

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

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The following description of Tennyson is interesting in connection with the portrait which accompanies this paper. It was written by Carlyle in a letter to Emerson, when Tennyson was about forty:—

"One of the finest looking men in the world. A great shock of rough dusky dark hair; bright, laughing, hazel eyes; massive aquiline face, most massive, yet most delicate; of sallow brown complexion, almost Indian looking;—His voice is musical, metallic, fit for loud laughter and piercing wail, and all that may lie between."

Born at Somersby, in Lincolnshire, on August 6, 1809, Alfred Tennyson was the fourth in a family of twelve, "most of them more or less true poets." His father, the Rector of the parish, was a very learned man, and all that his sons learnt of languages, mathematics and natural science, before they went to college, was learnt from him. They also had the run of his fine library and read widely in English literature. Their mother, a very beautiful and saintly woman, devoted to her family, is said to be described by Tennyson in the poem of "Isabel." The family seems to have been a very united and affectionate one, and the poet's childhood and youth were happy.

Even as a child, he showed great sensitiveness to the beauty of words; and he began to write in verse at eight years of age, producing at twelve an epic, and at fourteen a drama, all in perfect metre.

While very young, also, he was a keen observer of the habits of beasts, birds and insects, and began that loving study of nature which is so evident in his poetry. Like Milton, he felt from early youth that he was called to be a poet, and trained himself to be worthy of his task.

In 1828 he went to Cambridge, and there he made many friends among men afterwards famous.

The most interesting of these friendships was that with Arthur Hallam, son of Henry Hallam, the historian. This friend, a young man of great gifts of mind and person, became very intimate in the Tennyson family, and was engaged to be married to one of the poet's sisters. While travelling abroad with his father in 1833, Hallam died very suddenly, at Vienna. This bereavement, Tennyson tells us, for a while blotted out all joy

from his life and made him long for death. He has commemorated his friend in "In Memoriam," published in 1850, but begun in scattered sections, in the year of his friend's death. The first lines of it to be written are those of the section beginning:—

Fair ship, that from the Italian shore
Sailed the placid ocean-plains
With my lost Arthur's loved remains,
Spread thy full wings, and waft him o'er.

After leaving Cambridge, Tennyson lived at Somersby, and afterwards near London, with his family, devoting himself to study, and to his writing. In 1830 he published his first volume, "Poems, chiefly Lyrical." His last appeared in 1892, the year of his death. In June, 1850, he married Miss Emily Sellwood, to whom he had long been attached, but want of means had prevented an earlier marriage. They lived first in a country place in Sussex, then at Twickenham, where their oldest son, Hallam, was born. But in 1853 they went to Farringford in the Isle of Wight, which was their home for forty years. It is there that most of his famous poems were written and there that the poet died. Mrs. Thackeray Ritchie says of this beautiful place, fitting home for a great poet:—

The house at Farringford itself seemed like a charmed palace with green walls without, and speaking walls within. There hung Dante with his solemn nose and wreath; Italy gleamed over the doorways; friend's faces lined the passages; books filled the shelves, and a glow of crimson was everywhere; the oriel drawing-room window was full of green and golden leaves, of the sound of birds and of the distant sea.

In November, 1850, Tennyson was appointed Poet Laureate, at the instance, it is said, of Prince Albert, who greatly admired "In Memoriam." Wordsworth, who held the office before him, had been dead for some months, and Tennyson was recognised as the most worthy to succeed him. In 1842 the older and the younger poets had met and Wordsworth, writing of the meeting to a friend, says:—

I saw Tennyson when I was in London. He is decidedly the first of our living poets, and I hope will live to give the world still better things. You will be pleased to hear that he expressed in the strongest terms his gratitude to my writings. To this I was far from indifferent.

The new Laureate paid graceful tribute to his predecessor in the lines where he speaks of taking

This laurel greener from the brows
Of him who uttered nothing base.