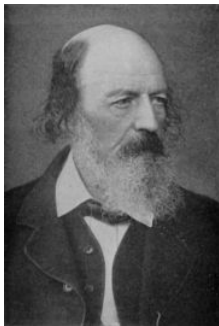


Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson

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The Lord Tennyson



Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Born: 6 August 1809
Somersby, Lincolnshire, England

Died: 6 October 1892
Westminster Abbey

Occupation: poet

Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson (6 August 1809 – 6 October 1892) was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom and is one of the most popular English poets.

Much of his verse was based on classical mythological themes, although *In Memoriam* was written to commemorate his best friend Arthur Hallam, a fellow poet and classmate at Trinity College, Cambridge who was engaged to Tennyson's sister but died from a cerebral hæmorrhage. One of Tennyson's most famous works is *Idylls of the King* (1885), a series of narrative poems based entirely on King Arthur and the Arthurian tales, as thematically suggested by Sir Thomas Malory's earlier tales on the legendary king. The work was dedicated to Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria. During his career, Lord Tennyson attempted drama, but his plays enjoyed little success even in his lifetime.

Tennyson wrote a number of phrases that have become commonplaces of the English language, including: "nature, red in tooth and claw", "better to have loved and lost", "Theirs not to reason why,/Theirs but to do and die", and "My strength is

as the strength of ten,/Because my heart is pure".

He is the second most frequently quoted writer in the English language, after Shakespeare. ^[1]

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Early life

Alfred Tennyson was born in Somersby, Lincolnshire, a rector's son and fourth of 12 children. He was one of the descendants of King Edward III of England.^[2] Reportedly, "the pedigree of his grandfather, George Tennyson, is traced back to the middle-class line of the

Tennysons, and through Elizabeth Clayton ten generations back to Edmund, Duke of Somerset, and farther back to Edward III."^[3]

His father, Rev. George Clayton Tennyson (1778-1831), was a rector of Somersby (1807-1831), also rector of Benniworth and Bag Enderby, and vicar of Grimsby (1815). The reverend was the elder of two sons, but was disinherited at an early age by his own father, the landowner George Tennyson (1750-1835) (who belonged to the Lincolnshire gentry as the owner of Bayons Manor and Usselby Hall)^[4], in favour of his younger brother Charles, who later took the name Charles Tennyson d'Eyncourt. Rev. George Clayton Tennyson raised a large family and "was a man of superior abilities and varied attainments, who tried his hand with fair success in architecture, painting, music, and poetry."^[5] Rev. Tennyson was "comfortably well off for a country clergyman and his shrewd money management enabled the family to spend summers at Mablethorpe and Skagness, on the eastern coast of England."^[6] Alternatively, some allege that Rev. Tennyson was perpetually short of money and that he drank heavily and became mentally unstable. His mother, Elizabeth Fytche (1781-1865) was the daughter of Stephen Fytche (1734-1799), vicar of Louth (1764) and rector of Withcall (1780), a

small village between Horncastle and Louth.^[7]
Tennyson's father "carefully attended to the
education and training of his children."^[8]

Tennyson and two of his elder brothers were writing poetry in their teens, and a collection of poems by all three was published locally when Alfred was only 17. One of those brothers, Charles Tennyson Turner later married Louisa Sellwood, the younger sister of Alfred's future wife; the other poet brother was Frederick Tennyson.

Education and first publication

Tennyson was first a student of Louth Grammar School for four years (1816-1820)^[9] and then attended Scaitcliffe School, Englefield Green and King Edward VI Grammar School, Louth. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge in 1828, where he joined the secret society called the Cambridge Apostles. At Cambridge Tennyson met Arthur Henry Hallam, who became his best friend.

His first publication was a collection of "his boyish rhymes and those of his elder brother Charles" entitled *Poems by Two Brothers* published in 1827.
^[10]

In 1829 he was awarded the Chancellor's gold medal at Cambridge for one of his first pieces, on "*Timbuctoo*".^{[11][12]} Reportedly, "it was thought to be no slight honor for a young man of twenty to win the chancellor's gold medal."^[13]

In 1830 he published his first solo collection of poems, *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* (1830+). "Claribel" and "Mariana", which later took their place among Tennyson's most celebrated poems, were included in this volume. Although decried by some critics as oversentimental, his verse soon proved popular and brought Tennyson to the attention of well-known writers of the day, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Return to Lincolnshire and second publication

In the spring of 1831, Tennyson's father died, forcing him to leave Cambridge before taking his degree. He returned to the rectory, where he was permitted to live for another six years, and shared responsibility for his widowed mother and her large brood. His friend Arthur Hallam came to stay with him during the summer and became engaged

to Tennyson's sister, Emilia Tennyson.

In 1833, Tennyson published his second book of poetry, which included his best-known poem, *The Lady of Shalott*, a story of a princess who cannot look at the world except through a reflection in a mirror. As Sir Lancelot rides by the tower where she must stay, she looks at him, and the curse comes to term; she dies after she places herself in a small boat and floats down the river to Camelot, her name written on the boat's stern. The volume met heavy criticism, which so discouraged Tennyson that he did not publish again for 10 more years, although he continued to write.

In 1833, that same year, Hallam had a cerebral hæmorrhage while on holiday in Vienna and died. It devastated Alfred, but inspired him to produce a body of poetry that has come to be seen as among the world's finest. However, roughly a decade of poetic silence followed Hallam's death.

Tennyson and his family were allowed to stay in the rectory for some time, but later moved to Essex. An unwise investment in an ecclesiastical wood-carving enterprise soon led to the loss of much of the family fortune.

Third publication and recognition

In 1842, while living modestly in London, Tennyson published two volumes of *Poems*, the first of which included works already published and the second of which was made up almost entirely of new poems. They met with immediate success. *The Princess: A Medley*, a satire of women's education, which came out in 1847, was also popular. W. S. Gilbert later adapted and parodied the piece twice: in *The Princess* and in *Princess Ida*.

The Golden Year

It was in 1850 that Tennyson reached the pinnacle of his career, being appointed Poet Laureate in succession to William Wordsworth and in the same year producing his masterpiece, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, dedicated to Hallam. In the same year (June 13), Tennyson married Emily Sellwood, whom he had known since childhood, in the village of Shiplake. They had two sons, Hallam (b. Aug. 11, 1852) — named after his friend — and

Lionel (b. March 16, 1854).

The Poet Laureate

He held the position of Poet Laureate from 1850 until his death, turning out appropriate but

mediocre verse, such as a poem of greeting to Alexandra of Denmark when she arrived in Britain to marry the future King Edward VII. In 1855, Tennyson produced one of his best known works, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," a dramatic tribute to the British cavalymen involved in an ill-advised charge on 25 October 1854, during the Crimean War. Other works written as Laureate include *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* and *Ode Sung at the Opening of the International Exhibition*.

Queen Victoria was an ardent admirer of Tennyson's work, and in 1884 created him **Baron Tennyson**, of Aldworth in the County of Sussex and of Freshwater in the Isle of Wight. Tennyson



Farrington - Lord Tennyson's residence on the Isle of Wight

initially declined a baronetcy in 1865 and 1868 (when tendered by Disraeli), finally accepting a peerage in 1883 at Gladstone's earnest solicitation. He took his seat in the House of Lords on 11 March 1884.^[14]

Tennyson's life at Freshwater features in Virginia Woolf's play of the same name, in which Tennyson mingles with his friend Julia Margaret Cameron and G.F. Watts. He was the first English writer raised to the Peerage. A passionate man with some peculiarities of nature, he was never particularly comfortable as a peer, and it is widely held that he took the peerage in order to secure a future for his son Hallam. Recordings exist of Lord Tennyson declaiming his own poetry, which were made by Thomas Edison, but they are of relatively poor quality.

Towards the end of his life Tennyson revealed that his "religious beliefs also defied convention, leaning towards agnosticism and pandeism".^[15]

Famously, he wrote in *In Memoriam*: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." In *Maud*, 1855, he wrote: "The churches have killed their Christ." In "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After," Tennyson wrote:

"Christian love among the churches look'd the twin of heathen hate." In his play, *Becket*, he wrote: "We are self-uncertain creatures, and we may, Yea, even when we know not, mix our spites and private hates with our defence of Heaven." Tennyson recorded in his *Diary* (p. 127): "I believe in Pantheism of a sort." His son's biography confirms that Tennyson was not Christian, noting that Tennyson praised Giordano Bruno and Spinoza on his deathbed, saying of Bruno: "His view of God is in some ways mine." D. 1892.^[16]

Tennyson continued writing into his eighties, and died on 6 October 1892, aged 83. He was buried at Westminster Abbey. He was succeeded as 2nd Baron Tennyson by his son, Hallam, who produced an authorised biography of his father in 1897, and was later the second Governor-General of Australia.

The art of Tennyson's poetry

Tennyson used a wide range of subject-matter, ranging from medieval legends to classical myths and from domestic situations to observations of nature, as source material for his poetry. The



Statue of Lord Tennyson in the chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge.

influence of Keats and other Romantic poets published before and during his childhood is evident from the richness of his imagery and descriptive writing. For example, compare *Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white*

from *The Princess* with Keats' *Eve of St Agnes*. However, he also handled rhythm masterfully. The insistent beat of *Break, Break, Break* emphasizes the sadness and relentlessness of the subject matter. Tennyson's use of the musical qualities of words to emphasize his rhythms and meanings is sensitive. The language of *I come from haunts of coot and hern* lilts and ripples like the brook in the

poem and the last two lines of *Come down O maid from yonder mountain height* offer a most beautiful combination of onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance:

The moan of doves in immemorial elms
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

Tennyson was a craftsman who polished and revised his manuscripts until they were perfect. Few poets have used such a wide variety of styles with such an exact understanding of metre. He reflects the Victorian period of his maturity in his feeling for order and his tendency towards moralizing and self-indulgent melancholy. He also reflects a common concern among Victorian writers in being troubled by the apparent conflict between religious faith and scientific discoveries. Like many writers who write a great deal over a long time, he can be pompous or banal, and this personality rings throughout all his works, work that reflects a grand and special variability in its quality. Tennyson possessed a poet's strongest artistic forces; he put great length into many works, most famous of which are *Maud* and *Idylls of the King*, the latter being perhaps one of literature's greatest addressings of the legend of King Arthur and The Knights of the Round Table.

Partial list of works

- From *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830):
 - *The Dying Swan*
 - *The Kraken*
 - *Mariana*
- *Lady Clara Vere de Vere* (1832)
- From *Poems* (1833):
 - *The Lotos-Eaters*
 - *The Lady of Shalott* (1832, 1842)
- From *Poems* (1842):
 - *Locksley Hall*
 - *Tithonus*
 - *The Two Voices* (1834)
 - "Ulysses" (1833)
- *The Princess* (1847)
 - "Tears, Idle Tears"
- *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849)
- *Ring Out, Wild Bells* (1850)
- *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854) - an early recording exists of Tennyson reading this
- *Maud* (1855/1856)
- *Enoch Arden* (1862/1864)
- *Flower in the crannied wall* (1869)
- *Harold* (1876) - began a revival of interest in King Harold
- *Idylls of the King* (composed 1833-1874)

- *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* (1886)
- *Crossing the Bar* (1889)

References

1. ^ The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 5th ed. OUP 1999
2. ^ Genealogists Discover Royal Roots for All
3. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
4. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
5. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
6. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
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8. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
9. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.

10. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
11. ^ Enjoying "Timbuctoo" by Alfred Tennyson
12. ^ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/lincolnshire/asop/people>
13. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
14. ^ *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Eugene Parsons (Introduction). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900.
15. ^ Cambridge Book and Print Gallery
16. ^ Freethought of the Day, August 6, 2006, Alfred Tennyson

External links

- Tennyson's Grave, Westminster Abbey
- Biography & Works (public domain)
- Online copy of 'Locksley Hall'
- Selected Poems of A. Tennyson
- The Twickenham Museum - Alfred Lord Tennyson in Twickenham
- Tennyson in Twickenham
- Works by Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson at Project Gutenberg
- Complete Biography & Works

- Selected Works of Tennyson at Inspired Poetry
- Illustrations of Tennyson's poetry by the Dutch artist Anja Cazemier

Preceded by William Wordsworth	British Poet Laureate 1850–1892	Succeeded by Alfred Austin
Peerage of the United Kingdom		
Preceded by New creation	Baron Tennyson	Succeeded by Hallam Tennyson

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