

F·B·PINION

A TENNYSON
COMPANION



A TENNYSON COMPANION

Life and Works

F. B. PINION

M
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PART ONE

Tennyson's Life

Chronology

- 1809 (6 August) Alfred Tennyson born at Somersby
1816–20 At Louth Grammar School
1823–4 Writes *The Devil and the Lady*
1827 *Poems by Two Brothers* published by Jacksons of Louth.
Enters Trinity College, Cambridge, in November
1828 Arthur Hallam enters Trinity College in October
1829 Tennyson wins the Chancellor's Gold Medal with
'Timbuctoo'. Becomes a member of 'The Apostles'
(October). Hallam spends Christmas at Somersby
1830 *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. Visits the Pyrenees with Hallam
1831 His father dies, and he leaves Cambridge
1832 After taking his degree, and coming of age, Hallam
stays at Somersby (March); he and Tennyson make a
tour along the Rhine (July). *Poems* published in
December (dated 1833)
1833 Ridicule of *Poems* in *The Quarterly Review*. Death of
Arthur Hallam in Vienna (September)
1835 Death of Tennyson's grandfather George
1836 Tennyson falls in love with Emily Sellwood at his
brother Charles's wedding
1837 The Tennysons leave Somersby for Beech Hill House at
High Beech near Epping. Victoria becomes Queen
1840 Move to Tunbridge Wells
1841 Move to Boxley, near Maidstone (late in the year)
1842 Emily Tennyson marries. Publication of *Poems* in two
volumes. Marriage of Cecilia Tennyson and Edmund
Lushington
1843 Collapse of the wood-carving business in which
Tennyson had invested most of his inheritance. Move to
Cheltenham
1845 Granted a Civil List pension
1847 *The Princess*
1850 *In Memoriam A. H. H.*; marriage; Poet Laureateship
1851 Move to Chapel House, Twickenham (March).
Holiday in Italy

- 1852 Birth of Hallam Tennyson (August). Death of the Duke of Wellington (September)
- 1853 Move to Farringford, Isle of Wight, in November
- 1854 Birth of Lionel Tennyson shortly before the Crimean War begins (March)
- 1855 *Maud, and Other Poems*
- 1856 End of Crimean War
- 1858 Alfred visits Norway
- 1859 *Idylls of the King* ('Enid', 'Vivien', 'Elaine', 'Guinevere'). Visit to Portugal
- 1860 Julia Cameron comes to live near Farringford
- 1861 Tennyson visits the Pyrenees with his family. Death of Prince Albert (December)
- 1862 Received by the Queen at Osborne
- 1864 *Enoch Arden, and Other Poems*
- 1865 Death of Tennyson's mother
- 1868 The foundation stone of Aldworth, the Tennysons' summer residence on Blackdown, laid in April
- 1869 *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* (dated 1870)
- 1872 *Gareth and Lynette, etc.* (i.e. with 'The Last Tournament')
- 1874 'Balin and Balan' completed (first published in the 1885 volume)
- 1875 *Queen Mary*
- 1876 *Harold* (dated 1877)
- 1879 *Becket* completed; death of Charles Tennyson; *The Lover's Tale* published; *The Falcon* produced
- 1880 *Ballads and Other Poems*
- 1881 *The Cup* produced. *The Foresters* completed (first performed in New York, and published, in 1892)
- 1882 *The Promise of May* produced
- 1883 Death of Edward FitzGerald
- 1884 Tennyson takes his seat in the House of Lords. *Becket* published (first performed in 1893)
- 1885 *Tiresias and Other Poems*
- 1886 Death of Lionel. *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, etc.* (including *The Promise of May*)
- 1889 *Demeter and Other Poems*
- 1892 (6 October) Tennyson dies at Aldworth. *The Death of Oenone, Akbar's Dream, and Other Poems* published posthumously

I

Tennyson's detestation of prying biographers erupted in bucolic imagery; their treatment of great men was like ripping pigs open for public gaze. He was certain to be ripped open, and thanked God that he and the world knew nothing of Shakespeare but his writings. He expresses his antipathy in 'The Dead Prophet'; Carlyle, 'one of the people's kings', after labouring to lift them 'out of slime' and show that souls have wings, had been stripped bare by his biographer, and exposed to public gaze. At nightfall, while the sun glares at the approaching storm, a vulturous beldam glides in and kneels by the corpse. She makes much of the man's noble qualities, but insists on the need to 'scan him from head to feet, Were it but for a wart or a mole'. Finding little outward blemish, she tears him 'part from part', extracts heart and liver, and pronounces one small and the other half-diseased. Earlier, in 'To—, After Reading a Life and Letters', Tennyson declared it is better for the poet to die unknown than at the temple gates of Glory, where 'the carrion vulture waits To tear his heart before the crowd'.

Holding that 'something should be done by dispassionate criticism towards the reformation of our national habits in the matter of literary biography', George Eliot reinforced her views with a quotation from the second of these two poems:

Is it not odious that as soon as a man is dead his desk is raked, and every insignificant memorandum which he never meant for the public is printed for the gossiping amusement of people too idle to re-read his books? 'He gave the people of his best. His worst he kept, his best he gave' — but there is a certain set, not a small one, who are titillated by the worst and indifferent to the best. I think this fashion is a disgrace to us all. It is something like the uncovering of the dead Byron's club-foot.

She believed that most people would read any quantity of trivial details about an author whose works they knew very imperfectly, if

at all, and that biographies generally were 'a disease of English literature'.

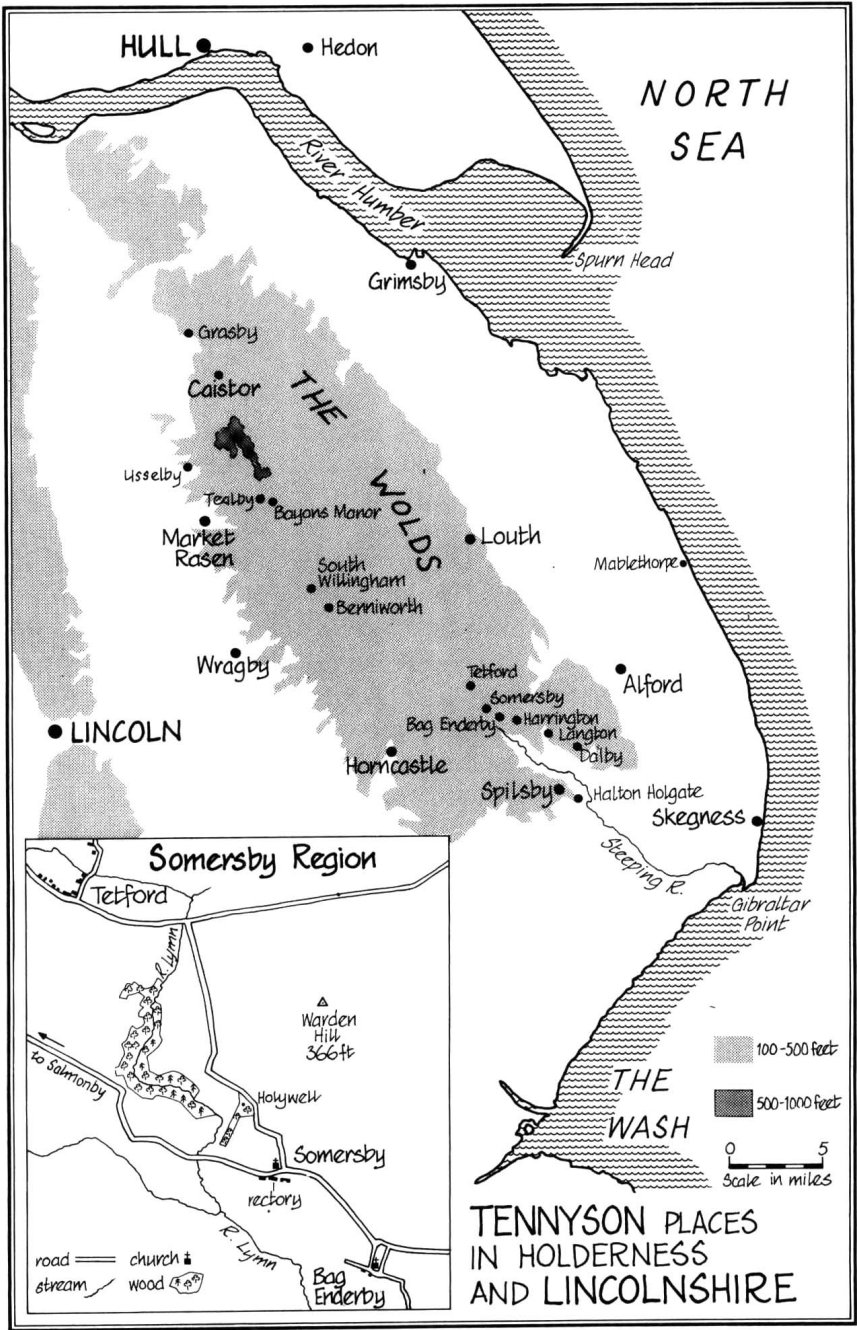
The distinction between the many whose literary interest is mainly biographical and the relatively few who are genuinely devoted to literature remains as valid as ever. Nevertheless, the study of a writer's works benefits appreciably from an understanding of all the factors that made him and his outlook what they were; and it is fortunate that the principal biographies of Tennyson have become increasingly illuminating. His son Hallam's *Memoir*, though a mine of information, is restricted and guarded; his grandson Charles's *Alfred Tennyson* discloses much more, with admirable lucidity throughout; finally we have *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* by Robert Martin, a work which presents little short of what we are likely to know, and appraises with an unusual degree of informed detachment the poet's inherited problems, his temperamental idiosyncrasies, and his literary achievements.

The Tennysons, thought to be Danish in origin, seem to have settled first in Holderness, near the Humber east of Hull. Their descendants belonged predominantly to small yeomen and professional classes. One, whose parents migrated to Cambridgeshire in the seventeenth century, became Archbishop of Canterbury, and founded a famous London school. In the eighteenth century Michael Tennyson, an apothecary at Hedon, married the heiress of the wealthy Clayton family, who owned most of Grimsby before its development, and claimed descent from holders of the Baronetcy of d'Eyncourt. Their son George Tennyson became a solicitor, set up practice at Market Rasen, and married Mary Turner of Caistor, to whom tradition ascribes talent in music and painting. George not only inherited his father's wealth and property but transmitted some of the Clayton hotheadedness and instability. As legal consultant on land enclosures for many years he became a shrewd business man; involvement in electioneering at Grimsby for his own ends made him hard-headed and wily; he lost no opportunity of acquiring land on favourable terms, and in this way became owner of the manor estate of Beacons, once d'Eyncourt property, with traces of an old castle, on the edge of the Wolds near Tealby, three miles from Market Rasen. Plans for improving the house, which was thatched and unpretentious, and for clearing and planting the neighbouring hillsides, were soon under way. In accordance with George's ambition, it was given the ancient name of Bayons Manor

which he claimed for it in furtherance of his d'Eyncourt pretensions. For the same reason he leased part of Deloraine Court near Lincoln Cathedral; unsuccessful in his social aims, he moved to Grimsby before occupying Bayons about 1801.

George and Mary's two sons were the youngest of four children. Before George Clayton Tennyson, the elder of the two, was of age, his father decided to make his younger son Charles his heir, concluding that he would be steadier and better qualified to achieve family distinction. After seven or eight years at St Peter's Grammar School, York, the elder brother, sensitive but rather uncouth and fractious (possibly as the result of incipient epilepsy), was sent to a private tutor in Huntingdonshire, where he was coached for admission to St John's College, Cambridge. He could have done well at the University, but informed his father that academic success demanded too much exertion, and finished with a pass degree. Destined for the Church against his will, he was ordained deacon in May 1801, before making a mysterious visit to Russia. The story, which his son the poet Alfred Tennyson believed, is that while dining with Lord St Helens, the English representative at the coronation of Czar Alexander in Moscow, he voiced a common English view that the Czar's predecessor had been murdered by a certain count. A hush followed, and he was later informed that the count had been one of the guests. Urged to ride for his life, he fled to the Crimea, where, as he lay ill and delirious, wild rustics danced round with magical incantations. An English courier passed by every three months, and George, having no money, had to wait for him before he could return to England. Whether this account was a fabrication to excuse his prolonged absence or a subsequent fantasy is conjectural, but it is quite inconsistent with the report of his movements which the officer of the ship on which he sailed to St Petersburg sent his father. He was ordained priest in December 1802, becoming rector of Benniworth, with duties also at South Willingham. Eventually he took lodgings in Louth, where he became engaged to Elizabeth Fytche, daughter of the previous vicar. They were married in August 1805, with expectations (realized at the end of 1806) of additional income from the livings of Somersby and Bag Enderby, two small neighbouring villages in the wold country east of Horncastle.

George's elder sister Elizabeth, beautiful and charming, a great reader and a writer of verse, pleased her father, above all by marrying the son and heir of a rich Durham coal-owner, who had



bought Brancepeth Castle and had considerable political power through the acquisition of pocket boroughs. When her father-in-law died, Elizabeth's husband Matthew Russell spent huge sums on restoring and furnishing his castle in medieval style. Charles Tennyson acted as his agent, and in return Matthew used his influence to secure him a place in Parliament, and thereby advance the fulfilment of the elder George Tennyson's ambitions at Bayons Manor. The younger sister Mary, who had sympathized with George against their father, became Calvinistic and married a local dissenting squire, John Bourne of Dalby. Tennyson remembered how she wept to think of God's mercy in making her one of the Elect. 'Has he not damned most of my friends? But *me, me* He has picked out for eternal salvation, *me* who am no better than my neighbours.' She told him one day that she thought of the words of Holy Scripture 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire' when she looked at him.

Delayed by repairs and extensions, George and his family did not enter Somersby rectory until early in 1808. Twelve children were born to him and Elizabeth, ten at Somersby: George, born at Bayons Manor, died within a few weeks in 1806; Frederick was born in 1807 (at Louth), Charles in 1808, and Alfred on 6 August 1809, the fourth anniversary of his parents' wedding; four girls and four boys followed, and accommodation proved inadequate long before the last of the surviving eleven was born in 1819. Three times in his infancy Tennyson was thought to be dead from convulsions. He remembered with affection the woodbine that climbed into the bay-window of his nursery, the Gothic vaulted dining-room with stained-glass windows that, as Charles said, made butterfly souls on the walls, the stone chimney-piece carved by their father, the drawing-room bookshelves, the lawn overshadowed by wych-elms on one side and by larches and sycamores on the other, with a border of lilies and roses, and the garden beyond leading down to the parson's field, at the foot of which flowed the brook described in 'Ode to Memory'. Nor did the seclusion of his native village, 'in a pretty pastoral district of softly sloping hills and large ash trees', with 'a little glen in it called by the old monkish name of Holywell', lose its appeal.

There were fewer than a hundred people in Somersby and Bag Enderby, and most inhabitants of the area were rough, uneducated, and not readily sociable. The Tennysons were not proud, and father and sons were disposed to talk with anyone they met. Fortunately