

Two Centenary Salutes: Charles Hamilton Sorley and Robert Graves

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Charles Hamilton Sorley was born on 19th May 1895, nine weeks before Robert Graves; he was killed at the age of twenty during the Battle of Loos. Both men were educated at leading public schools but whereas Graves was unhappy at Charterhouse, Sorley spent "five years that could hardly have been more enjoyable" at Marlborough. He read English literature avidly and had poetry published in the school magazine, "The Marlburian" (Wilson, 105). He rebelled against "mere convention" and became "utterly satiated by the artificiality of the atmosphere of a public school," but retained his natural originality and humour. The Master of Marlborough wrote: "...he was never dull or depressed. In fact a bubbling joy in life was one of his greatest charms..." (*Letters*, 59).

Sorley was fiercely critical of the "horrible public school system that sets up rivalry between neighbours":

The penalty of belonging to a public school is that one plays before a looking-glass all the time and has to think about the impression one is making. And as public schools are run on the worn-out fallacy that there can't be progress without competition, games as well as every thing degenerate into a means of giving free play to the lower instincts of man. (99)

Although there was "something in Marlborough that I would not have missed for worlds" (103), Sorley later realised: "...the public school atmosphere deliberately overdevelops the nasty tyrannical instincts. One is positively encouraged to confuse strength of character with petty self-assertion..." (128).

At the end of 1913 Robert Graves was awarded a classical exhibition to St. John's College, Oxford, and Charles Sorley won a scholarship to University College, Oxford. In a letter to Robert Nichols written in January 1917, Graves remembered Sorley at this time: "...I met him at Oxford in 1913 when we were both up there for scholarships, but didn't realise who he was—wasted opportunities, horrid to look back on..." (*Images*, 62).

Charles Sorley left Marlborough in December 1913, and it was decided he should spend a few months in Germany before going up to Oxford. He stayed first with a German lawyer and his family in Schwerin in Mecklenburg and then became a student at the University

of Jena. His intellectual development can be observed in the articulate accounts of various aspects of his German host's idiosyncrasies and way of life.

There were many diversions, and Sorley found it hard to study his Classics; his literary tastes matured and he discovered Thomas Hardy and became "more or less Hardy-drunk" (*Letters*, 71). After a few weeks he was "so intoxicated by the beauties of the German language" that Goethe replaced Hardy as his "favourite prophet" (90).

Charles Sorley's sparkling letters home from Germany reflect his growing love for the country and her people. In February 1914 he wrote to the Master of Marlborough:

For just at present, my patriotism is on leave. I cannot imagine a nicer nation. I was coming back from a long walk with the Frau last night and we passed a couple of companies of military returning from a field day of sorts. It is truth that we could hear them a mile off. Were they singing? They were roaring—something glorious and senseless about the Fatherland (in England it would have been contemptible Jingo: It wasn't in Deutschland), and all the way home we heard the roar, and when they neared the town the echo was tremendous Two hundred lungs all bellowing. And when I got home, I felt I was a German, and proud to be a German: when the tempest of the singing was at its loudest, I felt that perhaps I could die for Deutschland—and I have never had an inkling of that feeling about England, and never shall. (97)

After three months in Schwerin, Charles Sorley went to Jena and very quickly became absorbed in the life of the University. He reported on this to his old form-master and to the Master of Marlborough:

...the "nicht-inkorporierte" German students—such are now in the majority even in Jena, the most tradition-laden of German universities—are a most hospitable lot with extraordinarily alert and broad minds. The amount of their knowledge is of course colossal, and would put any corresponding Briton to shame. The north-German or middle-German, however, I find as a rule too cross-examinative and fond of talking patriotic shop. The south-German is almost sure to be delightful. While one of a thousand discoveries I have made in the last six weeks is that the superior better-blooded type of German Jew have far the finest minds of any people I have ever come across... (178)

...Jena is proving very satisfactory. It is a horrid little town and most unhealthily situated. But the University preserves the

traditions of Schiller, Fichte, and its other past professors excellently. I have got into many "intellectual" clubs, where we have "knowledge" evenings, "thought" evenings, "religion" evenings, and "joke" evenings, which in spite or on account of their formidable titles are very amusing. Their eager hospitality has ensured my acquiring a large circle of acquaintances... (182)

The Master replied criticising Sorley's policy of keeping "clear of the 'corps' student with beery wounded face," and Sorley wrote again:

...You say that the "corps" aren't bad really, But they are! Black-rotten!... They comprise only a third of the total number of students at Jena... they are the froth and the dregs. We, the "nicht-inkorporierten", the other two-thirds, are the good body of the beer... pretty soon we can mix with one another without any of the force and disadvantages of the artificially corporate life. A peculiarly offensive form of "fagging" for the six youngest students in each corps: compulsory drunkenness; compulsory development of offensive and aggressive behaviour to the outsider; and a peculiarly sickening anti-Semitism are their chief features. The students with whom I mostly go about are Jews, and so perhaps I see, from their accounts of the insults they've to stand, the worst side of these many-coloured reeling creatures. But they're dying out. Their place is being taken by non-combative and non-disciplinary Verbindungen... (200)

Realising that war was inevitable, Professor Sorley recalled his son and at the end of July Sorley wrote to his parents that "the haystack has caught fire. The drunken Verbindungen are parading the streets shouting 'Down with the Serbs'" (211). He then left Jena to walk in the Moselle valley with a friend; after a few days, they were arrested by the German military in Trier and imprisoned for a few hours. He arrived back at Cambridge at the beginning of August.

Neither Charles Sorley nor Robert Graves took up their places at Oxford. Graves left Charterhouse at the end of the 1914 summer term; in August he was commissioned in the Royal Welch Fusiliers although he felt he was "violating all my most cherished anti-war principles" (Assault, 117). Charles Sorley was commissioned in the 7th Battalion Suffolk Regiment the same month. Both young men had a very different relationship and attitude towards the country they were now being trained to fight. Robert Graves' maternal Grandfather, Heinrich von Ranke, was a distinguished German doctor and in his childhood Graves spent happy summer holidays at his grandparent's home

outside Munich. But at Charterhouse his German connection was considered "a social offence"; his "von Ranke" middle name became an acute embarrassment, and he was cruelly tormented (50):

My history from the age of fourteen, when I went to Charterhouse, to just before the end of the war, when I began to realize things better, was a forced rejection of the German in me... The business class to which most of the boys belonged was strongly feeling at this time the threat and even the necessity of a trade war;

"German" meant "dirty German." It meant "cheap shoddy goods competing with our sterling industries," and it also meant military menace, Prussianism, sabre-rattling... (*Good-bye*, 64)

Graves' uncle, Robert von Ranke, was the German consul in London when war was declared and was "forced to leave in a hurry" (187). Graves had "three or four uncles," including a general, and a number of cousins, serving in the German army; seven months before the war started he skied in Zurich with one of his cousins, "a gentle proud creature, whose chief interest was natural history"; he was serving in an elite Bavarian regiment by the time Graves arrived in the trenches (101).

Charles Sorley had spent seven happy months in Germany. He now found himself in a paradoxical situation. He greatly respected and liked the German people, admired their culture and understood their character. He was appalled by the jingoism and war-fever which he found on his return to England. His attitude to the war was perceptive and mature from the start and he confided to a school friend and wrote the poem "To Germany" at this time:

But isn't all this bloody? I am full of mute and burning rage and annoyance and sulkiness about it. I could wager that out of twelve million eventual combatants there aren't twelve who really want it. And "serving one's country" is so unpicturesque and unheroic when it comes to the point... (*Letters*, 220)

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
 And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
 But gropers both through fields of thought confined
 We stumble and we do not understand.
 You only saw your future bigly planned,
 And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,
 And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
 And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

When it is peace, then we may view again
 With new-won eyes each other's truer form
 And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm
 We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,
 When it is peace. But until peace, the storm
 The darkness and the thunder and the rain.

After he started his training, Sorley remained unabashed in his sympathy for Germany and his contempt for the British "deliberate hypocrisy, that terrible middle-class sloth of outlook and appalling imaginative indolence" (240). He unburdened these feelings to a friend and to the Master of Marlborough:

So it seems to me that Germany's only fault... is a lack of real insight and sympathy with those who differ from her. We are not fighting a bully, but a bigot. They are a young nation and don't yet see that what they consider is being done for the good of the world may be really being done for self-gratification... Each side has a virtue for which it is fighting, and each that virtue's supplementary vice. And I hope that whatever the material result of the conflict, it will purge these two virtues of their vices, and efficiency and tolerance will no long be incompatible. But I think that tolerance is the larger virtue of the two, and efficiency must be her servant. So I am quite glad to fight this rebellious servant... (231)

Curious, isn't it, that in old days a nation fought another for land or money : now we are fighting Germany for her spiritual qualities—thoroughness, and fearlessness of effort, and effacement of the individual. I think that Germany, in spite of her vast bigotry and blindness, is in a kind of way living up to the motto that Goethe left her in the closing words of Faust, before he died... (252)

The months of training for Charles Sorley were "complete stagnation among a mass of straps and sleeping-bags and water-bottles" (254) He rejected all false patriotism, had no illusions as to the glory and splendour of war and realised that the conflict ahead could only result in appalling tragedy and disaster. There was "no such thing as a just war", he told his mother: "After all, war in this century is inexcusable : and all parties engaged in it must take an equal share in the blame of its occurrence..." (261).

Robert Graves and Charles Sorley arrived in Northern France in May 1915. Charles Sorley was first billeted in farmhouses in Acquin "the

men on straw, the officers in old four-posters: within sound of the guns." On 8th June he told his father "we have heard no more than the distant rumbling of the guns but move slowly up in their direction tomorrow" (270). Three days later his Company joined the Battalion at Nieppe, nearer the front line at Ploegsteert, a town "where plaintive lettuces wither." He had not seen any action but from his billets he wrote his two finest war poems, "Two Sonnets":

Such, such is Death: no triumph: no defeat:
Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,
A merciful putting away of what has been.

And this we know: Death is not Life effete,
Life crushed, the broken pail. We who have seen
So marvellous things know well the end not yet.

Victor and vanquished are a-one in death:
Coward and brave: friend, foe. Ghosts do not say
"Come, what was your record when you drew breath?"
But a big blot has hid each yesterday
So poor, so manifestly incomplete.
And your bright Promise, withered long and sped,
Is touched, stirs, rises, opens and grows sweet.

On his arrival in France Graves was "disgusted" (*Good-bye*, 127) to find he was attached to the Welsh Regiment and was sent to the trenches at Cambrin. Billets were in the coal-mining village of Labourse. A week later he was in front-line trenches at Cuinchy, just north of Cambrin:

There has been a lot of fighting hereabouts. The trenches have made themselves rather than been made, and run inconsequently in and out of the big thirty-foot high stacks of brick; it is most confusing. The parapet of one of the trenches which we do not occupy is built up with ammunition-boxes and corpses. Everything here is wet and smelly. The lines are very close... This morning about breakfast time, just as I came out of my dug-out, a rifle-grenade landed within six feet of me... (152).

By the middle of June, Robert Graves and Charles Sorley were within sixteen miles of each other; Graves, in trenches a little to the south of Cuinchy where casualties were always heavy, and Sorley in trenches at

Ploegsteert Wood. Robert Graves was billeted in the cellars of Vermelles, less than a mile from the front-line. There was not a single undamaged house in the town, and he discovered deserted overgrown gardens and played cricket one afternoon. He found it "a very idle life except for night-digging on the reserve line, By day there is nothing to do" (156-7).

Charles Sorley was also oppressed by the sense of wasting time, and "a very great desultoriness everywhere." Even after he had been in and out of the trenches for two weeks he found life was "duller even than watching a cricket match..." (*Letters*, 280-1).

At the end of July Robert Graves rejoined the 2nd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers at Laventie:

We crawled through our own wire entanglements and along a dry ditch; ripping our clothes on more barbed wire, glaring into the darkness till it began turning round and round (once I snatched my fingers in horror from where I had planted them on the slimy body of an old corpse), nudging each other with rapidly beating hearts at the slightest noise or suspicion, crawling, watching, crawling, shamming dead under the blinding light of enemy flares and again crawling, watching, crawling... (*Good-bye*, 172).

Charles Sorley continued to go and return from the Ploegsteert trenches "with an almost monotonous regularity" but by August there was more action in his life:

Armed with bombs and equipped with night one can do much raiding with extraordinary safety: much to the Bosch's annoyance, or to his amusement when with infinite care a bombing party creeps up to his wire and commences with deadly effect to bomb itself. Such has happened more than once. The unfathomable laboriousness of the people opposite, infinite and aloof. Working day and night, nor heeding us. Thorns in their side we are, often pricking ourselves more than them; till we get too close, too harmful, too informed one day—and then a whip of lead. We are the gnat that buzzes, hums and stings without ceasing: they the bee, undisturbable in toil till roused, and then a deep sting which remains. Who does the greater damage none can say. Both do enough to keep alive a spark of considerable mutual irritation which this year or next year must burst into flame... (*Letters*, 296).

At the end of August, Sorley wrote to a friend:

But out in front at night in that no-man's land and long graveyard there is a freedom and a spur. Rustling of the grasses and grave

tap-tapping of distant workers: the tension and silence of encounter, when one struggles in the dark for moral victory over the enemy patrol: the wail of the exploded bomb and the animal cries of wounded men. Then death and the horrible thankfulness when one sees that the next man is dead: "We won't have to carry him in under fire, thank God; dragging will do": hauling in of the great resistless body in the dark, the smashed head rattling: the relief, the relief that the thing has ceased to groan: that the bullet or bomb that made the man an animal has now made the animal a corpse. One is hardened by now: purged of all false pity: perhaps more selfish than before. The spiritual and the animal get so much more sharply divided in hours of encounter, taking possession of the body by swift turns (305).

In spite of agreeing with his subordinates that the Loos—Lens area was unfavourable for a major attack, Sir John French consented to Joffre's plan for an autumn offensive in 1915, and the Battle of Loos was fought between 25th September and 13th October. Gas was used by the British for the first time. The initial assault was carried out by the six Divisions of I and IV Corps of the First Army under General Haig's command, with IX Corps as part of the general reserve under the command of Field Marshal French. In the event, Haig asked for this reserve early on the first day on finding his losses mounting considerably; but French, unwilling to commit his inexperienced troops too soon, delayed their move forward. The appalling weather, the difficulty of fighting in the industrial terrain (slag heaps, mineshafts, factories and rows of houses), lack of supporting artillery ammunition, together with resolute German resistance, all combined to make the Battle a costly failure. The initial assault wave, consisting of twelve battalions 10,000 strong, lost over 8,000 officers and men in under four hours.

The 2nd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers took part in the first ten days of the Battle of Loos and suffered severe casualties. Robert Graves later wrote:

From the morning of September 24th to the night of October 3rd I had in all eight hours of sleep. I kept myself awake and alive by drinking about a bottle of whisky a day. I had never drunk it before and have seldom drunk it since; it certainly was good then. We had no blankets, greatcoats, or waterproof sheets. We had no time or material to build new shelters, and the rain continued. Every night we went out to get in the dead of the other battalions.

The Germans continued to be indulgent and we had few casualties. After the first day or two the bodies swelled and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying. The ones that we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell until the wall of the stomach collapsed, either naturally or punctured by a bullet; a disgusting smell would float across. The colour of the dead faces changed from white to yellow-grey, to red, to purple, to green, to black, to slimy... (*Good-bye*, 211).

On 26th September, the day after the Battle of Loos started, Sorley's Battalion left Ploegsteert Wood and reached Labourse, just south-east of Bethune. All the following day enemy bombardment was very heavy and working parties were sent out to the chalk pit nearby. On 5th October, Sorley wrote to the Master of Marlborough:

The chess players are no longer waiting so infernal long between their moves. And the patient pawns are all in movement, hourly expecting further advances—whether to be taken or reach the back lines and be queened. 'Tis sweet, this pawn-being: there are no cares, no doubts: wherefore no regrets, The burden which I am sure is the parent of ill-temper, drunkenness and premature old age—to wit, the making up of one's own mind—is lifted from our shoulders. I can now understand the value of dogma, which is the General Commander-in-Chief of the mind. I am now beginning to think that free thinkers should give their minds into subjection, for we who have given our actions and volitions into subjection gain such marvellous rest thereby. Only of course it is the subjection of their powers of will and deed to a wrong master on the part of a great nation that has led Europe into war. Perhaps afterwards, I and my likes will again become indiscriminate rebels. For the present we find high relief in making ourselves soldiers... (*Letters*, 310).

On 12th October the Battalion went into the front line trenches near the Hohenzollern Redoubt, north of Loos. The following day it advanced to attack two trenches, known as the Hairpin, south of the Redoubt. During heavy machine-gun fire Sorley was shot in the head and killed instantaneously. A sonnet, which was probably the last poem he wrote, was later found in his kit.

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
 Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
 Say not soft things as other men have said,
 That you'll remember. For you need not so.

Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
 It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
 Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
 Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
 Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
 "Yet many a better one has died before."
 Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
 Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
 It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
 Great death has made all his for evermore.

Three months after Charles Sorley's death the slim volume of his poetry, 'Marlborough and other poems', was published. Still serving with his Battalion in France, Robert Graves wrote to Edward Marsh in February 1916 that he had "just discovered a brilliant young poet called Sorley" (*Images*, 39). Six months later Graves was wounded during the Battle of the Somme; recouping in hospital he told Marsh "I have my Sorley here: he's my chief standby" (60-1). Robert Graves' appreciation deepened and in January 1917 he told Robert Nichols that he was "a very very ardent Sorleian." A year later he wrote to Siegfried Sassoon:

I think one of the tests for worthiness to enter our dining club premises must be an appreciation of Sorley: Masfield gets in easily as he said the other day that to him twice as severe a loss as the ravishing of Belgium and the sack of cities and cathedral burnings, and the loss of the cargo of the Lusitania and so on was the death of Sorley—or words to that effect. The great loss of war... (107)

Many of Charles Sorley's poems refer to his great love of the wind and rain. At Marlborough he looked forward to wet days when competitive games, which he hated, were cancelled and he would be free to escape the confines of the school to go on 'sweats' (school slang for cross-country runs) over the Marlborough Downs to race with the wind or "hold communion with the rain." In July 1915, from Ploegsteert trenches Sorley, suffering from lethargy and nostalgia, wrote a letter to an English lecturer friend:

And so I am sunk deep in "Denkfaulheit," trying to catch in the distant but incessant upper thunder of the air promise of October rainstorms: long runs clad only in jersey and shorts over the Marlborough downs, cloaked in rain, as of yore... (*Letters*, 285).

We swing ungirded hips,
 And lightened are our eyes,
 The rain is on our lips,
 We do not run for prize.
 We know not whom we trust
 Nor whitherward we fare,
 But we run because we must
 Through the great wide air.
 The waters of the seas
 Are troubled as by storm.
 The tempest strips the trees
 And does not leave them warm.
 Does the tearing tempest pause?
 Do the tree-tops ask it why?
 So we run without a cause
 'Neath the big bare sky.

The rain is on our lips,
 We do not run for prize.
 But the storm the water whips
 And the wave howls to the skies.
 The winds arise and strike it
 And scatter it like sand,
 And we run because we like it
 Through the broad bright land.

"Sorley's Weather", Robert Graves' tribute to the young poet he so admired was included in *Fairies and Fusiliers* in 1917:

When outside the icy rain
 Comes leaping helter-skelter,
 Shall I tie my restive brain
 Snugly under shelter?

Shall I make a gentle song
 Here in my firelit study,
 When outside the winds blow strong
 And the lanes are muddy?

With old wine and drowsy meats
 Am I to fill my belly?

Shall I glutton here with Keats?
Shall I drink with Shelley?

Tobacco's pleasant, firelight's good:
Poetry makes both better.
Clay is wet and so is mud,
Winter rains are wetter.

Yet rest there, Shelley, on the sill,
For though the winds come frorely,
I'm away to the rain-blown hill
And the ghost of Sorley.

-HIRWAUN HOUSE

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