

**TABLE TALK WITH
PRINCIPAL TYLER TINGLEY '48, '64, '01 (HON.); P'99 | By Beth Brosnan**

Since his appointment in 1997, Principal Tyler C. Tingley has been involved in just about every inch of Academy life. He's presided over school assemblies and alumni/ae events, over meetings of the faculty and the trustees. He's overseen the completion of the Academy Master Plan and the launching of The Exeter Initiatives, the \$305-million campaign to fund the plan's goals—including major building and renovation projects and the expansion of Exeter's financial aid program. He's even pulled his share of dorm duty.

But there's still one place that Exeter's principal instructor has yet to spend much time: in a Harkness classroom, teaching. "I'm a complete rookie," Tingley says with a laugh—albeit a rookie with several decades' worth of teaching experience.

A past head of both the Blake School in Minneapolis and the Kingswood-Oxford School in West Hartford, CT (and a former English teacher), Tingley says he arrived at Exeter convinced "that I was already a Harkness teacher—I just hadn't taught in schools with Harkness tables." What he soon discovered, he adds, was "how much I had misunderstood Harkness. As an English teacher, I was accustomed to discussion classes. I asked a lot of questions, but I was always the focal point. The kids were doing a dance that I had choreographed."

But Tingley's days as a Harkness rookie are numbered. During spring term, he will teach his first course at Exeter, a senior English elective entitled "Fellowship and Fantasy: J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis."

Tingley's fascination with both authors considerably predates the recent film versions of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It began in high school when he first read Tolkien's trilogy, which was published in the mid-1950s. "Like a lot of people in the 1960s, I was enthralled by it and read it over and over again," Tingley recalls. His interest deepened in college, when, as an English major at Harvard, he studied *Beowulf* and some of the other older heroic literary forms that inspired Tolkien. And last fall, when Tingley finally took the first sabbatical of his 37-year career, he decided to spend it (together with his wife, Marcia) at Oxford University, where both Tolkien and Lewis taught, researching their lives, their work and their friendship.

In an assembly talk he gave after returning to Exeter, Tingley explained that he's drawn to the literature of fantasy "because fiction that is intentionally unrealistic allows authors to talk about big, philosophical issues in ways that are sometimes difficult to get at in more realistic fiction. Both Lewis and Tolkien

believed that there should be complex, challenging, emotionally stirring fantasy written for adults, not just children. And more than just think about it, they wrote it."

Tingley's sponsor at Oxford was Neil MacFarlane, chair of the university's politics department and the spouse of one Exonian (Anne Church Bigelow '74) and father of another (Eliza MacFarlane '05). As a visiting scholar, Tingley immersed himself in draft materials, academic correspondence and ancient manuscripts from the early days of England and northern Europe.

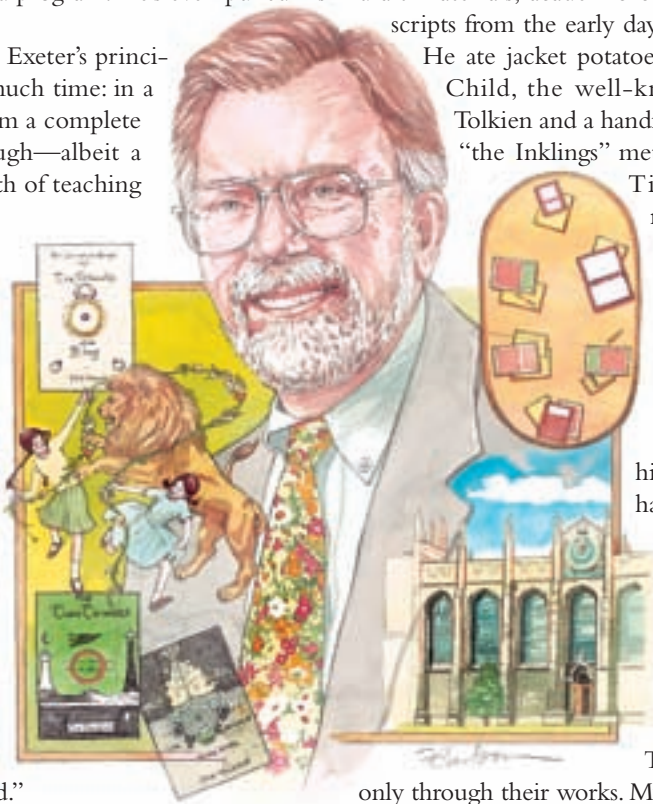
He ate jacket potatoes and drank pints at the Eagle and Child, the well-known Oxford pub where Lewis, Tolkien and a handful of other fantasy writers known as "the Inklings" met weekly to discuss their work. (To

Tingley, their meetings "sound remarkably like Harkness discussions.") He even spent a memorable evening with the youngest of Tolkien's four children, Priscilla, who described how her father's writing day did not commence until 10 p.m., after a full day of teaching followed by dinner with his family. Tolkien's custom typewriter had two sets of keys (the second set was for Anglo-Saxon characters), and he placed the large contraption atop a stack of pillows to muffle the sounds of his late-night tapping.

"Little insights like that into a writer's life are just priceless," says Tingley. "Often we know writers only through their works. My sabbatical enabled me to develop a more immediate understanding of Tolkien and Lewis and their friends," an acquaintance he looks forward to sharing with his students. On more than one occasion, he found himself wishing he could conduct his research *with* his Exeter class, because "learning is more powerful when many minds are exploring together."

Equally priceless, he adds, was the opportunity to discover that he was "just as excited about being a scholar as I ever was." His experience also reaffirmed his faith in Exeter's strong sabbatical program: not just for the rest and reflection a sabbatical affords, but because it allows teachers the chance to "get out of the rat race and be creative." In Tingley's case, that meant writing—with humor, candor and considerable feeling—a lengthy series of vignettes he dubbed "rambles," about topics as various as National Sausage Week or the visit he and Marcia paid to the church where poet T.S. Eliot's ashes are interred. (See excerpts, page 5.)

It's these rare chances to "write and read and think without fetter," says Tingley, that allow Exeter faculty to reconnect with what brought them to the Harkness table in the first place. "I was intellectually convinced of this before my sabbatical," he says. "I came back viscerally convinced of it. Taking a sabbatical can make you a better teacher."



FRED CARLSON