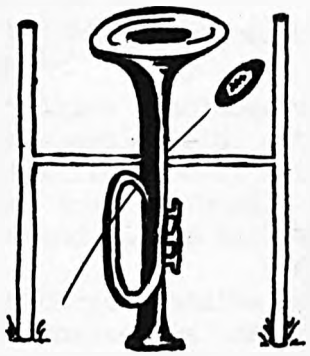
"the Battle of the eastern field"

a commentary

by Jessica Yates



In Mallorn 12 our Editor outshone himself by obtaining reprint permission for Tolkien's first published (and anonymous) poem, *The Battle of the Eastern Field*. As I read it, I couldn't help being reminded of another poem, well-known to schoolboys of the time, and on checking the original I became convinced that Tolkien's poem was not just a mock-heroic piece, but a parody of a specific Victorian classic. When I discussed this with other members, they did not on the whole remember the original, so I think it is worthwhile to describe it with a few quotations, so that we can appreciate *The Battle of the Eastern Field* as Tolkien intended.

The poem Tolkien parodied is undoubtedly *The Battle of Lake Regillus*, which is one of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. These were published in 1842, and first included in Everyman's Library (Dent) in 1910, a year before Tolkien wrote his parody. It is probable that other editions of the poem were known at King Edward's School: the new (1954) introduction to the Everyman edition states: "judged for what they are, ballads, they are masterly, and deserved the immense popularity they enjoyed with two generations of Englishmen. In those days every schoolboy knew them, and many both young and old had them by heart. From them young people learnt to take pleasure in the sound and rhythm of verse....."

Macaulay himself wrote an introduction to his *Lays*. He did not pretend that they were translated from any originals, but said that they were his own speculations, based on his knowledge of English ballads and Roman history, concerning what Roman ballads might have been like. This was, he explained, the oral history of the Roman people, which was later transmuted into the prose history written by Livy and other historians. The most famous of Macaulay's *Lays* is, of course, *Horatius*. *Regillus* is the sequel, which describes how the Tarquins tried once again to conquer Rome, and were completely defeated, one of their Roman opponents being Herminius, who kept the bridge with Horatius.

One important difference between the Macaulay and the parody is that Macaulay's poem was meant to have been written some time after the battle, to celebrate the annual festival on the anniversary of the battle. Therefore his first lines, "Ho trumpets, sound a war-note, Ho, lictors, clear the way!" refer to preparations for the festival, and not to the battle itself. However, Tolkien's first lines: "Ho, rattles sound your warnote! Ho trumpets loudly bray!" do refer to the actual battle to take place later that day - in fact, a rugby match.

Macaulay's poem also explains the numbering system Tolkien used for his stanzas, in order to represent a mutilated poem. Tolkien numbered in Roman

numerals thus: I, II, III, IV, XIII, XX, XXI. Macaulay's stanzas are numbered consecutively from I to XL.

I will now quote from Macaulay's first stanza, to provide conclusive proof that *Eastern Field* is a parody, and then quote those lines from the rest of his poem which have close parallels in Tolkien. In fact, after this first stanza Tolkien breaks away from Macaulay's vocabulary and writes very much his own poem, using Macaulay's rhyme-scheme and his heroic style.

STANZA I of *The Battle of Lake Regillus*
(to be compared with Stanza I of *The Battle of the Eastern Field*, *Mallorn* 12)

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 doors 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.**

Note that Macaulay's knights are robed in purple with olive crown because of the festival. Tolkien's knights wear the opposing colours of their teams, scarlet and green.

There is no close parody in Tolkien's stanza II. In stanza III, the listing of famous warriors is an idiom which Macaulay acknowledges from Homer. Four lines in Tolkien's stanza III echo four of Macaulay's stanza XIII, with their rhyme on *foes/shows* (Macaulay's *foes/rose* as below):

But in the centre thickest
Were ranged the shields of foes.
And from the centre loudest
The cry of battle rose.

Tolkien also employs Macaulay's pattern of listing warriors: several in a group, each with their claim to fame, and finally the most famous of all.

Macaulay's stanza XIV opens with: "Now on each side the leaders / Gave signal for the charge"; which Tolkien carefully varies as: "Now straight the shrill call sounded / That heralds in the fray."

The next close parallel comes with the episode of the hero who is wounded and carried off. In Macaulay he is stabbed in the neck, in Tolkien he is knocked down, and in both: "His clients from the battle / Bare him some little space." Exactly the same lines are used! But whereas Macaulay's 'clients' are concerned about bringing their hero back to life, Tolkien's lads just rub

*There are four more lines in Macaulay - Tolkien's Stanza I has only 16 lines.

his wounded knee.

Macaulay's stanza XVII opens: "But meanwhile in the centre / Great deeds of arms were wrought." Tolkien follows this closely with: "....meanwhile in the centre / Great deeds of arms were wrought." In both cases "wrought" rhymes with "fought". Then we have something very cheeky, and what I consider to be the raison d'être of the parody - the main joke. The original poem brings in the sudden appearance of Castor and Pollux to save the day for the Romans. They are styled by Macaulay "The Great Twin Brethren". But Tolkien is writing about a rugger match, so of course he brings in the goalmouth under the title "The Great Twin Posts". This would have brought the biggest laugh among the schoolboy (and schoolmaster) readers.

Tolkien's stanza XX has a humorous reference to the dinner-signal, or bull - it seems in fact to have been a horn. Then we have an argument between Tolkien and his friends, who try to rewrite his text. G.A.B. wants something more heroic for the final signal, but Tolkien prefers to use the phrase "close of play".

Tolkien concludes with a heroic feast, his own contribution to the story, in mock-heroic vein. It would be typical of his civilised views on life that the glorification of war that filled the literary studies of young men in grammar schools, should thus be sent up in a rugger match which comes to an agreed end and is followed by a reconciling feast.

Much yet remains to be discovered about this poem, especially the sources of the characters' names: Hill-Lord, Corcii, Atlas, Bogey, Ericillus, Falco, Sekhet and Mensura. Some may be Latinisations and puns of Tolkien's own invention, but we know that the schoolboys had their own 'official' Latin names for the purposes of reporting debates, etc. On the next page to *Eastern Field* in the school magazine is an *Acta Senatus*, which includes the names of M.CORCIUS PATO and his brother Q.CORCIUS PATO IUNIOR, and also ALGIDIUS MENSURA. So their Latin names had already been invented, but Tolkien probably added some of his own.

What is quite clear, to conclude, is that Tolkien 'Saxonised' the Roman world of Macaulay in the preferred use of English vocabulary and the more barbaric tone of his diction. Such words as clan, grail, corslet, helm, flaxen, liegemen and henchmen evoke the Germanic heroic tradition. This early work is remarkably consistent with the later work of the man who was to revive the saga tradition and compose translations and pastiche of Old and Middle English literature.