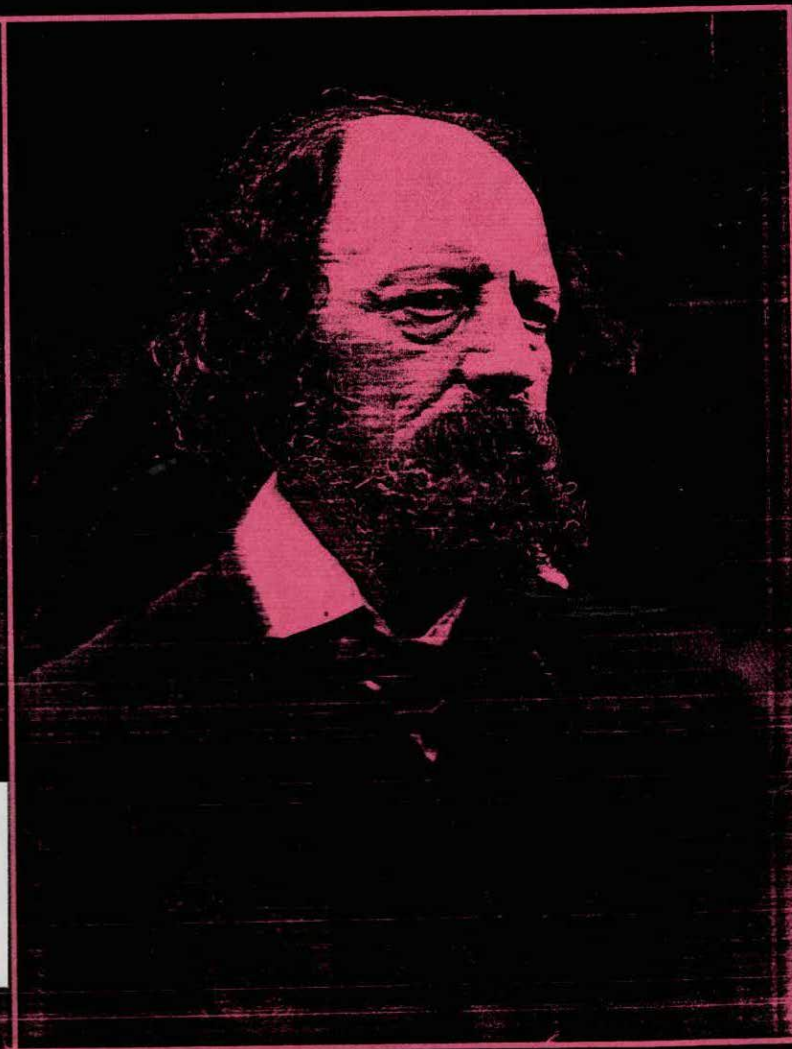


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# TENNYSON

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## THE PENGUIN POETRY LIBRARY

### TENNYSON

Alfred Lord Tennyson was born in 1809 at Somersby, Lincolnshire, the sixth of eleven children of a clergyman. He went up to Cambridge in 1828 but did not obtain a degree. He never had any other occupation than poet. In 1845 he was granted a state pension of £200 a year and in 1850 he was created Poet Laureate. He accepted a peerage in 1883. His first important book, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, was published in 1830, and was not a critical success. Three years later his close friend Arthur Hallam died and this event had a lasting influence on his life and writing: *In Memoriam*, a series of lyrics and speculations on mortality in tribute to Hallam, appeared in 1850 and is considered by many to be his most important poem. His longest and most ambitious work, *Idylls of the King*, was composed in two creative spells (1856-9 and 1868-74), and it reflects Tennyson's lifelong interest in the Arthurian legend. Tennyson has been neglected, but his verse is now receiving the serious attention and acclaim that it deserves. T. S. Eliot wrote of Tennyson: 'He has three qualities which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: abundance, variety and complete competence. He had the finest ear of any English poet since Milton.'

After a short illness Tennyson died in 1892 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

# Tennyson

*Poems*

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Selected by W. E. Williams

Introduction by Jenni Calder



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## INTRODUCTION

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON was born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, the son of a country rector whose large and varied library provided his earliest inspiration. He began writing poetry at the age of eight, and in 1827 he and his brother Charles published their first book, *Poems by Two Brothers*. The following year he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, but left before completing his degree. The year 1830 saw the publication of *Poems Chiefly Lyrical*, Tennyson's first important book, although it was badly received by the critics.

In 1833 he published *Poems*, including 'The Lady of Shalott' and 'The Lotos-Eaters', which was liked by the general public, acclaimed by Tennyson's friends, and virulently attacked in the *Edinburgh Quarterly*. In the same year his closest friend and most perceptive critic, Arthur Hallam, died suddenly in Vienna at the age of twenty-two, an event which was to have a profound influence upon Tennyson's life and writing. He began 'In Memoriam', which grew over the years into the record of a spiritual conflict and a confession of faith. Generally considered to be Tennyson's most important work, this sequence of lyrics and speculations



## INTRODUCTION

about mortality in tribute to Hallam was published anonymously in 1850.

In 1842 Tennyson published *Poems*, including 'Locksley Hall' and 'Ulysses', and in 1847 'The Princess', a serio-comic epic about female emancipation embodying some of his finest lyrics. It was his first popular success, running through five editions in six years. However, only with the publication of 'In Memoriam' in 1850 did Tennyson's financial position allow him to marry Emily Sellwood, to whom he had been engaged for seven years. On Wordsworth's death in April 1850 he was appointed Poet Laureate, whereupon he assumed for the next forty-two years the peculiarly Victorian mantle of public poet, although with an underlying ambiguity which informs so much of his mature verse.

Tennyson's earliest adult poems reveal his skill at drawing from classical myth and medieval legend a general mood of melancholy and particular moral comment which was to remain characteristic throughout his career. The colour and richness of his imagery and descriptive writing shows the influence of Keats, but are made distinctive by Tennyson's rhythmic qualities. His superb metric manipulation was well developed by 1833: In 'Oenone', 'The Lady of Shalott', and 'The Lotos-Eaters' his use of language and metre to sustain the dream-like



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and tragic inability of his protagonists to act against the inevitability of their situations is expertly and sensitively controlled. He is at his most impressive when he uses the musical qualities of language as a means of deepening his rhythms and his meaning.

Tennyson frequently presented legendary heroes as spokesmen for his own moral attitudes, but he was also concerned to show the innate moral heroism of ordinary domestic life. This led him at times to destroy a pleasing theme by inappropriate sentiment, or to strangle a poem's natural energy by simultaneously overlaying it with moral insignificance and cautiously restraining the human activity, as in 'Enoch Arden' (1864). But it was poems such as this that were most popular, although not necessarily praised by the critics. His *Idylls of the King* (1859) have often been criticized for their use of legend as a vehicle for Victorian moralizing. But Tennyson was genuinely concerned at the contradictions of Victorian Britain and was not able to reconcile the two sides of his sense of responsibility—the one that worried and the one that saw itself as prophet of the age. While being confident of progress and of the value of a humbly heroic stance, he remained deeply troubled by the unpredictability of human emotions and behaviour. In 1855, the year after the publication of

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his most jingoistic poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', he wrote 'Maud', an intense, almost breathless group of lyrics describing a tragic love affair. The violent rhythms and impassioned language completely override any impression of complacency or narrowmindedness that Tennyson suggests elsewhere.

Tennyson had an almost unflawed metrical understanding, and it enabled him to handle a wide variety of forms. He was equally happy with the rapid narrative of 'The Princess', and the short lyrics that he later added to the poem. In his lyrics he created, in language that is both precise and suggestive, an identity of mood and physical surroundings which represents Tennyson at his elegiac best. The nostalgia of 'Tears, Idle Tears', the insistent sadness of 'Break, Break, Break', products of rhythmic control as much as of language, infect to some degree most of his poetry. Even in his prophetic optimism his melancholy is hovering near: T. S. Eliot called him the saddest of all English poets.

Tennyson was a careful poet, as his much-revised manuscripts show, and he never lost touch with his earliest attitudes. He returned again and again to the same themes and moods. But if he was limited in scope, and if his talents were hampered by public demand—for he was

## INTRODUCTION

one of the most popular of major poets—and by his own sense of moral duty, his metrical skill remains quite breathtaking in its vigour and delicacy.

JENNI CALDER

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