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CHARLES SORLEY

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THE LETTERS
OF
CHARLES SORLEY

WITH A CHAPTER OF BIOGRAPHY

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PREFACE

IN the spring of 1916, a few weeks after the publication of *Marlborough and Other Poems*, a letter about the book and its author reached me from an unknown correspondent. "I have had it a week," he wrote, "and it has haunted my thoughts. I have been affected with a sense of personal loss, as if he had been not a stranger but my dearest friend. But indeed his personality—the 'vividus vis animi'—shines so strongly out of every line, that I feel I have known him as one knows very few living people: and surely no one was ever better worth knowing." "I venture to beg you," the writer went on to say, "before it is too late, to give the world some fuller account of his brief life.... Let us know him with his faults nothing extenuated, as his fellows knew him, with the 'rebel' side brought out—the boy who 'got not many good reports,' who was yet the same as he who stood 'with parted lips and outstretched hands.'"

Many other readers made the same request or urged the publication of a volume of *Letters from Germany and from the Army*, which had been printed privately and given to a few personal friends. At the time we were not persuaded. It seemed to us that enough had been done by publishing the poems and that, for the rest, so dear a memory need not be shared with the world.

Meanwhile, however, the poems have become more widely known ; curiosity is expressed about their author ; and critics form impressions of his personality. If the poems are to have a place, however small, in literature, this interest is only natural and may even be welcomed ; but it ought to be well-informed, and the poems alone do not give all that is needed for a true judgment. This is one reason why the present volume is published now.

Anything in the way of a formal biography was not to be thought of. But in his familiar letters to his family and friends there is material enough, when taken along with the poems, for forming a picture of the writer. There is also in them a picture of the times, especially in Germany immediately before the war, and a criticism of life and literature, which may be found to have a value of their own.

He speaks for himself in these letters ; and they have been selected so as to let him be seen as he truly was. Truth indeed—"the cry of all but the game of a few"—is hard to capture. Truth of fact needs truth of proportion also, and the two together do not always ensure truth of impression. A word written to a friend may express only the mood of the moment ; set down in cold print, it appears as something permanent, irrevocable. To read it aright we must not read it alone, and we must have sympathy with the writer's mind. It is always easy to misinterpret ; and the most that an editor can do is to provide the material for a correct interpretation.

PREFACE

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This reflection has a bearing on the following letters. They extend over a period of less than four years; but in those years appreciation widened and early standards were modified. Further, in some of the letters there is a good deal of conscious exaggeration, of provocation to controversy, and even of sheer fooling. To have omitted these passages would have been to convey a defective impression of the writer's character. It would be still more misleading to take too seriously every humorous extravagance. Yet there is usually a serious meaning behind the most extreme statement. This holds of his recurring criticisms of the institutional side of religion; it holds also of what he says about the war.

The war moved him deeply, though it did not make him either bitter or unjust. He never hesitated as to his own duty in the matter, but he tried to understand the enemy's point of view as well as our own. Some of his efforts in this direction may have been mistaken; but his views were always honest and always his own. He looked on the world with clear eyes and the surface show did not deceive him. He saw that the spiritual values for which we fought could not be measured by material weapons or by material success. He saw too that the immediate effect of the war was to turn men's thoughts to material values and away from the things that are more excellent. And insight into these things underlies his occasional paradoxes.

For the most part the letters in this volume are not given in full. The following small alterations have also been made: dates have been found for many undated letters; a few names of private persons have been changed or have been replaced by a description or a blank; proper names have usually been substituted for nicknames; slight inaccuracies of quotation have been rectified; and eccentricities of spelling have not been retained. In other respects the letters are printed as they were written. A few explanations and references, where these seemed necessary, have been added in smaller type or in footnotes.

The material for the book has been selected in collaboration with my wife; and she has written the first or biographical chapter.

W. R. SORLEY

CAMBRIDGE,
October, 1919

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