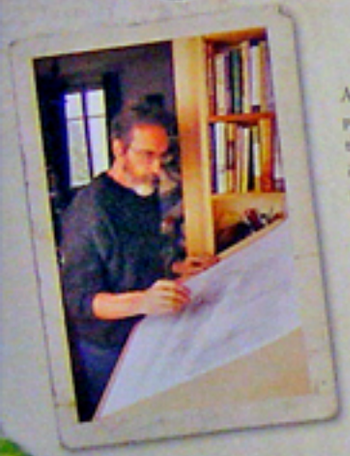
It's the same with the pictures in this unique book. Worlds are imagined and illustrated, becoming real in front of our eyes. Not that John is some conjuror of cheap tricks. His magic has a purpose; to make us think and wonder about distant places and people in times gone by. It's impossible to gaze at his wide yet detailed landscapes and not feel uplifted. The sensation reminds me of the first time I flew as a child, low over the ground, and saw the world afresh. *Lost Worlds* goes further than an aeroplane can, without us leaving the armchair. Like flying in our dreams, here we can oversee Atlantis and Camelot and believe again in unicorns. This is a book for all ages, to stimulate the child in us and fulfil our adult fantasies. At the same time, there is a modesty in John's text, as if he had simply had an idea that amused him and generously wanted us to share it. The whole enterprise seems effortless, a measure of its artistry.

I, for one, am again in his debt.

Ian McKellen

Sir Ian McKellen,
actor, Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*

Hunting for Unicorns – a word from John Howe



Alicorns, or unicorn's horns, were once considered antidotes for poison. Kings, princes, royal ambassadors and popes might carry a piece of alicorn with them on their travels, just in case they fell ill. The horns were worth ten times their weight in gold. But where did the idea of unicorns come from? How do we know what they looked like? How can we explain the astonishing popularity of creatures that never existed? Like all history, there is never just one answer. Mentioned seven times in the Bible, unicorns were among the creatures in the Garden of Eden. They were said to inhabit Prester John's Kingdom. But the creatures remained elusive, although surely they existed – if not, where did the horns come from?

Holding a narwhal tooth, still wishing unicorns might exist.

Only one living creature, the narwhal, possesses a long, spiral 'horn', but it is actually a tooth. But, of course, the people who braved the North Atlantic ocean wouldn't reveal where they had obtained their lucrative prizes, which were sold as unicorn horns for great riches to kings, popes and princes. Searching the past is like hunting for unicorns. The idea of this unique animal filled a space in imaginations and it came to symbolize many things. Unicorns may never have existed, but they certainly needed to. Fancy and fact – tall tales and very real horns – combined over centuries to create an astonishing myth. We need unicorns.

In much the same way, we need history. The world is a big place, and its past is even bigger – and it is full of worlds that have been lost. What is a world, and how do you lose one? If history is any indication, humanity has created worlds from the very beginning, both by building hearths and by gazing at the stars in wonder. New worlds replace old; knowledge is gained and lost. A new world is born with each person, and one dies with each. Your world is not the same as mine and, though we may share much in common, each world is unique.

How do we know that facts are really true? History is not necessarily what happened, but more often what someone said happened. Wherever possible, I have tried to choose the most plausible of the various facts. Wrong, right (or somewhere in between), they are the choices that appeared best to me. History is about picking up the pieces, whether they are dug out of the ground or discovered in old letters and stories. And, especially, history is about trying to put the pieces together, although each piece is from a different puzzle.

There are two kinds of lost worlds: those abandoned in time, buried and forgotten, like Aratta or Mohenjo-Daro, and the ones that live in the imagination, from Atlantis to Camelot. The first ones we might call real, since they once had streets filled with people. The latter are real too, but in a different way; they embody our need for symbols and meaning. Each world tells us where we have come from, physically and spiritually. Some worlds are both.

Worlds can be lost because, in order to exist, they must not be found. Invisible, sunken in the ocean's depths, perched on inaccessible peaks or buried in the centre of the earth, they are beyond our grasp. Because they are out of reach, they remain the kingdoms of those who claim to have seen them – marvellous places for a lucky few. Naturally, they must remain hidden, or they would lose their magic and appeal. They have no place in our world, but symbolize our yearning for those imagined places where everything is perfect. In the same way, lost civilizations become stories handed down in legend or artefacts that emerge from careful digging in the past. Either way, they are ultimately beyond our grasp. Like the unicorn.

This book is not written to give definitive answers; it is written to tell stories, the fascinating stories that make up our past, real or imagined. It is written to offer a modest door that opens on to the worlds themselves. What we make of the past, and what it may tell us about ourselves, is a never-ending story, of which this book is one minuscule chapter in a multitude. I hope it will encourage you to read on.

John Howe

Thebes

Dawn rises over the Nile valley, the sun mirrored on the wide, slow water of the sacred river. It outlines two colossal statues, one broken at the waist, its torso and head lying in a pile of rubble at its base, the other intact, although damaged by sand and wind. A dozen travellers lounge about, their guides quieting restless donkeys and camels. A shepherd drives his flock before him, heading for higher ground; the Nile in flood has left shallow lakes about the statues' feet. Almost imperceptibly, a fine, keening whistle is heard, increasing in volume as the sun warms the mountains behind Thebes, the Seat of Kings. The colossi of Memnon are singing for Eos, Goddess of the Dawn.

Atlantis

Gradually, the Atlanteans fell from grace, fighting amongst themselves, as each successive generation abandoned divine ideals for petty quarrels. They no longer admired beauty for its own sake, but preferred to hoard precious stones and metals. This angered Zeus, who chastised his brother, Poseidon. In sorrow and anger, Poseidon raised the sea and a great wave engulfed Atlantis. This cataclysm took place, Plato said, 9,000 years before his time.