The pity of war, the joy of running

World War 1 poet Charles Hamilton Sorley, who died in the trenches 100 years ago, has become the patron poet of runners.

By Roger Robinson

Charles Hamilton Sorley died one hundred years ago, on October 13, 1915, shot in the head in the last stages of the Battle of Loos. He was age 21, newly-promoted captain in the Suffolk Regiment, and potentially one of the finest poets of the twentieth century.

Sorley left literally a handful of poems. The volume *Marlborough and Other Poems* (January, 1916), compiled after his death, has thirty-eight. Some of those were found in his knapsack. Among the surviving few are poems that made him one of the voices of that traumatic war, as well as – very recently, and utterly unpredictably – a kind of patron poet of today's huge international running movement.

That strange evolution began in 1956 when Sir Roger Bannister selected two lines from Sorley as an epigraph to head the concluding chapter of his memoir, *First Four Minutes*:

"We run because we like it
Through the broad bright land."

Bannister probably found Sorley's poem "The Song of the Ungirt Runners" in the updated 1939 edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Bannister's book has been many times republished and reprinted, in America as *The Four-Minute Mile*, and continues to be widely read. Thanks to Bannister's recognition, Sorley's seemingly simple but resonant two lines, with his surname attached, have passed in front of countless readers who would not normally encounter verse.

The full poem reached another international readership when Louis Untermeyer included it in his anthology *Modern British Poetry – Mid-Century Edition* (1950), which became for some decades a required text in American colleges. From those two sources, it has infiltrated the culture of running. As anthologies of sports poetry began to appear, "Ungirt Runners" became the almost inevitable selection to represent running. Alan Bold's British *The Poetry of Motion* (c.1986) and Garth Battista's American-focused *The Runner's Literary Companion* (1994) are examples. Today the poem features first or very high on websites like Poetryhunter.com that offer "poems about running."

It therefore features often on significant occasions. When the 1957 Boston Marathon champion, USA Olympian, and admired writer and English teacher John J. Kelley was inducted into America's National Distance Running Hall of Fame in 2002, his acceptance speech was built around a moving reading of Sorley's poem. When a running club in New Zealand called Wellington Scottish celebrated its centenary in 2015, the introduction to its new history ends with Sorley's last stanza, with a note linking the club's centenary to that of World War 1, and mentioning Sorley's Scottish birth. The poem has been read at more than one runner's funeral. Many copies of my book *Running in Literature* (2003) have gone forth inscribed "We run because we like it/Through the broad bright land."

The poem justifies this almost iconic status among runners. Its rhythm is exactly the stride and

breathing of the long-distance runner at medium effort. Its repetitive sound patterns match the pulse of running. Its impressionistic glimpses of the passing landscape perfectly catch the perception of a moving observer. The heightened individual consciousness interacting with the greater scale of nature (“the great wide air,” “the broad bright land”) is perfect for the “runner's high” experience. It expresses hauntingly many joys that are common to runners - the simple love of movement over the earth, the sense of freedom from the constraints of civilization, the absence of any material motive, or competitive motive for most (“We do not run for prize”), the almost perverse satisfaction of running through bad weather, the consciousness of physical betterment, and the mix of individual purpose with group communality.

These are timeless, but the hundred-year-old poem also finds itself attuned to the twenty-first century running community. Modern running is an unprecedented kind of global culture, its members not usually literary but mostly well-educated, fervently committed to what they do in an almost religious way, willing to work hard and undergo discomfort for the love of the challenge, and eager for inspiration and the sense of significance.

Sorley's poem, remarkably, articulates much of that, with a hypnotic resonance, better than any other available literary work. Housman's “To an Athlete Dying Young” is the other near-iconic runner poem, but being a tragic lament with undertones of forlorn gay love, it catches the mood of mass modern running less well than Sorley's positive-spirited bad-weather pack run. The streak of defiance, the assertion of independence from conventions, the relish in the challenge, the ultimate simplicity of the activity's pleasure and reward, all those are exactly in tune with modern runners' self-image, aspirations, or fantasies. They love words like “courage,” and “difficult.” “Impossible is nothing,” and “Just do it” are the advertising slogans of major running shoe companies, but they could almost come from Sorley - “we run without a cause,” “we run because we like it.” Modern running is an intensely individual commitment, yet it has also become a huge but somehow bonded community. Sorley's repeated “we” catches that. Modern running is essentially positive, and environmentally conscious. Sorley's final affirmation, “And we run because we like it/Throught the broad bright land” gets that perfectly, too.

In the literary-academic world, Sorley now is regarded almost exclusively as a poet of the trenches. He is in most “Soldier Poets” anthologies. He was named by Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That* as “one of the three poets of importance killed during the war.” His is among the sixteen World War 1 poets whose names are engraved on a memorial stone in Westminster Abbey. His work is recognised as coming very early in the school of angry-realist tragic trench poetry. He is known mainly for the lines that open his brutally direct refutation of sentimental mourning for the war dead, “When you see millions of the mouthless dead/Across your dreams in pale battalions go/Say not soft things.”

“The Song of the Ungirt Runners” is also a war poem, but much less obviously. The poem is often misread and in chronological terms misplaced. “The Song of the Ungirt Runners” has apparently evoked for many readers vague idealistic images of athletes in ancient Greece. But far from being vague, idealistic, or ancient, the poem is precisely located, real, and contemporary. Its implied context is the war. Quiller Couch was astute in giving it a transitional placing in the 1939 edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, immediately after the war poems of Rupert Brooke, Julian Grenfell and Wilfred Owen, but not among them.

Sorley was a runner before he was a war poet. In late 1914 to early 1915, the two converged.

Sorley was born in Aberdeen in 1895, and lived in Cambridge from 1900, when his father was appointed Professor of Philosophy there. He went in 1908 to Marlborough College, where he became a good debater, an excellent cross-country runner, and a lover of vigorous walking over the

Marlborough Downs. Running was called “sweats,” and the compulsory long walks on summer Sundays were “distance calls,” because the students (all boys at that time) were checked at some distant landmark. Some poems from his school days refer to these outings, usually (as in “Ungirt Runners”) in rain and wind, which recur as emblems of what one poem calls “cleansing through pain.” One is titled “Rain,” and uses running, again like “Ungirt Runners,” as an expression of freedom, escape from socially imposed constraints, as those are defined for an independent-minded teenager at boarding school:

When the rain is coming down,
And all Court is still and bare,
And the leaves fall wrinkled, brown,
Through the kindly winter air,
And in tattered flannels I
'Sweat' beneath a tearful sky…
There is something in the wind
That would whisper 'Leave behind
All this land of time and rules,
Land of bells and early schools.
Latin, Greek and College food
Do you precious little good.
Leave them: if you would be free
Follow, follow, after me!'

Leaving Marlborough in 1913, Sorley won a scholarship to Oxford, but went first on an extended walking and study excursion to Germany. When war broke out in August 1914, he was walking in the Mosel valley. He was briefly detained at Trier, but released to return to England, where he immediately volunteered and was commissioned. He spent nine months in training with the Suffolk regiment, based at Shorncliffe Camp, on the south coast of Kent (near Folkestone). He went with the battalion to Belgium on May 30, 1915.

Sport was an important part of military training, and Sorley, promoted first lieutenant in November 1914, with his background as a runner at Marlborough, coached cross-country, which he called “the best of all sports.” Though his men were mostly complete beginners, newly recruited farm workers from Suffolk (“a county famed for its sluggishness,” he wrote in an affectionately tongue-in-cheek letter), he trained them for the divisional cross-country championship, and described the outcome with roguish delight. The pre-race favourites, he wrote, were teams from two battalions of Royal Fusiliers, “every one of whom were ex-harriers” – experienced inter-club cross-country runners, in other words. The championship was run on Kent farmland, a big race with four hundred runners from twelve regimental teams. The young officer-coach reported gleefully that on “a heavy course over the rich Kentish soil...the Suffolks came in an easy first. This has been one of our many triumphs.” (Letter to A.R. Gidney, March 6, 1915)

It's a letter that throws light on the iconic poem, and helps to locate it. “Ungirt Runners” reworks the schoolboy verse “Rain” in evoking the sense of freedom through running in bad weather, but it's not a pre-war poem, as Sorley's “Wikipedia” entry says. The setting is explicitly woodland and beach alongside a troubled stormy sea, or perhaps a clifftop path above the sea. That's not the Marlborough Downs, nor his home town of Cambridge, nor Jena, near Leipzig, well inland, where he studied in 1914. And it describes a group run, not the solitary “wandering” that Sorley liked as his escape from school. I sometimes wonder if the opening sequence of the film *Chariots of Fire*, with young athletes loping in wind and spray, might have been inspired by Sorley's celebration of a pack running on a wind-swept shore.

The “ungirt runners” are not idealistically naked athletes in ancient Greece, but army runners training on the English south coast, relishing the freedom of movement that running gives them. The title and the first lines - “We swing ungirded hips/ And lightened are our eyes” - emphasise the freedom of being released from the coarse khaki, the encumbering belts, heavy packs, helmets, and constricting wrap-around puttees of British infantry uniform at that date. That longing to escape the constraints of uniform was strong in Sorley. A letter in May 1915 to the Master (headmaster) of Marlborough College describes how he yearned for a rainy day on the downs, and to “sweat [run] round Barbury and Totterdown...At present I am too cornered by my uniform for such luxuries.” From the war zone in France, a week before his death, he wrote again to the Master, “O for a pair of shorts and my longloose coloured jersey gules and argent once again.” As a modest epitaph for himself, in the personal poem “I have not brought my Odyssey,” he offered “Was at his happiest in shorts.”

“Ungirt Runners” repeats phrases musically, but the most obviously recurrent word is “we.” Sorley at Shorncliffe Camp was only twenty, fit from all the walking and field hockey he did in Germany, and he loved running. He ran with the troops he was coaching, and the poem enunciates a human bond of a different order from military hierarchies and the strict separation between officers and men. Runners know the egalitarian friendships that are forged in the fires of hard training. This is a poem about the shared experience of being outside social structures, free from twenty-four hours a day of imposed discipline, free from being compelled to recognise seniority and chain of command, and the obligation to do everything for “prize” or “cause.” What a release it must have been, to the young officer as much as the men, to get away for a run together, off base, out of uniform, stripped of all insignia of status, enjoying the movement, the terrain, and the group communality. No wonder they liked it. No wonder they won.

The runners are presented wholly from the inside, through their breathing and feelings. Beneath the poem's directness in recreating physical experience, the joy of movement, lies something deeper, an anxiety that is the anxiety of that terrible time in history: “We know not whom we trust/Nor witherward we fare.” Those lines encapsulate the disorientation of young men who were in effect being slaughtered by the older generation. They lived, and ran, in a time of destructive tempest, a storm without meaning or purpose, a world of unanswerable questions under the assault of implacable forces: “Does the tearing tempest pause?/ Do the tree-tops ask it why?” The only possible answers come not from reason or duty or knowledge, but from simple impulse: “We run because we must...We run without a cause...We run because we like it.”

This is the dimension that lifts this poem to a level that more than justifies inclusion in the *Oxford Book*. In its almost *symboliste* evocation of a natural environment that is “troubled”and “tearing” rather than comforting, the poem expresses the indirection and loss of inherited values felt by a tragic generation. It's a poem close to Baudelaire, or Hardy, or middle-period Yeats (“An Irish Airman...”). It's probably no coincidence that Sorley had been carefully reading Hardy's newly published *Satires of Circumstance* at the time (late 1914 to early 1915) when he was coaching the team and writing the poem.

Nor is this the frontal cry of outrage of the realist trench poems - “Livid with terror,” or “the monstrous anger of the guns,” or his own “pale battalions” and “gashed heads.” As a war poem, “Ungirt Runners” ultimately belongs with those rare and special works that reflect on the tragedy in an oblique or minimalist way, like Hardy's poem “In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations,'” or Katherine Mansfield's story “The Fly.” An old plough-horse pulling the harrow, a man tormenting a fly with blobs of ink, a pack of runners in the rain - not a gun to be heard, yet these have come down to us as unforgettably exquisite expressions of the essential pity of World War 1.

At the centenary of Sorley's death (and so many other deaths), it's some consolation that a brilliant

young man whose life and talent were about to be wasted could find some pleasure in his last months in the simple joy of running with other runners.

There is no grave. Sorley's name is among the 20,610 British and Commonwealth solders commemorated in the Loos Memorial, unveiled in 1930, and is on the Poets' Corner memorial of 1985. *Marlborough and Other Poems* was a success at that emotional time, going through three editions in 1916, and a fourth, "rearranged and reset," in 1919. A fifth edition and the letters followed, and a selection of poems was published in 1931, in the *Benn's Augustan Books of Poetry* series. Inclusion in the *Oxford Book of English Verse* came in 1939, with another tearing tempest about to break out.

Robert Graves paid tribute to him as an outdoors poet in "Sorley's Weather:"

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.

The best memorial is a wooden signpost at a cross-roads of ancient footpaths high on Poulton Down above Marlborough, near Mildenhall. The signpost features in several poems written as Sorley looked back on Marlborough days:

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.
                (“Lost”)

The old battered post had long gone, when in 1976, Gerald Murray, who taught English and PE at Marlborough College, enterprisingly installed a replacement. There is a small stone commemorating Sorley alongside. Locals hold readings there every November. To reach it takes an energetic run or walk, often in rain and wind, as it should. It is known simply as Sorley's Signpost.

MAIN TEXT ENDS

TWO POEMS FOLLOW

Charles Hamilton Sorley, The Song of the Ungirt Runners

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 witherward 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.

Charles Hamilton Sorley, Poem XXXIV

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.

AUTHOR NOTE: Roger Robinson is a writer on literature and on running. He is Professor Emeritus of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, editor of the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, and senior writer for *Running Times* magazine in USA.