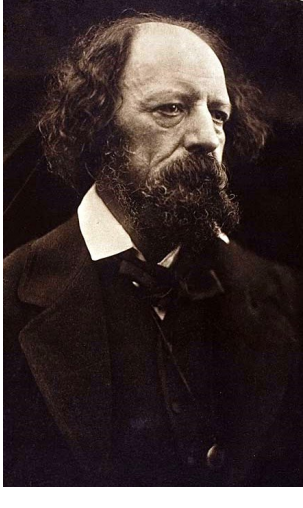


# Alfred, Lord Tennyson

<b>The Right Honourable Lord Tennyson FRS</b>	
	
1869 Carbon print by Julia Margaret Cameron	
<b>Born</b>	6 August 1809 Somersby, Lincolnshire, England United Kingdom
<b>Died</b>	6 October 1892 (aged 83) Lurgashall, Sussex, England <sup>[1]</sup> United Kingdom
<b>Occupation</b>	Poet Laureate
<b>Alma mater</b>	Cambridge University
<b>Spouse(s)</b>	Emily Sellwood ( <span>m.</span> 1850 <span>–</span> <span>w.</span> 1892)
<b>Children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hallam Tennyson (b. 11 August 1852)</li> <li>Lionel (b. 16 March 1854)</li> </ul>

**Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson**, FRS (6 August 1809 – 6 October 1892) was Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria's reign and remains one of the most popular British poets.<sup>[1]</sup>

Tennyson excelled at penning short lyrics, such as "Break, Break, Break", "The Charge of the Light Brigade", "Tears, Idle Tears" and "Crossing the Bar". Much of his verse was based on classical mythological themes, such as Ulysses, although *In Memoriam A.H.H.* was written to commemorate his best friend Arthur Hallam, a fellow poet and fellow student at Trinity College, Cambridge, who was engaged to Tennyson's sister, but died from a brain haemorrhage before they could marry. Tennyson also wrote some notable blank verse including *Idylls of the King*, "Ulysses", and "Tithonus". During his career, Tennyson attempted drama, but his plays enjoyed little success.

A number of phrases from Tennyson's work have become commonplaces of the English language, including "Nature, red in tooth and claw", "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all", "Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die", "My strength is as the strength of ten, / Because my heart is pure", "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield", "Knowledge comes, but Wisdom lingers", and "The old order changeth, yielding place to new". He is the ninth most frequently quoted writer in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Early life

Tennyson was born in Somersby.<sup>[3]</sup> He derived from a middle-class line of Tennysons, but also had a noble and royal ancestry.<sup>[4]</sup>

His father, George Clayton Tennyson (1778–1831), was rector of Somersby (1807–1831), also rector of Benniworth and Bag Enderby, and vicar of Grimsby (1815). 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. He was comfortably well off for a country clergyman and his shrewd money management enabled the family to spend summers at Mablethorpe and Skegness, on the eastern coast of England". Alfred Tennyson's mother, Elizabeth Fytche (1781–1865), was the daughter of Stephen Fytche (1734–1799), vicar of St. James Church, Louth (1764) and rector of Withcall (1780), a small village between Horncastle and Louth. Tennyson's father "carefully attended to the education and training of his children."

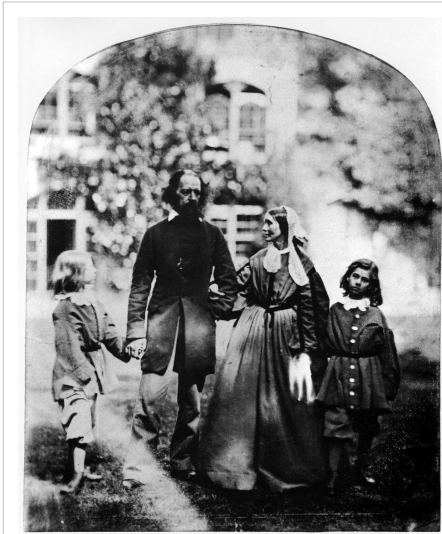
Tennyson and two of his elder brothers were writing poetry in their teens, and a collection of poems by all three were published locally when Alfred was only 17. One of those brothers, Charles Tennyson Turner later married Louisa Sellwood, the younger sister of Alfred's future wife; the other was Frederick Tennyson. Another of Tennyson's brothers, Edward Tennyson, was institutionalised at a private asylum, where he was deemed dead.

## Education and first publication

Tennyson was first a student of Louth Grammar School for four years (1816–1820)<sup>[4]</sup> and then attended Scaitcliffe School, Englefield Green and King Edward VI Grammar School, Louth. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1827, where he joined a secret society called the Cambridge Apostles.<sup>[5]</sup> At Cambridge Tennyson met Arthur Henry Hallam, who became his closest 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.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1829 he was awarded the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge for one of his first pieces, "Timbuctoo".<sup>[6][7]</sup> Reportedly, "it was thought to be no slight honour for a young man of twenty to win the chancellor's gold medal".<sup>[4]</sup> He published his first solo collection of poems, *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* in 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 overly sentimental, 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



Tennyson with his wife Emily (1813–1896) and his sons Hallam (1852–1928) and Lionel (1854–1886).

In the spring of 1831, Tennyson's father died, requiring 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 the family. Arthur Hallam came to stay with his family during the summer and became engaged to Tennyson's sister, Emilia Tennyson.

In 1833 Tennyson published his second book of poetry, which included his well-known poem, "The Lady of Shalott". The volume met heavy criticism, which so discouraged Tennyson that he did not publish again for ten years, although he did continue to write. That same year, Hallam died suddenly and unexpectedly after suffering a cerebral haemorrhage while on vacation in Vienna. Hallam's death had a profound impact on Tennyson, and inspired several masterpieces, including "In the Valley of Caunteretz" and *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, a long poem detailing the "Way of the Soul".<sup>[8]</sup>

Tennyson and his family were allowed to stay in the rectory for some time, but later moved to High Beach, Essex, about 1837, leaving in 1840.<sup>[9]</sup> An unwise investment in an ecclesiastical wood-carving enterprise soon led to the loss of much of the family fortune. Tennyson then moved to London, and lived for a time at Chapel House, Twickenham.

## Third publication

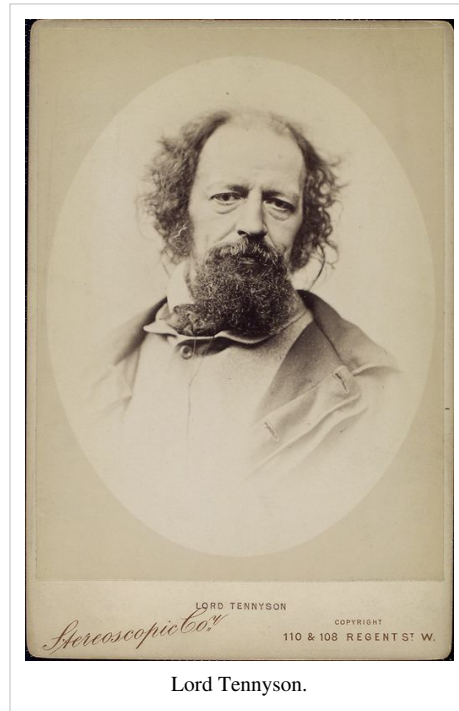
In 1842 while living modestly in London, Tennyson published two volumes of *Poems*, of which the first included works already published and the second was made up almost entirely of new poems. They met with immediate success. Poems from this collection, such as *Locksley Hall*, "Tithonus", and "Ulysses" have met enduring fame. *The Princess: A Medley*, a satire on women's education, which came out in 1847, was also popular for its lyrics. W. S. Gilbert later adapted and parodied the piece twice: in *The Princess* (1870) and in *Princess Ida* (1884).

It was in 1850 that Tennyson reached the pinnacle of his career, finally publishing his masterpiece, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, dedicated to Hallam. Later the same year he was appointed Poet Laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. In the same year (on 13 June), Tennyson married Emily Sellwood, whom he had known since childhood, in the village of Shiplake. They had two sons, Hallam Tennyson (b. 11 August 1852)—named after his friend—and Lionel (b. 16 March 1854).

Tennyson rented Farringford House on the Isle of Wight in 1853, and then bought it in 1856.<sup>[10]</sup> He eventually found that there were too many starstruck tourists who pestered him in Farringford, so he moved to "Aldworth", in West Sussex in 1869.<sup>[11]</sup> However, he retained Farringford, and regularly returned there to spend the winters.

## Poet Laureate

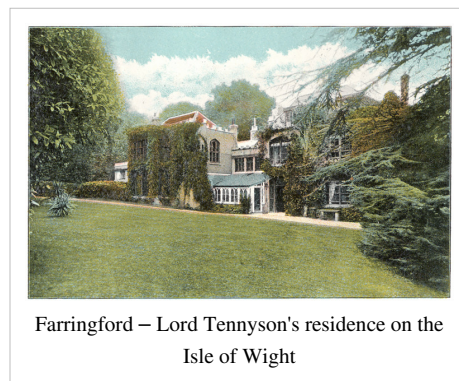
After William Wordsworth's death in 1850, and Samuel Rogers' refusal, Tennyson was appointed to the position of Poet Laureate; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Leigh Hunt had also been considered.<sup>[12]</sup> He held the position until his own death in 1892, by far the longest tenure of any laureate before or since. Tennyson fulfilled the requirements of this position by turning out appropriate but often uninspired verse, such as a poem of greeting to Princess 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 cavalrymen involved in an ill-advised charge on 25 October 1854, during the Crimean War. Other esteemed works written in the post of Poet Laureate include *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* and *Ode Sung at the Opening of the International Exhibition*.



Lord Tennyson.

Tennyson initially declined a baronetcy in 1865 and 1868 (when tendered by Disraeli), finally accepting a peerage in 1883 at Gladstone's earnest solicitation. In 1884 Victoria created him Baron Tennyson, of Aldworth in the County of Sussex and of Freshwater in the Isle of Wight. He took his seat in the House of Lords on 11 March 1884.<sup>[4]</sup>

Tennyson also wrote a substantial quantity of non-official political verse, from the bellicose "Form, Riflemen, Form", on the French crisis of 1859, to "Steersman, be not precipitate in thine act/of steering", deploring Gladstone's Home Rule Bill.



Farringford – Lord Tennyson's residence on the Isle of Wight



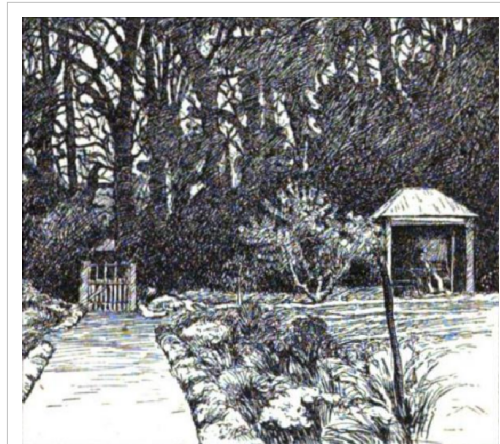
Statue of Lord Tennyson in the chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Virginia Woolf wrote a play called *Freshwater*, showing Tennyson as host to his friends Julia Margaret Cameron and G.F.Watts.<sup>[13]</sup>

Tennyson was the first to be raised to a British peerage for his writing. 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.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Thomas Edison made sound recordings of Tennyson reading his own poetry, late in his life. They include recordings of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and excerpts from "The splendour falls" (from *The Princess*), "Come into the garden" (from *Maud*), "Ask me no more", "Ode on the death of the Duke of Wellington", "Charge of the Light Brigade", and "Lancelot and Elaine"; the sound quality is as poor as wax cylinder recordings usually are.

Towards the end of his life Tennyson revealed that his "religious beliefs also defied convention, leaning towards agnosticism and pandeism":<sup>[14]</sup> Famously, he wrote in *In Memoriam*: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." [The context directly contradicts the apparent meaning of this quote.] 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 an orthodox Christian, noting that Tennyson praised Giordano Bruno and Spinoza on his deathbed, saying of Bruno, "His view of God is in some ways mine", in 1892.<sup>[15]</sup>



Sketch of Alfred Tennyson published one year after his death in 1892, seated in his favourite arbour at his Farringford House home in the village of Freshwater, Isle of Wight.

Tennyson continued writing into his eighties. He died on 6 October 1892 at Aldworth, aged 83. He was buried at Westminster Abbey. A memorial was erected in All Saints' Church, Freshwater. His last words were; "Oh that press will have me now!".<sup>[16]</sup>

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.



## Tennyson and the Queen

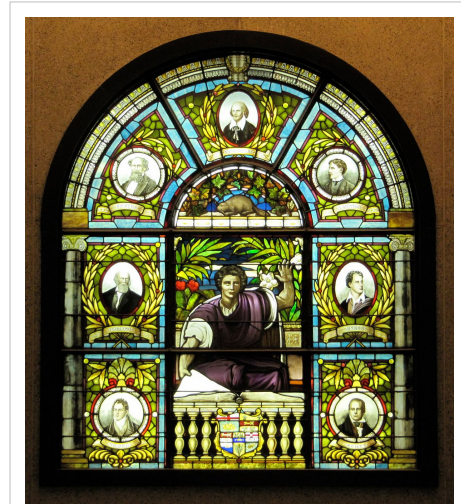
Though Prince Albert was largely responsible for Tennyson's appointment as Laureate,<sup>[12]</sup> Queen Victoria became an ardent admirer of Tennyson's work, writing in her diary that she was "much soothed & pleased" by reading *In Memoriam A.H.H.* after Albert's death.<sup>[17]</sup> The two met twice, first in April 1862, when Victoria wrote in her diary, "very peculiar looking, tall, dark, with a fine head, long black flowing hair & a beard, — oddly dressed, but there is no affectation about him."<sup>[18]</sup> Tennyson met her a second time nearly two decades later, and the Queen told him what a comfort *In Memoriam A.H.H.* had been.<sup>[19]</sup>

## The art of Tennyson's poetry

In writing 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 influence of John Keats and other Romantic poets published before and during his childhood is evident from the richness of his imagery and descriptive writing.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> He also handled rhythm masterfully. The insistent beat of *Break, Break, Break* emphasises the relentless sadness of the subject matter. Tennyson's use of the musical qualities of words to emphasise 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" illustrate his telling 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 extensively.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Few poets have used such a variety of styles with such an exact understanding of metre; like many Victorian poets, he experimented in adapting the quantitative metres of Greek and Latin poetry to English.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> He reflects the Victorian period of his maturity in his feeling for order and his tendency towards moralising. He also reflects a concern common among Victorian writers in being troubled by the conflict between religious faith and expanding scientific knowledge.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Like many writers who write a great deal over a long time, his poetry is occasionally uninspired, but his personality rings throughout all his works — work that reflects a grand and special variability in its quality. Tennyson possessed the strongest poetic power;<sup>[citation needed]</sup> he put great length into many works, most famous of which are *Maud* and *Idylls of the King*, the latter arguably the most famous Victorian adaptation of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. A common thread of grief, melancholy, and loss connects much of his poetry (e.g., *Mariana*, *The Lotos Eaters*, *Tears*, *Idle Tears*, *In Memoriam*), likely reflecting Tennyson's own lifelong struggle with debilitating depression.<sup>[20]</sup> T. S. Eliot famously described Tennyson as "the saddest of all English poets", whose technical mastery of verse and language provided a "surface" to his poetry's "depths, to the abyss of sorrow".<sup>[21]</sup>



Stained glass at Ottawa Public Library features Charles Dickens, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Lord Byron, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Shakespeare, Thomas Moore

## Homoerotic imagery

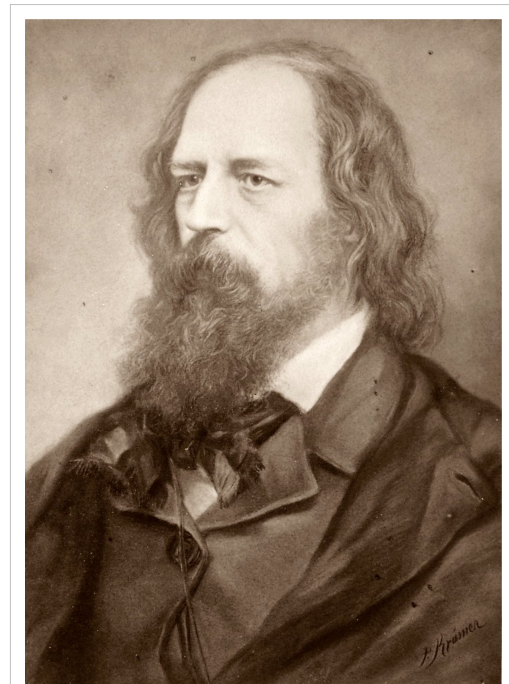
The poem *In Memoriam* about a man's love for another man includes sexual imagery; for example, the poet compares his sorrow to the sorrow of a loving widower who misses his late wife in bed.

Tears of the widower, when he sees A late-lost form that sleep reveals, And moves his doubtful arms,  
and feels Her place is empty, fall like these;<sup>[22]</sup>

This is not a unique example and material that can be interpreted as homoerotic is widespread in Tennyson's work. There has been speculation that Tennyson may have experienced homosexual feelings for his friend, though there is no question that he was strongly attracted to women. If Tennyson had bisexual feelings there is no firm evidence that he acted on them.<sup>[23]</sup>

## 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) – three versions painted by J. W. Waterhouse (1888, 1894, and 1916). Also put to music by Loreena McKennitt on her album *The Visit* (1991).
  - *St. Simeon Stylites* (1833)
- From *Poems* (1842):
  - *Locksley Hall*
  - *Tithonus*
  - *Vision of Sin* <sup>[24]</sup>
  - *The Two Voices* (1834)
  - "Ulysses" (1833)
- From *The Princess; A Medley* (1847)
  - "The Princess"
  - 'Godiva'
  - *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal* – it later appeared as a song in the film *Vanity Fair*, with musical arrangement by Mychael Danna
  - "Tears, Idle Tears"
- *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849)
- *Ring Out, Wild Bells* (1850)
- *The Eagle* (1851)
- *The Sister's Shame* <sup>[25]</sup>
- From *Maud; A Monodrama* (1855/1856)
  - *Maud*
  - *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854) – an early recording exists of Tennyson reading this.
- From *Enoch Arden and Other Poems* (1862/1864)
  - *Enoch Arden*



Alfred Tennyson, portrait by P.Krämer-Friedrich Bruckmann


- *The Brook* – contains the line "For men may come and men may go, But I go on for ever" which inspired the naming of a men's club in New York City.
- *Flower in the crannied wall* (1869)
- *The Window* – Song cycle with Arthur Sullivan. (1871)
- *Harold* (1876) – began a revival of interest in King Harold
- *Idylls of the King* (composed 1833–1874)
- "Becket" (1884) <sup>[26]</sup>
- *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* (1886)
- *Crossing the Bar* (1889)
- *The Foresters* – a play with incidental music by Arthur Sullivan (1891)
- *Kapiolani* (published after his death by Hallam Tennyson)<sup>[27]</sup>

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- Biography & Works (<http://www.online-literature.com/tennyson/>) (public domain)
- Online copy of *Locksley Hall* (<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2161.html>)
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- Farringford Holiday Cottages and Restaurant, Home of Tennyson, Isle of Wight (<http://www.farringford.co.uk>)
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- Works by Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson (<http://www.gutenberg.org/author/Alfred+Lord+Tennyson>) at Project Gutenberg
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- Settings of Alfred Tennyson's poetry in the Choral Public Domain Library ([http://www.choralwiki.org/wiki/index.php/Alfred\\_Tennyson](http://www.choralwiki.org/wiki/index.php/Alfred_Tennyson))
- The Louverture Project: Anacaona – poem by Alfred Tennyson ([http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Anacaona\\_-\\_poem\\_by\\_Alfred\\_Tennyson](http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Anacaona_-_poem_by_Alfred_Tennyson)) – Poem about the Taíno queen.
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- Selected Works at Poetry Index (<http://www.poetry-index.net/AlfredTennyson.html>)
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Honorary titles		
Preceded by <b>William Wordsworth</b>	<b>British Poet Laureate</b> 1850–1892	Succeeded by <b>Alfred Austin</b>
Peerage of the United Kingdom		
Preceded by <b>New creation</b>	<b>Baron Tennyson</b> 1884–1892	Succeeded by <b>Hallam Tennyson</b>

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