Charles Hamilton Sorley was born on 19 May, 1895 in Aberdeen, Scotland. He was the son of William Ritchie Sorley. He was educated, like Sassoon, at Marlborough College (1908-13). At Marlborough College Sorley’s favorite pursuit was cross-country running in the rain, a theme evident in many of his pre-war poems, including “Rain” and “The Song of the Ungirt Runners”. Before taking up a scholarship to study at University College, Oxford, Sorley studied in Schwerin, Germany, until the outbreak of the First World War. Later Sorley returned to England and volunteered for military service, joining the Suffolk Regiment. He arrived at the Western Front in France as a lieutenant in May in 1915, and quickly rose to the rank of Captain at the age of only twenty. Sorley was killed in action, shot in the head by a sniper, at the battle of Loos on October 13, 1915.

Sorley was also an early poet of the Great War. His poetry is of a very different style from Brooke’s. As a matter of fact Sorley
was very much critical of Brooke’s 1914 sonnets. He claimed that Brooke was over-praised and obsessed with his own sacrifice. Sorley was primarily influenced by Goethe, Hardy, Ibsen and Homer. Nevertheless he was critical of the late Victorians:

“The voice of our poets and men of letters is finally trained and sweet to hear; it seems 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.”

He was also critical of some of Hardy’s more “public” poetry, but praised The Dynasts for its honesty and truth to events and human nature. According to Robert Giddings ‘It was his attachment to German Culture that made it easy for him to distrust the shallow British patriotism which greeted the start of the War”. But at the same time, he was astonished and distressed by the brutal ways of German onslaught on the trenches. In September 1914 he wrote:

“For the joke of seeing an obviously just cause defeated, I hope Germany will win. It would do the world good and show that real faith is not that which says ‘we must win for our cause is just’, but that which says ‘our cause is
just: therefore we can disregard defeat'. 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."

Sorley conceived a deep, almost loving admiration for his country. Though increasingly aware of the darker side of German culture, the militaristic spirit he applauded the efficiency, the love of learning and music and the simple patriotism that pervaded the country. When the War broke out, he appeared to be quite clear of his intentions that the Allied cause was just, and that it was his business as an English man to fight for his country for all the faults he saw in it. He subscribed to a deep loving admiration for the country.

Robert Graves, a contemporary of Sorley, described him in his book *Good Bye to All That* as “one of the three poets of importance killed during the War”. (The other two were Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen). In his work Sorley may be seen as a forerunner of Owen and Sassoon. His unsentimental style stands in direct contrast to that of Rupert Brooke. Sorley’s last poem which was recovered from his kit after his death which includes some of his most famous lines:
‘When you see millions of mouthless dead

Across your dreams in pale battalions go”.

Sorley’s sole work was published posthumously in January 1916 and immediately became a literary success, with six editions printed the same year. Sorley is regarded by some, including the Poet Laureate John Masefield, as the greatest loss of all the poets who were killed during the First World War. Nevertheless he gives the impression of a mind already more mature than that of Brooke’s, and a poetic gift, in spite of its youthful imperfections, that might have developed to far more impressive achievements than he had already shown.

Though the poems which Sorley wrote in the early months of the War show a kind of limited attitude. But the force of his work heralded the horror, anger and disillusionment that were to characterize the later works of the War Poets of the period. As John H. Johnston says: “Charles Hamilton Sorley was perhaps the most intellectually brilliant and perceptive of the English War Poets...” Though only two or three of Sorley’s poems could be said to rank with any others inspired by the First World War as specimens of the early response. They display a grasp of reality altogether beyond the talents of Brooke, Nichols and others. It is basically through his letters
that Sorley’s personality and convictions have come up. His poems are a document of the development of an original and independent mentality. As John H. Johnston further says that this “demonstrate the incalculable effects of the War in tragically terminating the potentialities of the best minds of a whole generation”.

When the War broke out with its upsurge of emotions, Sorley could assess the situation with calmness and maturity. He remained a critic of the sentiments expressed by those who very quickly identified their own reactions with the patriotic mood. Remarking on Hardy’s *Satires of Circumstance* in a letter dated November 30, 1914, Sorley says: “Curiously enough, I think that ‘Men who march away’ is the most arid poem in the book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the ranks man going to war: ‘victory crowns the just’ is the worst line he ever wrote---- filched from a leading article in *The Morning Post*, and unworthy of him who had always previously disdained to insult justice by offering it a material crown like Victory”.

Sorley’s accurate penetration into Rupert Brooke’s ‘sentimental attitude’ toward the War is another instance of his critical acuteness. In spite of the fact that Sorley’s
patriotism was beyond doubt, he distrusted the emotions aroused by "childish and primitive questions of national honour".

So far as Sorley's poetic career is concerned he had started writing poetry at the age of ten but we have only about thirty-eight poems which could be said to be the mature work and of these "only nine are classified by his editors as poems 'Of War and Death'." Though Sorley's life was cut short due to his untimely death and therefore he was denied the opportunity to witness the catastrophic war at length. He began to feel the meaninglessness of the argument for War before the battle of Loos claimed him in the autumn of 1915. He declared his spirit in a sonnet "To Germany", which ends in a truly prophetic attitude:

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".

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.5-7)
Sorley had perceived how grimly it came about, that the man in the trenches was cut off by an impassable gulf from the people at home:

“When you see millions of 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. ...”

*(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll. 1-7)*

In this poem Sorley speaks of the vast numbers who died and the finality of their passing, this time openly reproving the facile elegiac sentiments of 1914. As John H. Johnston puts:

“The haunted, visionary quality of the sonnet brings to mind Hardy’s *The Souls of the Slain*, wherein the victims of the Boer War, after their spectral visit to England’s shores, plunge “to the fathomless regions/ of myriads forgot”.

Sorley’s poetic ideas evolved rapidly, but he did not survive to prove this evolution in a poetic expression which would
expand and clarify. The influence of Hardy- clearly visible in his later War poems— is first apparent in “The River”, which depicts the “black inscrutability’ of the forces of nature; man can attain the strength that comes of unity” only by surrendering his mortal body to the “one great strength/
That moves and can not die”.

His pessimistic approaches are also visible in the poem entitled “Rooks” in which Sorley deals with the haunting transience and mystery of life: “we would live on , these birds and I , he cries:

“Yet how? Since everything must pass
At evening with the sinking sun,
And Christ is gone, and Barabbas,
Judas and Jesus, gone, clean gone,
Then how shall I live on?”

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll. 1-5)

The extreme question in Sorley’s conscience is of the complexity and subtlety of his spirituality. Sorley in these lines realises the facts of the existence. In his point of spiritual questioning he arrives at the conclusion that once life has come into existence it has to end sooner or later, this is the only reality of life. In his opinion everything has to pass from
this world as is evident from the image of “evening with the
sinking sun’, ‘And Christ is gone, and Barabbas’. Here Sorley
seems to be influenced by the younger generation of the
Romantics. This approach of transience vs. permanence seems
to be due to the influence of Keats.

Sorley’s reaction to the War comes out most clearly in the
octet of his sonnet “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”.

(CP. ll. 1-9)

These lines display the meditative and brooding strain in
Sorley’s temperament. He demonstrates here an understanding
of the historical significance of the crisis which was unique
among the younger War poets of the First World War. Sorley
valued his experiences in Germany and tried to account for
the human failures that lay behind the false attitude of the patriotic enmity. He could measure the depths of a tragedy which Brooke ignored. The spare, monosyllabic diction of 'To Germany' is characteristic of Sorley’s nature of thought and expression. His blunt, economical use of vocabulary directly contrasts with Brooke’s aureate use of phrases.

Whereas “To Germany” exhibits the meditative and contemplative nature of Sorley another poem entitled “All the hills and vales along” written about the same time subscribes to the harsher, more savage impulses which animated him:

“All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song,
And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.

O sing marching men,
Till the valleys ring again.

Give your gladness no earth’s keeping,
So be glad, when you are sleeping.”

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll. 1-8)

These lines once again show the mounting tension of the war situation in the mind of the poet. Sorley is prophesying the possible destruction awaiting in the front life. The aggravating
situation of the war-front forces him to foresee the possible catastrophic condition ahead in the life of the soldiers, hence the human loss. This also shows the prevalent mood of Sorley in most of his poems. He is speculative, contemplative and brooding over the future happenings. This poem is one of the most bitter-tasting marching songs ever written in the history of the War. It insists on the apartness of the earth from men’s sufferings and death, and yet its oneness with them in their fate. He is trying to trace out the myths of life. This poem embodies the opposition between the human capacity of emotion, thought and action.

According to John H. Johnston “Sorley’s irony”, however, “reaches far beyond Housman’s sardonic rejection of intellectual responsibility.” We could find here an echo of A. E. Housman’s concept of Nature as hostile and indifferent to man:

“Earth that never doubts nor fears,
Earth that knows of death, not tears,
Earth that bore with joyful ease
Hemlock for Socrates,
Earth that blossomed and was glad
‘Neath the cross that Christ had,
Shall rejoice and blossom too
When the bullet reaches you”.

(M & O P, ll.1-8)

This poem has some similarities with Grenfell’s “Into Battle”, but it is a darker, more ironical poem. Sorley’s War experience made him sure of his pre-war doubts which he had about the war. His criticism of Brooke is less than that of the culture which fostered him. As John Press says:

“Life and literary criticism would be much simpler if human beings were less complex and unpredictable: the writings of Sorley during the four and a half months left to him after he had landed in France display an attitude of mind that is, if not contradictory, at least highly ambiguous.”

But in Sorley’s poetry there is no dearth of those elements which enjoyed self-sacrifice, courage and devotion to duty. The poems inspired by such values are the product of his thoughtful maturity. Given the incapability of irony or ambivalence in Georgian poetry, Sorley manages both an emotional association with its singers and an ironic reserve that evokes the tragic concern of their song. To put it in the words of John H. Johnston, the final stanza of “All the hills
and vales along", "echoes the very rhythm of men, whose intensified physical life and movement correspond briefly to the vitality present in the natural world": 12

"Fom the hills and valleys earth
Shouts back the sounds of mirth,
Tramp of feet and lilt of song
Ringing all the road along.
All the music of their going,
Ringing swinging glad song -throwing,
Earth will echo still, when foot
Lies numb and voice mute.
On marching men, on
To the gates of death with song.
Sow your gladness for earth’s reaping,
So you may be glad, though sleeping.
Strew your gladness on earth’s bed,
So be merry, so be dead."

( Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.31-44)

Sorley here tries to well-knit his recurring reminders of death throughout the moments measuring a marching song. He combines, in these lines, the pathos of youthful vitality with the irony of its swift extinction. There is also an absence of
inspirational appeal, the celebration of the visible virtues and romantic self-contemplation. These lines give the image as if the soldier themselves are peering into their painful predicaments on the path of death. They know that they are going into the lap of death. Sorley visualizes the conflict as a catastrophi human tsunami. Sorley's imagery suggests that frustration, bewilderment and anguish which is clearly seen in later phase of the First World War Poetry.

The "Two Sonnets" of Sorley on death corresponds to the serious implications of elegiac tone. In the first of the "Two Sonnets", Sorley voices the myriads who are destined to die. The undercurrent implications of prophetic imagination seem to constitute the sheer mass of humanity that the war could swallow. As John H. Johnston rightly points out, "Against the enormity of this sacrifice and its meaningless inevitability he envisions a hereafter completely stripped off conventional spiritual comforts". This aspect could well be seen in the following lines:

"Saints have adored the lofty souls of you.
Poets have whitened at your high renown.
We stand among the many millions who
Do hourly wait to pass your pathway down."
You, so familiar, once were strange: we tried
To live as of your presence unaware.
But now in every road on every side
We see your straight and steadfast signpost there.
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 that I wished to know."

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.1-14)

The poet visualizes ‘Death’ which brings no hope of consolation. There are hopelessness, bleakness and loneliness in a land far from the life hereafter. In the poet’s opinion the ‘steadfast signpost” is discovering the truth behind the illusions created by religion and the imagination. In the sonnet Sorley voices on behalf of the millions who are doomed to die. He unfolds his coldly stoic attitude, an attitude that is elaborated in the second sonnet. In this sonnet (Second of the “Two Sonnets”) the bitterness of the truth is implied but can easily be discerned:
"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 pai. We who have seen

So marvelous things know well the end not yet..."

(M&OP, l.6)

Unlike Brooke, death for Sorley is not a transformation into ‘a white unbroken glory’ but a complete and final departure from all aspects of physical life, ‘a slate rubbed clean, a merciful putting away of what has been’. So far as his language is concerned, Sorley projects his own vision of death: “We who have seen/so marvellous things know well the end not yet.” As the War swallows millions, conventionally ‘poetic ideas of spiritual survival and compensation enshrines a mockery of death.

Sorley is considered to be the first of the War poets who perceived the nature of warfare making it “easy to be dead”. The conflict subscribing merely on “human attrition the loss of life bore a sacrificial aspect that could not longer be treated in conventional elegiac terms”.14 His last three sonnets present his own version of death, and they provide a perfect
opportunity to express idea and vision present in his attitude. De Sola Pinto’s *Crisis in English Poetry* argues that Sorley broke away from the conventionally ‘heroic’ attitude of Brooke and Grenfell:

“The poems that [Sorley] wrote in the last years of his life express new attitude to the war which are quite different from those of Brooke and Grenfell. They are the attitudes of men who have known the horror and boredom of modern warfare at first hand”.

It is with Sorley’s verse that the tendencies of the First World War poetry reveals themselves. Sorley exhibited intellectual and imaginative powers that directed those attitudes. Hence, though his poems are few in number, Sorley could have established himself as a poet of the Great War with honour and respect. To conclude it would be appropriate to quote Hazel Powell to get the exact picture of Sorley: “Sorley is of particular interest because he was writing at the beginning of the War, yet his poems show a maturity of outlook and a realism which was out of step with most of the other poets of the time.”
References

2. *Ibid*, p.14
5. *Ibid*, p. 55
7. *Ibid*, p. 57
8. *Ibid*, p. 58
9. *Ibid*, p. 69
11. *Ibid*, p. 62
12. *Ibid*, p. 61
13. *Ibid*, p. 66
14. *Ibid*, p. 69