

***Ministry of Higher Education***

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***The weak are meat, and the strong do eat'': War Poetry Into  
Manifestation***

A paper

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ تَفَسَّحُوا فِي الْمَجَالِسِ فَافْسَحُوا يَفْسَحِ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۖ  
وَإِذَا قِيلَ انشُرُوا فَانْشُرُوا يَرْفَعِ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ  
خَبِيرٌ (١١)

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## **Dedication**

A gift to everyone who supported me and supported me in my academic journey, especially my parents and my husband

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Poets have written about the experience of war since the Greeks, but the young soldier poets of the First World War established war poetry as a literary genre. Their combined voice has become one of the defining texts of Twentieth Century Europe. In 1914 hundreds of young men in uniform took to writing poetry as a way of striving to express extreme emotion at the very edge of experience. The work of a handful of these, such as Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, has endured to become what Andrew Motion has called 'a sacred national text'. Although 'war poet' tends traditionally to refer to active combatants, war poetry has been written by many 'civilians' caught up in conflict in other ways: Cesar Vallejo and WH Auden in the Spanish Civil War, Margaret Postgate Cole and Rose Macaulay in the First World War, James Fenton in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup>

War poetry is, simply put, poetry that deals with the subject of war. Often composed during a particular conflict, these poems are usually written by soldiers. However, nurses and doctors in military hospitals, and even war correspondents have written war poetry. In general, the authors are all people who have seen what really happens on the battlefield with their own eyes. Although people have been writing verses about war for thousands of years, war poetry differs considerably from previous eras' poems about conflicts. The poems written by soldiers from World War I and later conflicts were not epics; these verses did not praise heroes or epic battles.<sup>2</sup>

Rather, they often questioned the purpose of war, why people fight, and overall an unflinchingly realistic portrayal of the nature of battle. War poetry is exclusively realistic, showing warfare in an unglamorous and unromantic light. War poetry as we know it effectively began during World War I. World War I (1914-18) was one of the most climactic events of the twentieth century. There were more than 41 million casualties worldwide. The mechanization and sheer scale of the conflict was matched by a change in poetry; more than 2,200 poets from Great Britain and Ireland alone wrote war poetry. For the first time, the soldier-poet became a distinct figure in literature. In the last one hundred years, the idea of World War I poetry has typically emphasized soldier-poets over civilians, male writers over female writers, and English poets over other nationalities. World War I poetry includes a wide range of themes and voices. Four of the most important themes are the abstract rhetoric of honor, injury, gender relations, and poetic formalism.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, the soldier-poets of World War I are divided loosely into two groups: the early and late poets. The early poets tended to write poems that endorsed the cause of war and emphasized abstract notions of honor. The late poets tended to be more anti-war and either abandoned abstraction to focus on the details of the war experience or contrast abstract ideas with cold, hard reality. Probably the most famous World War I poem, which belongs to the early group, is "In Flanders Fields" (1915) by Canadian John McCrae, which begins with the lines "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row."<sup>4</sup>

In this poem, which commemorates the war dead, McCrae's use of the imagery of the red poppies in a Belgian field was so striking, the red poppy remains a well-known symbol for World War I in Great Britain in particular, and for veterans in general.

Rupert Brooke is also one of the early soldier-poets. A well-to-do man educated at Cambridge, Rupert Brooke's patriotic verse was celebrated during his lifetime. Poems such as "The Dead" (1914) are awash with imagery and lyricism. The poem concludes by equating a good death with glory, "He leaves a white / Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance, / A width, a shining peace, under the night." The abstract rhetoric of honor formed the basis for much wartime poetry, but little of it strikes a modern audience as effective or unpretentious. Rupert Brooke died early during the war, and later poets lived to provide a much more harrowing experience of life in the trenches.<sup>5</sup>



## Chapter Two

### Charles Hamilton

Sorley, Charles Hamilton (1895–1915), poet, was born in Aberdeen on 19 May 1895, the elder twin son and third surviving child in the family of three sons and one daughter of William Ritchie Sorley (1855–1935), professor of moral philosophy at Aberdeen University, and his wife, Janetta Colquhoun Smith. When Sorley was five his father was appointed Knightbridge professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge University and elected a fellow of King's College, and from then on Sorley was brought up in Cambridge, where until he was nine he was taught at home by his mother. From 1906 to 1908, with his twin brother Kenneth, Sorley attended King's College choir school as a day boy, and it was there, at the age of ten, that he wrote a publishable poem, *'The Tempest'*, in form and content a clear portent of his adult work. Compulsory regular attendance at services in King's College chapel may account for numerous biblical references in later poems; Sorley was deeply religious in the philosophical sense but always remained out of tune with conventional belief. When he was thirteen, despite an erratic academic performance at King's, Sorley gained an open scholarship to Marlborough College, where he developed two abiding sensual passions, for food and cross-country running. His poetry began to appear in *The Marlburian* in 1912, influenced by John Masefield and by the Wiltshire downs, with their irresistible evocation of the past. Impending death was an early subject, and one of his most accomplished schoolboy poems is *'The River'*, based on an actual suicide.<sup>6</sup>

In his last year at Marlborough, Sorley won the senior Farrar prize for English literature and language, the Buchanan prize for public reading, and a scholarship to University College, Oxford. It was decided that before going up to Oxford, which in fact he never did, he should spend time with a German family in Mecklenburg and three months studying at the university in Jena, where he attended lectures on philosophy and political economy and made many close friends among German Jews. Hence his stay on the continent strongly influenced the ambivalent feelings he was to entertain towards the war, reflected so strikingly in his poetry. He had rashly embarked on a walking tour in the Moselle region when war was declared, and he spent the night of 2 August 1914 in prison at Trier. Although Sorley was to make light of the experience, he had been in considerable danger. On his release he made his way back to England through Belgium, sailing from Antwerp in the hastily requisitioned *Montrose*.<sup>7</sup>

Sorley was deeply divided in his loyalties, but, believing the war to be an evil necessity, he immediately enlisted and received a commission in the 7th battalion of the Suffolk regiment. He was promoted first lieutenant in November 1914 and captain nine months later. He arrived in France with his battalion on 30 May 1915, having told his mother, 'I do wish people would not deceive themselves by talk of a just war. There is no such thing as a just war. What we are doing is casting out Satan by Satan.' He served for several months in the trenches around Ploegsteert, and displayed considerable courage in saving the lives of two men.<sup>8</sup>

When his battalion moved south to take part in the battle of Loos, Sorley commanded an attack on two trenches known as the Hairpin, south of the Hohenzollern redoubt, and was killed by a sniper on 13 October 1915. He was buried near the spot where he fell. He was twenty.

A posthumous collection, *Marlborough and other Poems*, was published in 1916 and went into six editions in the first year. Robert Graves pronounced Charles Sorley 'one of the three poets of importance killed during the war', rating him alongside Wilfred Owen. Sorley is certainly remarkable for rejecting the prevailing enthusiasm for war so early on, and for forecasting, through a mixture of irony and pity, the horrors of Flanders before ever he reached the front. Typical of his best work, much of which he had no opportunity to revise, are '*Barbury Camp*', written at Marlborough, '*The Song of the Ungirt Runners*', and his last poem, '*When you see millions of the mouthless dead*', scribbled in pencil and discovered in his kitbag after he had been killed. His parents published a collection of his letters in 1919, *The Letters of Charles Sorley*, which the *Manchester Guardian* thought 'contained the first mature impressions of a nature which was all vigour and radiance, a boy who may be said to have had a genius for truth'. His collected poems appeared in 1985.<sup>9</sup>

## **When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead**

This sonnet, written in pencil, was found among the twenty-year-old Sorley's personal effects after he was killed at the Battle of Loos, just one of 59, 247 British casualties in the three-week battle.

**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.**

Mouthless, deaf, gashed, and blind – the poem flatly catalogues the dead of war as a mutilated mass of millions, silenced and cut off from all sight

and sound. The pale battalions that march across survivors' dreams recall Dante's words when he descends into the hell of *The Inferno*: "I had not thought death had undone so many." Each young man once full of life and promise has been transformed into a "spook," and "None wears the face you knew." The men are no longer linked to loved ones; neither are they their own. They have been given to "Great death" for evermore. And what are survivors to do? The poem counsels, "Say not soft things," and adds two more negative commands: do not shed tears for the dead – do not attempt to honour their sacrifice. Instead, "Say only this, 'They are dead.'" The poem asks us to gaze upon the consequences of battle, to search the mutilated faces of the "o'ercrowded mass," and to acknowledge the cost of war without sentimentality and without attaching glory to the loss. There is nothing new or special in personal grief, in this or in any war, for "many a better one has died before." Sorley wrote to his mother in April of 1915 to share his sense that Rupert Brooke's poetry was "overpraised," explaining, "He [Brooke] is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable, and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances.... He has clothed his attitude in fine words: but he has taken the sentimental attitude."<sup>10</sup>

" Sorley's poetry evidences an unsentimental view of war, and so it is worth considering how he might wish to be remembered, one of the youngest of the poets who failed to survive the First World War. His poetry speaks

eloquently of the unfulfilled promise of the young man who was shot in October of 1915. In a letter home, Sorley wrote of his own desires if he were to survive: "Indeed I think that after the war all brave men will renounce their country and confess they are strangers and pilgrims on the earth." <sup>11</sup>

The effects of war are widely spread and can be long-term or short-term. Soldiers experience war differently than civilians, although either suffer in times of war, and women and children suffer unspeakable atrocities in particular. In the past decade, up to two million of those killed in armed conflicts were children. The widespread trauma caused by these atrocities and suffering of the civilian population is another legacy of these conflicts, the following creates extensive emotional and psychological stress. Present-day internal wars generally take a larger toll on civilians than state wars. This is due to the increasing trend where combatants have made targeting civilians a strategic objective. Literature serves as a fairly accurate gauge concerning the ideas and tendencies of a specific society. In the years immediately preceding World War I, British literature was primarily geared toward entertainment. After the emergence of "penny dreadfuls" and pulp fiction at the end of the nineteenth century, shelves were full of fiction that was entertaining because of its shallow, visceral, thrilling, or comedic tendencies. The First World War jolted society into the reality of war, significantly altering the face of literature because it changed the way people thought about life. The realities of an all-encompassing war revealed the frivolous nature of sheer entertainment and opened questions about life and death, purpose and direction, justice, patriotism, love, and sacrifice. The tone of literature shifted from light-hearted, carefree story-telling to the bitter remembrances and cynical outlooks of a generation who now knew pain and suffering on a massive scale.

Poetry dominated literature at this time, with thousands of poems produced regarding the experience at war, whether in the trench, in the factory, or at home. In addition to poetry, memoirs and diaries became popular methods

of communicating the realities of war, giving firsthand accounts of the experience of being at war. These pieces of work are now invaluable resources as historians delve into the history of the war and the experiences of those who lived it. After the War, a general sense of purposelessness and defeat led to a movement both in modernism and in anti-authoritarianism and nihilism in literature and in art. A sense of separation between the artist and writer and the general public was created during this time. No longer could the public fully understand the creator, because it had not experienced what the creator had. An elitism in the arts developed alongside the cynicism that came with experience.



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