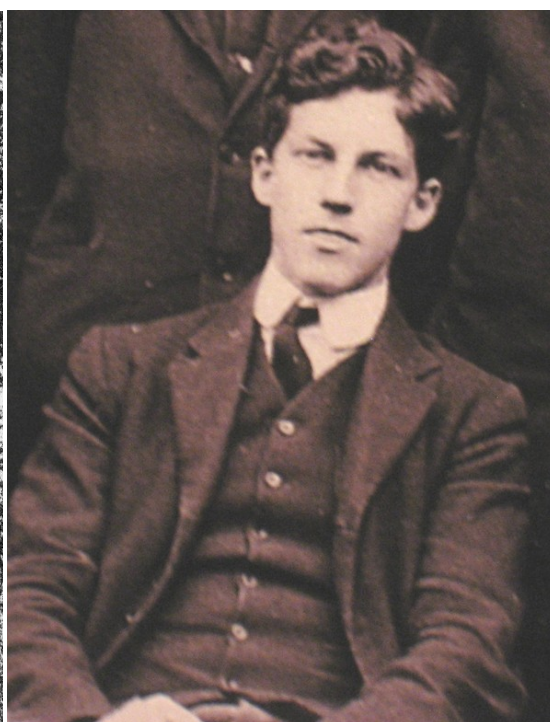


CHARLES HAMILTON SORLEY

There are two articles about Charles Sorley recorded below that were published in *The Malburian* (the journal for Marlborough College). The first, published in 1976 was by James Runcie; the second by W.J. Earp, published in 1984. A sketch map of the Marlborough Downs by Stan Hickerton highlights key places of interest to students of both Jefferies and Sorley along with relevant photographs.



Five Mile Clump



Charles Sorley as a sixth former



Sorley Stone with initials CHS

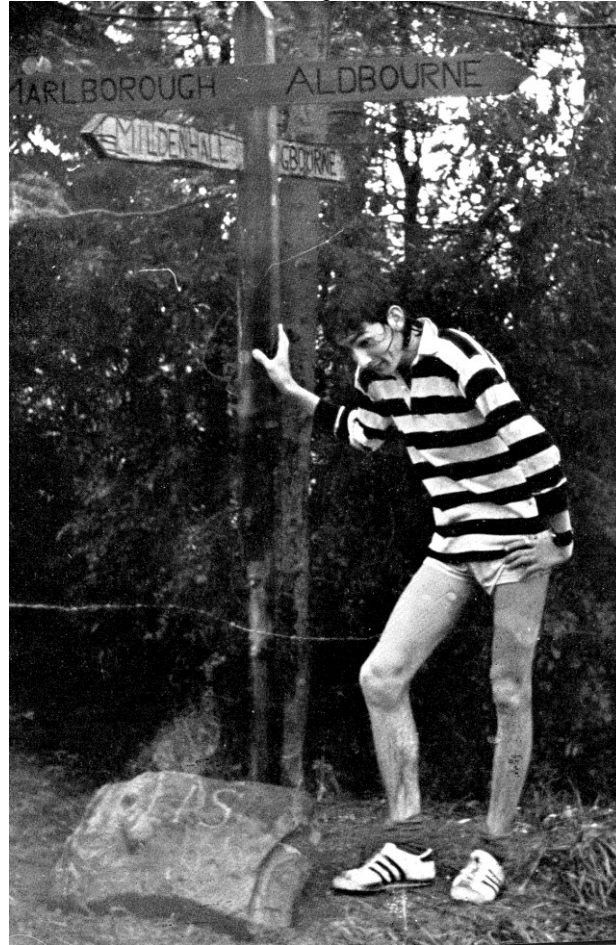


The Sorley Signpost

1895

1915

SORLEY's SIGNPOST by James Runcie, 1976



The gathering of Charles Sorley's relations, friends and admirers which met on Sunday, 3 October, came together to commemorate a man whose vein of poetic genius had been suddenly revealed and then abruptly halted at the age of twenty. We were celebrating his qualities of perception, honesty and imagination that are abundantly clear in a poem such as **To Germany:**

"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."

The Literary Society played host at a luncheon for sixty people, after which the company was addressed by John Press and entertained with poetry readings from Sorley and T. S. Eliot's **Little Gidding**. Mr. Press gave us an appreciation of his work rather than an exposition of detailed literary criticism. He captured the spirit of Sorley's work, and might well have quoted the review of **Marlborough and Other Poems** in **Blackwoods Magazine**:

"Charles Sorley, for instance, could not have helped being a poet. Literature was in his blood and mind."

This account of Sorley's life and work was brilliant in the limited time Mr. Press had:

"He was endowed with an exceptionally keen intelligence, a quality that shines through his letters more clearly and memorably than in his poetry, mainly, I think, because like almost all young poets he had not freed himself from the echoing images and cadences of his literary ancestors. His intelligence was at the service of another gift. A. E. Housman once remarked that the disinterested love of truth was the rarest of human passions. Charles Sorley possessed this rare gift in abundant measure. His intelligence enabled him to detect hypocrisy and evasiveness wherever they might exist, and his truthfulness compelled him to condemn those faults, however attractively they might clothe themselves.

The voice of our poets and men of letters is finely trained and sweet to hear; it teems with sharp saws and rich sentiment: it is a marvel of delicate technique: it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes: it is a living lie.'

That passage comes from a paper on John Masefield read to the Literary Society of Marlborough College on 3 November 1912. It anticipates Sorley's reaction to the chauvinistic self-righteousness engendered by the outbreak of the First World War on 4 August 1914.

Within a few days of the declaration of war he wrote to A. E. Hutchinson that 'our friends and correspondents don't seem able to give up physical luxuries without indulging in emotional luxuries as compensation. But I'm thankful to see that Kipling hasn't written a poem yet'. Kipling soon repaired the omission with **For all we have and are**, a poem that carried a stern warning, 'The Hun is at the gate'. Sorley loathed that kind of propaganda, partly because he had lived in Germany for several months before the war, and had learned to admire all that was good in pre-war Germany. Indeed he was the only poet of his generation to have first-hand knowledge of that country, unless one counts Rupert Brooke, who sat outside the Cafe des Westens in Berlin in November 1912 and jotted down the opening lines of **Grantchester**. Sorley condemned even **Men Who March Away** by Thomas Hardy, because it was 'untrue of the sentiments of the ranksmen going to war', and he singled out one line of Hardy's poem **Victory crowns the just** as the worst he ever wrote—filched from a leading article in the **Morning Post**. That judgment occurs in a letter of 30 November 1914: on 20 September Sorley had written: 'All outlooks are at present material, and the unseen value of justice as justice, independent entirely of results, is forgotten. It is looked upon merely as an agent for winning battles'.

Intelligence and the love of truth would not by themselves have made Sorley a poet. He was also endowed with imagination, a quality easier to recognise than to define, a quality that, as early as August 1914, enabled him to perceive the nature of the conflict between Germany and the Allies, and to sum it up in his poem **To Germany**:

'And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
And hiss and hate.
And the blind fight the blind.'

A month later, in lines that foreshadow the nightmare of the carnage in France and Flanders, he laid his finger on the nature of modern warfare:

'A hundred thousand million mites we go
Wheeling and tacking o'er the eternal plain.'

I think that, even before the outbreak of war, Charles Sorley had become aware of what the Greek poet Demetrios Capetanakis called 'the ageless ambiguity of things', and I suspect that he became aware of this element in human life during his runs alone on the Marlborough Downs, where we shall go later this afternoon. His recognition of complexity and perplexity informs all that he wrote in verse and in prose about Marlborough, war, life and death. In a letter to A. E. Hutchinson, dated 15 December 1914, Sorley states explicitly, 'I am not a patriotic O.M.'. Yet although he knew that public-school morality, like patriotism, is not enough, he never broke his links with Marlborough. He wrote letters to his schoolmasters; as late as July 1915 his verse epistle **I have not brought my Odyssey** is informed by the ethos of the public-school:

'Sons of one school across the sea
We have no fear to fight.'

Until the day of his death his reaction to his experience of war remained ambiguous. Nowhere is this shown more vividly than in two letters written during the last few months of his life. In a letter of 1 June 1915 he recognises the existence within himself of irreconcilable impulses and responses to experience:

'I shall march hotly to the firing-line, by turn critic, actor, hero, coward and soldier of fortune: perhaps even for a moment Christian, humble, with Thy will be done'.

Then shock, combustion, the emergence of one of these: death and life: and then return to the old rigmarole.'

His letter of 26 August 1915 to Arthur Watts, one of his finest passages of prose, acknowledges that war can exhilarate:

' . . . out in front at night that no-man's land and long graveyard there is a freedom and a spur.'

But he also depicts the terror and the degradation of war:

' . . . 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 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.'

Sorley died before he had discovered a poetic language capable of conveying such honesty and directness. The deepest vein of his poetry is revealed when he is not arguing or making moral judgments but listening and responding to the language of the earth: 'Earth that blossomed and was glad 'Neath the cross that

Christ had, Shall rejoice and blossom too When the bullet reaches you.' Even before the war he was haunted by the intimations of mortality that permeated the Marlborough Downs. We find this in the first stanza of **Stones**, written in July 1913:

The field is almost white with stones
That cumber all its thirsty crust.
And underneath, I know, are bones,
And all around is death and dust.'

Robert Graves remarked that these lines always made him feel as though his mouth was full of chalk. In a letter of 15 December 1914, enclosing **Lost**, Sorley wrote to A. E. Hutchinson about the effect on him of Marlborough and the surrounding countryside: 'I have tried for long to express in words the impression that the land north of Marlborough must leave on all those whose minds' wheels are not clogged and the native power of their mind not diverted by the artificial machinations that go on within the College Gates. Simplicity, paucity of words, monotony almost, and mystery are necessary. I think I have got it here at last.'

When he sent the poem to his mother on 28 April 1915 he called it 'the last of my Marlborough poems'.

'I may not think on those dear lands
(O far away and long ago!)
Where the old battered signpost stands
And silently the four roads go.' "

We then moved out to the signpost-site on the Downs. Here Dr. Sinclair Goodlad read further extracts from Sorley's poetry while The Lone Runner appeared on the horizon and ran to the site. The signpost was erected, and the Bishop of Ely stepped forward and offered a short prayer of dedication. Now the signpost stands again, with a specially carved Sarsen stone by Simon Verity nestling at its feet, an unequivocal remembrance of the man and his poetry. It is a testament to Sorley's final valediction to Marlborough, written in 1915, the year of his death:

'I think it like that signpost in my land,
Hoary and tall, which pointed me to go
Upward, into the hills, on the right hand.
Where the mists swim and the winds shriek and blow,
A homeless land and friendless, but a land I did not know and wished
to know.'

CHARLES SORLEY: AN ASSESSMENT

W.J. Earp, 1984



Charles H. Sorley

Charles Hamilton Sorley, born 19th May 1895, killed in action 13th October, 1915. These dates are separated by twenty tantalising years, tantalising in that they gave a glimpse to his contemporaries and posterity alike of a vein of poetic genius, which having been revealed was abruptly closed for ever. The agonising temptation when considering his career is to speculate on the great poet or dramatist he might have become; for he died too young to have any tangible influence upon the main stream of English poetry, and all one can do is to avoid sentimentality in attempting to assess what was, rather than what might have been. Here clearly was a person of genius who drew all those whom he met to him like a magnet. And after such an outstanding and well-balanced Marlborough career, who knows what he might have achieved?

There must be a number of readers who are unaware that such a person ever existed, while many Marlburians may only know the name from the simple commemorative plaque on the South side of the ante-Chapel, which carries his name and dates. He came to Marlborough as a scholar from King's College Choir School, and had a brilliantly successful career here. He loved the countryside round Marlborough, especially the Downs, as perhaps no one else has ever done, and all his writing moves with Marlborough as its life-blood; yet at the same time he threw himself wholeheartedly into the spartan life of the public school in his

time, and was so outstanding in this environment that many of his contemporaries were unaware of the size of the star in their midst. He won a scholarship to University College, Oxford, was head of C1, XI Cap, and officer in the O.T.C., and was the first Secretary of the original of the present Literary Society. Yet he was not a typical public school "hearty": he loved running across the Downs in all weathers, was passionately fond of Masfield, Hardy, and Richard Jeffries, and wrote lively and fascinating letters, which have been collected and published. No-one with such temperament could have tolerated with unthinking acceptance the strictly disciplined life at Marlborough. Indeed the Marlborough countryside provided him with an escape, while his criticism of the public school system and ethos is of that best sort, which comes from the intelligent participator rather than the careless and irresponsible rebel. Like many very clever boys, he was not enthusiastic to work at that which did not interest him in the ordinary school curriculum, while he would pursue with tremendous enthusiasm any intellectual whim.

O come and see, it's such a sight,
So many boys all doing right:
To see them underneath the yoke,
Blinded by the elder folk,
Move at a most impressive rate
Along the way that is called straight
(What You Will)

On Sundays are there thirty chosen ones
Who wear white ties, because their lives are white . . .

This comes from a poem enclosed in a letter to a friend still at Marlborough, when Sorley had left. The final stanza sums up what has been said above of his attitude to school life:

And is there still a refuge, when each day
The same small life, the same poor problem brings?
Is there still change? O, is there still a way
Outward, across those many earth-risings,

A Comfort, and a place to find new things?
And are the Downs, and the downs still grey?
And is the Chapel still a house of sin
Where smiling men let false religion in?

After getting his scholarship he left Marlborough, whereas in the normal course of events he would have stayed on until the following summer as was then the custom. He went to Germany in order to see something of the world, and when the war broke out he returned to join up. He loved Germany — read Goethe with avidity, and hence one can feel the tragedy of such a sensitive and intelligent person being caught up in a war both in accordance with and against his better judgement. He was not, as so many were, filled with shallow heroics or immature optimism about the nature of the war:

'There is no such thing as a just war. What we are doing is casting out Satan by Satan,' he wrote in a letter in 1915. Perhaps it was due to the fact that he knew something of the Germans, and perhaps too it was because he always made his own assessment of any situation; anyway, from the first he reckoned that the war would take three years and would end in stalemate.

To Germany

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.

His battalion was sent to the front at the end of May 1915; he had just over four months at the front before a sniper's bullet found a fatal target.

His chief weakness as a poet, though there is little enough by which to judge him fairly, is a certain conventionality of language and expression, which he would have outgrown. (We must also not forget that he did not wish his poems to be published and none were published in any way, but much as he had made them in the first draft). This was due to his inexperience—he had barely left school, and inevitably much of his poetry suffers from the very fact that he could not at school stand outside his environment. As his father, Professor W. R. Sorley, wrote to Professor Geoffrey Bickersteth in January 1916:

"Deep down in him was the desire to write; but he wanted life first—something to write about. So what we have left is all his own experience, never mere imagination of what experience might be. And so, in his healthy development, love was not yet."

"Love was not yet"—here was a man as yet too young to have experienced anything of the central human emotion, who has still left us such considerable poems. Professor Bickersteth draws attention to R. L. Nettleship's definition of genius:

"Genius is the power of getting knowledge with the least possible experience, and one of the greatest differences between men is the amount of experience they need of anything in order to understand it."

"Sorley, aged 20," Bickersteth goes on in a letter to Mr Murray, "is, or was, a perfect example of genius, as thus defined." Even if one feels that Nettleship's words do not tie down exactly this nebulous and elusive thing, genius, there is no doubt that a mind possessing the fineness and sensitivity of Sorley's had this quality.

Two things stand out above all in his poetry—his preoccupation with death, and his love of Marlborough and its characteristic wild weather. The poet John Press, in his penetrating and balanced critical account of Sorley's life and work (v. sub.

"Acknowledgements") deals extensively with Sorley's attitude towards death and his reaction to the horrors of trench warfare. Two quotations will suffice:

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.
(The second of "Two Sonnets")

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"

In fact, he came to see that in some ways being a soldier was a kind of liberation, or maybe channel, for his rebellious nature. As he says in a letter to the Master of Marlborough,

"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...Perhaps afterwards, I and my like will again become indiscriminate rebels. For the present we find high relief in making ourselves soldiers."

The second strain, that of the Marlborough countryside and its weather, he was constantly aware of, and there are many references to this in his letters, which one cannot but admire for their precocity, their liveliness and their superb descriptions—indeed, Press suggests that "In many ways his letters are more vigorous and penetrating than his verse."

This comes out most clearly in a letter to a school-friend, December 1914. Besides stating his devotion to the Marlborough countryside, it demonstrates his ability to discriminate good and bad in the system:

"I am not a patriotic O.M.; neither, I imagine, will you be. But if I must have an appellation to go through life with—and I suppose one must be labelled something—it is Marlburian: for Marlborough to me means the "little red-capped town" (sorry for quoting myself!) and the land that shelters it: not the school which has given it so much and so transient notoriety. It to say that the school means one's friends there and therefore one should wish to be labelled O.M. The bulk of the people one meets at school are shadowy substances, partially detaching

themselves from the huge artificial mass Marlburian and soon disappearing again thereinto. One's (few) friends have a value entirely apart from the accidental circumstances which brought one together with them. I have tried for long to express in words the impression the north of Marlborough must leave on all those whose mind's wheels are not clogged and the motive power of their mind not diverted by the artificial machinations that go on within the College Gates".

The "land north of Marlborough" was for him the inspiration of much of his thought, especially of course at school where, as I have mentioned above, it represented an escape from the routine of the school, just as, a decade later, MacNeice and Blunt found the same relief, for he loved above all, to run across these tracts of undulating ground:

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 waves arise and strike it
And scatter it like sand,
And we run because we like it
Through the broad bright land.
(Song of the Ungirt Runners)

Of course one must remember that, as his passionate love of Hardy and Masfield demonstrates, Sorley the poet as he has come down to us belongs to the pre-first world war age, and Fate barely allowed him to emerge from this embryonic environment. He may not have sought "to revolutionise poetry on its purely formal side, but contented himself with employing (in metre and technique) tradition and versification"; but one may fairly guess that he would have progressed. As it is, it is in some ways fairest to judge him by the best of his schoolboy poems which represent that phase of his development which had been completed, and quote the following comment on "Marlborough" by Professor J. A. Stewart (who held the chair of Moral Philosophy at Oxford in 1916). Here is an extract from the poem:

Marlborough

Crouched where the open upland billows down
Into the valley where the river flows,
She is as any other country town,
That little lives or marks or hears or knows.

So, long ago, one halted on his way
And sent his company and cattle on;
His caravans trooped darkling far away
Into the night, and he was left alone.

And he was left alone. And, lo, a man
There wrestled with him till the break of day
The brook was silent and the night was wan.
And when the dawn was come, he passed away.

The sinew of the hollow of his thigh
was shrunken, as he wrestled there alone.

The brook was silent, but the dawn was nigh
The stranger named him Israel, and was gone.
And the sun rose on Jacob; and he knew
That he was no more Jacob, but had grown
A more immortal vaster spirit, who
Had seen God face to face, and still lived on.

So there, when sunset made the downs look new
And earth gave up her colours to the sky,
And far away the little city grew
Half into sight, new-visioned was my eye.

I have only quoted that part of the poem most immediately relevant to Professor Stewart's comment:

"It seems to me the Jacob story in Marlborough is a trance-image, rising out of the depth, by which he sees the familiar scene. Indeed it is by the pressure of such images springing spontaneously out of his emotion that all his seeing and all his thinking in these poems are accomplished. If one is surprised by the profundity of this thinking in so young a man, one has to remember that this is a great Poet's thinking, and that the great poets have mostly reached their highest as young men. To my mind his 'dream-life' seems to have been set, like a jewel, in his 'practical life' in such a way that, at certain moments, catching -the Sight of emotion, it reflected it, and illuminated the 'practical life' without interfering with it *qua practical*. The content of the 'dream-life' was not a set of phantoms distinct from the realities of the practical life, but just these 'realities' themselves with the 'trance-image'¹ somewhere present among them and illuminating them. The 'realities' of the practical life are realities for him, at these moments, only because they reveal the real presence of the trance-image, which we may well believe comes to a man like a gift from the Gods."

Any poem which merits such penetrating criticism must surely arouse our admiration for the author, "one so young, who so loved life and made such a success of it".

To summarise, one may quote from the review of "Marlborough and Other Poems" which appeared in Blackwoods Magazine which expresses succinctly the nature of his character and achievements:

"Charles Sorley, for instance, could not have helped being a poet. Literature was in his blood and mind. He wrote with equal delicacy in prose and verse. He was fast making his own style, his own method of criticism. He was discovering the truth of men and things as he went along..."

He was never affected by the sentimental heroics of Brooke and Grenfell, and died before Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg, older men than he and towards the

end of the war, came to see the full extent of the horror of warfare, and to crystallise it in their poems. His was always the independent approach. Perhaps, indeed his "millions of the mouthless dead" become the long role of "those intolerably nameless names" and maybe a premature "Anthem for Doomed Youth". One can see this fine quality of his mind, to pin-point that which was good or real and pass over that which was bad or illusory developing at Marlborough in his writings. Viewing his achievements in the broader perspectives of English Poetry as a whole, Press says:

"Sorley deserves to be remembered for half a dozen true poems, and for a quality of mind, which enables him to see, from the beginning, the nature of the 1914-18 war, and thus preserved him from the illusions, and the subsequent disenchantment, to which so many of his contemporaries succumbed."

W. J. Earp

Footnotes and Acknowledgements

Inevitably in this article much has been omitted and I have concentrated mainly on the Marlborough stage of his career, rather than that that came after, when his horizons were rapidly expanding. John Press's article in the quarterly "A Review of English Literature" (April 1966) which is a most penetrating assessment of Sorley, was the starting point for this small revival of interest in Sorley. Mr Murray, who has guided these discoveries throughout, wrote to Professor Bickersteth (who was Master of the Classical Lower Sixth when Sorley was here, and went on to become Professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh) and he has supplied many of the ideas instanced here in two letters commenting on Press's article; and wherever possible I have tried to acknowledge by quotation marks the extent to which these two sources have made up this assessment: in fact, this is no more than a collation for Sorley's old school magazine of the information that has come to hand.

For Sorley's place at the forefront of the Marlborough poetical tradition see the "Marlburian" Easter 1966; and in the same issue there is an account of the origins and history of the present Literary Society, of which he was the first Secretary. His poems (Marlborough and other Poems) and his superbly incisive and lively letters (Sorley's Letters) are both in the Library. Recently too, an American book on Sorley, entitled "The Ungirt Runner" has been brought out. It is a full scale study, using much the same sources, by Thomas Swann.

Finally, Professor Bickersteth has commented upon a mis-reading of Sorley's handwriting, scribbled as it was in the trenches, in the poem beginning "I have not brought my Odyssey"; the version in Marlborough and Other Poems" reads:

Paris—who didn't care a bit
For Helen—only to annoy her
He did it really, K.T.A.

Sorley actually wrote "to annoy Pa" so as to rhyme with K.T.A. Incidentally the missing lines in the same poem after

We have no fear to fight—

are also supplied by Professor Bickersteth; the full version is:

We have no fear to fight, for we
Have echo of our deeds in you,
We have our *aoidos* too.

The other gap in the poem occurring after the lines:

So I descend beneath the rail
To warmth and welcome and wassail . . .

is filled by 28 lines excluded by the possessor of the original from the version sent for publication because of the high praise of the friend to whom they were addressed, a Master here by the name of John Bain. Here are those lines:

We have no fear to fight, for we
Have echo of our deeds in you
We have our *aoidos* too.

To warmth and welcome and wassail,
And you our minstrel, you our bard,
Who makes war's grievous and hard,
Lightsome and glorious and fair
Will be, at least in spirit, there.
We'll read your rhymes, and we will sing
The toun o' touns till the roofs ring.
And if you'll come among us, then
We shall be most blest of men,
We shall forget the old old pain,
Remember Marlborough again
And hearken all the tales you tell
And bless our old *aoidos*.

Well,
This for the future. Now we stand
Stronger through you, to guard our land,
I do but give thanks of each
(Thanks far far greater than my speech)
Of those who knew or did not know
(For all knew you) not long ago
In places that we see in sleep
Our eyes are dry but our hearts weep
Warm living tears that memory dear
Calls up the moment that we hear
(For we do hear it) your kind voice
Who understood us, men and boys.
So now and for the ages through
We are all dead and living too.
Our common life lies on your tongue
For as the bards sang, you have sung.