

Commentary: **The Battle of the Eastern Field**

Maggie Burns

When the boys at King Edward's School, Birmingham, opened their copy of the March 1911 *Chronicle*¹ there would have been laughter and groans of recognition as they read an anonymous poem: *The Battle of the Eastern Field*. This is a (fragmentary) epic account of a recent rugby match at the school's playing field on Eastern Road. But it is also a humorous parody of one of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome - The Battle of Lake Regillus*².

Almost every boy in the school would have known the poem. Every year since 1891 the Old Edwardians Association had given poetry recital prizes³. Originally a competition for all boys in the school, from 1893 it was compulsory for the younger boys in Blocks B, C, and D, and the boys in Block A – the First, Second and Third classes – only took part if they wished to do so. Each block was set a different poem; commonly poems by Milton, Gray, Tennyson and Macaulay. Boys had to learn the set piece by heart and recite it to the Class Master. The two best from each class would then recite to the Head Master, who awarded the prize.

From 1906 onwards the titles of the poems set are given in the King Edward's School Lists⁴. In 1906 – and again in 1908 - the poem for the boys in Block D was part of *The Battle of Lake Regillus*. Hilary Tolkien was in Block D in 1906⁵ so his older brother probably heard him practice the poem many times. Some of the lines in the parody were from Horatius by Macaulay, another set poem. In this article Macaulay's poem will be referred to as *Lake Regillus*; Tolkien's, as *Eastern Field*.

It is probable that Tolkien would have read and enjoyed Macaulay's *Lays* even without the poetry competition. It was so popular that there were many editions following the first publication in 1842. There had even been a previous parody in a *Chronicle*¹ of 1883, about a dinner celebrating the appointment of E. W. Benson (an Old Edwardian) as Archbishop of Canterbury. It bears the title of another of Macaulay's lays; *The Prophecy of Capys*, but mimics the opening of *Lake Regillus*:

Ho, trumpets sound a war-note!
Ho, waiters, clear the way!
Room for the men of Birmingham
Who dine in state to-day!...

Tolkien could have read the old *Chronicle* in the school library. His father Arthur might have had a copy as he was on the committee of the Old Edwardians Association until he left Birmingham for South Africa in May 1889; the first report of the Association was in the same 1883 *Chronicle*.

The underlying theme of the *Lays*, described by Macaulay in his Preface, would have appealed to Tolkien. Macaulay composed ballads about the ancient history of Rome which he believed must have existed, but had been lost:

But there was an earlier Latin literature, a literature truly Latin, which has wholly perished... That literature abounded with metrical romances, such as are found in every country where there is much curiosity and intelligence, but little reading and writing.

Tolkien would later write of his own desire to create a 'mythology for England'. In *J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century*⁶ Shippey mentions the use of the 'lay' and the 'ballad' to reconstruct imagined history, history that may have actually happened. Macaulay's *Lays* also embody the ideal of the individual who stands up against great forces despite the odds. In his essay *Horatius at Khazad-Dûm* Stoddard shows how closely the story of Gandalf holding the bridge against the Balrog echoes the story of Horatius holding the bridge against the enemies of Rome⁷.

The Battle of the Eastern Field was published in the *Chronicle* with a pseudonym. It begins with a brief introduction by 'G.A.B.' – but the Blue Book shows that there was no pupil at King Edward's with those initials. Christopher Wiseman wrote to Tolkien in April 1911 addressing him as 'Gabriel', so the initials suggest Tolkien's authorship. I am indebted to Douglas Anderson for the information that in Tolkien's personal copy of the *Chronicle* he had initialled both the poem and the report on the Latin debate *Acta Senatus* which follows. *Eastern Field* was published again in 1978 in *Mallorn* 12: Jessica Yates contributed a fascinating article to *Mallorn* 13 (1979) identifying it as a parody of *Lake Regillus*.

G.A.B. begins by giving the source; a script in the waste paper-basket in the prefects' room, and explains that much of it was indecipherable. The tradition of the newly-discovered MS, or of the scrap of paper found by chance, was used several times in the *Chronicle* in the years Tolkien was at King Edward's. The pieces were humorous. In 1907 an article *From Herodotus* was introduced thus: 'The following fragment has been found (by our Special Correspondent) in the sands of Egypt. – Ed.' Early in 1908 there were 'notes on the new play of Aeschylus which has just been discovered' by 'Professor Weckmann'. It takes the form of a critical appreciation with several exchanges between the Author and the Editor. The Editor is reminded of a rhyme about 'a moribund songster'; as in this verse:

"Who saw him die?"
 "We" said the chorus,
 "When the play began to bore us,
 We saw him die."

Years later Tolkien would use this technique in a short Foreword to the first edition of *The Lord of the Rings*⁸. The first three paragraphs spoke of the story as 'history'. Tolkien gave the sources as '... the memoirs of the renowned Hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo, as they are preserved in the Red Book of Westmarch... information derived from the surviving records of Gondor...' Tolkien regarded this as an integral part of the tale, the 'machinery of the story'. He composed a new Foreword for the second edition stating that he felt by this time that the story itself should not be confused with personal information. He gave some examples of sources for the story from his own life, including the mill and millers at Sarehole, and his First World War experiences. The new Foreword removed any excuse for publishers to assume that legendary stories, supposedly based on ancient manuscripts, were like legendary gold - anyone's for the finding (or publishing).

Eastern Field is a ballad that, like Macaulay's verse, records a historical event. It tells the story of a rugby match between the Richards and Measures house teams – Richards' house wore green, Measures' wore red. It was probably the match described by G.F. Cottrell in the June 1911 *Chronicle*:

'... won by Richards' by 11 points to 3. This match produced one of the finest games ever seen on the School ground, and will long be remembered by those who had the good fortune to play or to be spectators.'

Measures and Richards had been closely matched that year: this match was the decider. Cottrell was in Richards, Wiseman and Tolkien in Measures.

The house system had been set up in 1903 by A. E. Measures, the assistant Head Master, with the aim of encouraging boys to play football. Rugby matches were played on the school sports field off Eastern Road – hence Eastern Field – two and a half miles to the south of the city centre, off the Bristol Road. The boys travelled there by tram. The field is very close to the present site of the school opposite Birmingham University and is still used for rugby, cricket and athletics.

Tolkien's poem uses the same metre, and like Macaulay's is divided into stanzas. The first stanza is a close imitation of the opening of *Lake Regillus*:

Ho, trumpets, sound a war-note!
 Ho, lictors, clear the way!
 The Knights will ride, in all their pride,
 Along the streets to-day.
 To-day the walls and windows
 Are hung with garlands all,
 From Castor in the Forum,
 To Mars without the wall.
 Each Knight is robed in purple,
 With olive each is crowned;
 A gallant war-horse under each
 Paws haughtily the ground.
 While flows the Yellow River,
 While stands the Sacred Hill,
 The proud Ides of Quintilis
 Shall have such honour still.

Macaulay's first stanza continues for four more lines; Tolkien ends the direct parody here.

Tolkien skilfully combines the mood of the battlefield with the everyday life of King Edward's School. In the first line of Eastern Field the 'trumpets' have become 'rattles'. The 'windows' hung with 'garlands' of Rome are now 'blackboards', on which there is 'flaunting script'. Photos of the old King Edward's in New Street show 'Atlas on the staircase', a large globe standing at the top of the Masters' staircase. 'Bogey's darkling crypt' - Tolkien had referred to 'one Bogey' in his report of his own speech in the October 1910 debate, one of the school-porters. This was almost certainly the porter mentioned by C.V.L. Lycett in his letter to the *Old Edwardians Gazette*³ of January 1972: '... Dick the troglodyte, who stoked the furnace, worked in the nether regions, and cleaned our O.T.C. rifles...'

The 'purple' robes of the Knights (line 9) have become the scarlet of Measures' house, the 'olive' crown is now the 'olive green' of Richards' house (line 10). 'Yellow River' (line 13) in both *Horatius* and *Lake Regillus* refers to the River Tiber; see below for a description of Birmingham's river. The 'Sacred Hill' (line 14) has become the 'Great Pavil', or the sports pavilion, an impressive new building on the playing field. In 1901 the *Chronicle* Editor had appealed to the Head Master Cary Gilson for a new pavilion to replace the 'miserable, worm-eaten, tumbledown cowshed': the new one was completed in 1903.

In the second stanza Tolkien sets the scene of the rugby match. This therefore does not parody *Lake Regillus* although the mock-epic tone is sustained; the 'Green-clad Chieftain' asks the 'foe in scarlet dight':

Shall no one wrest the silver grail
Nor dare another fight!

E.B. Alabaster was the captain of Richards (Green-clad), and Tolkien the captain of Measures (foe in scarlet). The 'silver grail' was the Football Cup, donated by Cary Gilson in 1904 to encourage boys to play football. Through the poem Tolkien lifts some lines directly from Macaulay, or adapts them marginally, as in the following examples

Nor without secret trouble
Does the bravest mark his foes
[*Lake Regillus* X, *Eastern Field* III]

His clients from the battle
Bare him some little space
[*Lake Regillus* XVI, *Eastern Field* IV]

... meanwhile in the centre
Great deeds of arms were wrought
[*Lake Regillus* XVII, *Eastern Field* XIII]

Now backward and now forward
Rocked furious[ly] the fray
[*Lake Regillus* XIX, *Eastern Field* XX]

But whereas the Romans pitch their camp:
Hard by the Lake Regillus
[*Lake Regillus* IX]

The rugby captains instruct their players to meet
Hard by Brum's great river
[*Eastern Field* II]

Birmingham's river is the Rea. The Tiber may be a great river, but the Bournbrook, a feeder of the River Rea, is close to its source and is little more than a muddy stream where it runs through Edgbaston. Until 1911 it did mark the county boundary; the playing field was in Warwickshire but if a ball went over onto the opposite bank it would have been in Worcestershire.

After the first match on the field played in October 1872 it was reported in the *Chronicle* that the ball had to be retrieved from the stream several times, but that this might be avoided in future matches

‘with due caution’. Tom Shippey played rugby when a pupil at King Edward’s and then later for the Old Edwardians. When I asked whether any kind of barrier – fence or hedge – had been placed so that the ball no longer went in the stream, he commented that the time spent recovering the ball (from the stream) offered a welcome break in the game on occasion.

The opening of stanza III of *Eastern Field* evokes but contrasts with the ‘golden morning’ of *Lake Regillus*. As the match takes place in February in England the day ‘greyly dawns’. The description of the homes of the players also echoes phrases in both *Horatius* and *Lake Regillus*. In Rome the warriors gather

From Setia’s purple vineyards,
From Norba’s ancient wall
[*Lake Regillus* stanza X]

But in Birmingham

From Edgbastonia’s ancient homes,
From Moseley’s emerald sward.

Edgbaston and Moseley were the two most prosperous suburbs of Birmingham. It should be noted that Moseley was not and is not grimy and industrial, but has many trees, parks and large gardens, so is certainly green, if not emerald.

There is no detailed report on this match in the *Chronicle* – only matches against external teams are described – but it is possible to identify the players. G.F. Cottrell was the School Captain so is the ‘Chiefest Lord’ of the poem. As *Eastern Field* was a parody of a poem about Ancient Rome Tolkien used some of the Latin names given to boys who took part in the annual Latin debate. Tolkien’s report on the 1911 debate, *Acta senatus*, is also in the March 1911 *Chronicle*. He did not give the English equivalents but the Debating Secretaries for the previous and subsequent years did, so some names can be deduced. ‘King Mensura’ is A.E. Measures; as a housemaster he coached the teams and refereed matches. ‘Ericillus of the sands’ is L.K. Sands and ‘Falco of the bridge’ is F. T. Faulconbridge – both in Richards. The ‘Corcii of fame’ are W.H. Payton, and R.S. Payton, in Measures.

Tolkien would almost certainly have played in this match as the Captain of Measures. His rugby-playing is described in 1910 and in 1911 in the yearly article ‘Football Characters’ (ref 1). In both 1910 and 1911 Tolkien is described as a light forward, with pace and dash. More information is given in 1911

‘... is a good dribbler. He has done much good individual work, especially in breaking away from the scrum to assist the three-quarters. His tackling is always reliable, and he follows up hard. Has been a most capable and energetic Secretary...’⁹.

It is possible that some of the ‘blots’ noted by G.A.B. mark points where Tolkien was heavily involved in the game and could not therefore describe the scene as an observer.

Some of the names probably depended on jokes then current amongst the boys. I am grateful to Douglas Anderson for telling me of Tolkien’s handwritten notes on his own copy of the *Chronicle*. These identify Cupid as H.L. Higgins, and the Hill-lord as E. L. Hill. In a letter to the *Old Edwardians Gazette*, July 1975, Christopher Wiseman described Higgins as ‘a brilliant centre three-quarter’; he was the rugby captain in 1911-1912. Both Higgins and Hill were in Richards. Wiseman with longish blond hair (‘flaxen crest’) was ‘Sekhet’, who tackles the ‘Green-clad Chieftain’. Sekhet is a female deity, this name could also have derived from a school joke.

In *Lake Regillus* the battle is won for the Romans by the Great Twin Brethren, Castor and Pollux. There is a reference to this in stanza XIII of *Eastern Field*, where Higgins [Cupid] spies the ‘Great Twin Posts’ and presumably scores a try. Wiseman mentioned in a letter to Tolkien in November 1914 that they had been ‘the Twin Brethren in the good old school days before there was a T.C.B.S.’¹⁰. In Tolkien’s reply he agreed that he thought the ‘great twin brotherhood’ between them had been the origin of the later T.C.B.S.. Tolkien may have had this in mind when writing *Eastern Field*. However we do not know from Wiseman’s letter whether the nickname came before the writing of *Eastern Field* – or whether it was inspired by the poem.

The last stanza of *Eastern Field* is not modelled on *Lake Regillus*. It tells of making peace, and of feasting; neither of which occur in the *Lays of Ancient Rome*. At the end of the match Measures invites them to have refreshments in epic language:

Ho, henchmen lade the board,
With tankards and with viands rare

One line 'For never, I ween, shall warriors...' is based on a line in *Horatius* 'Never, I ween, did swimmer...'. There is a wordless comment on the line '... lust of meat and drink (!!! Homer)'. This phrase or its equivalent occurs a number of times in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Throughout the poem the tone shifts between the epic and the everyday. The poet describes the shouts and cheers of the watchers as being

Like the roar of the raucous signal
When the dinner-hour bull blows

After the 'men of war' go to the feast the poem appears to end in praise of battle: there were many cheers for those 'men of heart, to whom brave war is dear'. But this warlike tone turns out not to be the end; the reader is brought back from the heroic to the world of everyday: 'The Ed. won't let me put any more in. Most of them then went home to bed. G.A.B.'

Macaulay did not offer an idealized picture of war in *Horatius* or in *Lake Regillus*. In both he shows the suffering and death of warriors, and those who were close to them mourn their loss. Tolkien may also have had a second type of poem or song in mind when composing the parody, as the down-to-earth comments of G.A.B. and the Editor are a deliberate counterpart to the heroic mood. In the late Victorian and Edwardian period it was common to describe team sports in the vocabulary of the battlefield. The message to schoolboys that war was noble, and that it would be their duty to fight, was often conveyed through songs and poems.

Probably the best-known poem of this type is *Vitai Lampada* by Sir Henry Newbolt, published in 1897. It begins with a game of cricket at school: 'There's a breathless hush in the Close tonight' and ends with the British soldier dying in Africa, his Captain's words in his ears: 'Play up! play up! and play the game!' In a letter to the *Old Edwardians' Gazette* in 1974 Christopher Wiseman referred to himself and Tolkien in the rugby team: 'both being in the scrum we were each in support of the other on the battlefield.' The School Song of the King Edward's (boys) Grammar Schools, written circa 1895, includes the lines:

We sing our living heroes, who learnt the game of life
In cricket's honest warfare and football's manly strife.

In *J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century*⁶ Shippey quotes lines from the School Song at King Edward's, 'Forward', first sung at the 1903 Speech Day (Tolkien would have been present):

Oftentimes defeat is splendid, Victory may still be shame,
Luck is good, the prize is pleasant, But the glory's in the game

Shippey suggests that when Bilbo says after the Battle of the Five Armies: 'I have always understood that defeat may be glorious. It seems very uncomfortable, not to say distressing' Tolkien may have had the lines from 'Forward' in mind¹¹.

Tolkien's ending to *Eastern Field* seems to confirm that he did not think war should be praised as glorious. The poem was written in 1911 three years before the beginning of the First World War. Many of his friends died in the war; including three of those mentioned in this poem: G.F. Cottrell, L.K. Sands, and R.S. Payton¹².

Shortly after the first publication of *Eastern Field* an Old Edwardian, L.H. Salaman gave a talk on 'Parody', which was reported in the May 1911 *Gazette*³. In praising the poet's skill he commented on another aspect of the poem:

... I am glad to see, from the last number of the "School Chronicle" that the School possesses a parodist of great promise, and I am sure that all who have read his quotations have found in him that great quality of the great poets - human sympathy.

Human sympathy is a keynote of Tolkien's stories. Bilbo spares Gollum because of pity, and so unwittingly provides for his nephew Frodo's salvation. Tolkien wrote that of the two moments in *The Lord of the Rings*

which moved him most deeply, one was the point at which Gollum nearly repented. *The Battle of the Eastern Field* is a forerunner of Tolkien's later works in many ways, in the humour, the skill with language, the underlying themes, and the telling of an exciting story.

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1. King Edward's School *Chronicle*, the school magazine written and edited by the boys, which appeared twice a term.
2. Macaulay, Thomas Babington, *Lays of Ancient Rome*. First published in 1842, quotations taken from the reprint edition issued by the Echo Library.
3. *Old Edwardians Gazette*: the magazine for old boys of King Edward's School.
4. King Edward's School *Lists*.
5. King Edward's School *Blue Book* – lists all the pupils in alphabetical order. Then issued twice-yearly in January and September.
6. Shippey, Thomas, *J.R.R. Tolkien Author of the Century*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.
7. www.troynovant.com/Stoddard/Tolkien/Horatius-at-Khazad-dum
8. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954.
9. In rugby the ball may be carried as well as kicked. A try is when a player manages to touch the ground with the ball behind the line on which the posts stand, scoring 5 points. The player can then score 2 additional points by kicking the ball between the goal uprights. The scrum is formed to restart the match; three rows of the players in the opposing teams face each other and the ball is passed down the tunnel formed in the middle.
10. Hammond, Wayne, and Scull, Christina, *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology*. London: HarperCollins, 2006.
11. Both of the King Edward's Foundation songs are still sung [2008]. The boys who told me this remembered that the grammar-school song said something about football and cricket, but did not appear to have registered the original underlying message.
12. King Edward's School Service Record, compiled by C.H.Heath, first published in 1919, Additions and Corrections 1931. Heath, a master at the school, prepared additional copies with interbound manuscript pages for the school library and for Birmingham Central Library. Those pages show the job of the father and suburb of residence. Given here are the occupations of the fathers of the boys mentioned in the poem, as this gives a good picture of the social mix of King Edward's School: Alabaster – manufacturing jeweller, Sands – Canon, Faulconbridge – linotype operator, Cottrell – secretary, Wiseman – Methodist minister, Payton – merchant, Higgins – foreman at Bournville [Cadbury's], Hill – doctor.

J. R. R. Tolkien: **The Battle of the Eastern Field**

(On Friday March 31st I found this curious fragment
in the waste paper basket, in the Prefects' room.
Much of it was so blotted that I could not decipher it.
I publish it with emendations of my own. G. A. B.)

I.

Ho, rattles sound your warnote!
Ho, trumpets loudly bray!
The clans will strive and gory writhe
Upon the field to-day.
To-day the walls and blackboards
Are hung with flaunting script,
From Atlas on the staircase
To Bogey's darkling crypt.
Each knight is robed in scarlet,
Or clad in olive green;
A gallant crest upon each breast
Is proudly heaving seen.
While flows our Yellow River,
While stands the great Pavil,
That Thursday in the Lenten Term
Shall be a beanfest still.

II.

Thus spake the Green-clad Chieftain
To the foe in Scarlet dight,
"Shall no-ne wrest the silver grail
"Nor dare another fight!"
And the doughty foeman answer'd –
"Ay, the goblet shall be won,
"And on a famous field of war
"Great deeds of progress done!"
So hard by Brum's great river
They bade their hosts to meet,
Array'd upon the Eastern Field
For victory or defeat!

III.

Now greyly dawns that fatal day
Upon the Eastern Field,
That Thursday in the Lenten Term
With honour ever seal'd