

THE  
OXFORD BOOK  
OF  
ENGLISH VERSE

The  
Oxford Book  
Of English Verse  
1250-1918

Chosen and Edited by  
Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

New Edition

Oxford University Press

New York      Toronto

1940

FIRST PUBLISHED 1900

REPRINTED 1901, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908  
1910, 1911, 1913, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1921  
1925, 1927, 1930

NEW EDITION 1939

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The  
Oxford Book  
Of English Verse  
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Oxford University Press  
Amen House, E.C. 4  
London Edinburgh Glasgow New York  
Toronto Melbourne Capetown Bombay  
Calcutta Madras  
Humphrey Milford  
Publisher to the  
University

TO  
THE PRESIDENT  
FELLOWS AND SCHOLARS  
OF  
TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD  
A HOUSE OF LEARNING  
ANCIENT LIBERAL HUMANE  
AND MY MOST KINDLY NURSE

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

FOR this Anthology I have tried to range over the whole field of English Verse from the beginning, or from the Thirteenth Century to this closing year of the Nineteenth, and to choose the best. Nor have I sought in these Islands only, but wheresoever the Muse has followed the tongue which among living tongues she most delights to honour. To bring home and render so great a spoil compendiously has been my capital difficulty. It is for the reader to judge if I have so managed it as to serve those who already love poetry and to implant that love in some young minds not yet initiated.

My scheme is simple. I have arranged the poets as nearly as possible in order of birth, with such groupings of anonymous pieces as seemed convenient. For convenience, too, as well as to avoid a dispute-royal, I have gathered the most of the Ballads into the middle of the Seventeenth Century; where they fill a languid interval between two winds of inspiration—the Italian dying down with Milton and the French following at the heels of the restored Royalists. For convenience, again, I have set myself certain rules of spelling. In the very earliest poems inflection and spelling are structural, and to modernize is to destroy. But as old

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inflections fade into modern the old spelling becomes less and less vital, and has been brought (not, I hope, too abruptly) into line with that sanctioned by use and familiar. To do this seemed wiser than to discourage many readers for the sake of diverting others by a scent of antiquity which—to be essential—should breathe of something rarer than an odd arrangement of type. But there are scholars whom I cannot expect to agree with me; and to conciliate them I have excepted Spenser and Milton from the rule.

Glosses of archaic and otherwise difficult words are given at the foot of the page: but the text has not been disfigured with reference-marks. And rather than make the book unwieldy I have eschewed notes—reluctantly when some obscure passage or allusion seemed to ask for a timely word; with more equanimity when the temptation was to criticize or ‘appreciate’. For the function of the anthologist includes criticizing in silence.

Care has been taken with the texts. But I have sometimes thought it consistent with the aim of the book to prefer the more beautiful to the better attested reading. I have often excised weak or superfluous stanzas when sure that excision would improve; and have not hesitated to extract a few stanzas from a long



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poem when persuaded that they could stand alone as a lyric. The apology for such experiments can only lie in their success: but the risk is one which, in my judgement, the anthologist ought to take. A few small corrections have been made, but only when they were quite obvious.

The numbers chosen are either lyrical or epigrammatic. Indeed I am mistaken if a single epigram included fails to preserve at least some faint thrill of the emotion through which it had to pass before the Muse's lips let it fall, with however exquisite deliberation. But the lyrical spirit is volatile and notoriously hard to bind with definitions; and seems to grow wilder with the years. With the anthologist—as with the fisherman who knows the fish at the end of his sea-line—the gift, if he have it, comes by sense, improved by practice. The definition, if he be clever enough to frame one, comes by after-thought. I don't know that it helps, and am sure that it may easily mislead.

Having set my heart on choosing the best, I resolved not to be dissuaded by common objections against anthologies—that they repeat one another until the proverb *δὲς ἢ τοῖς τὰ καλὰ* loses all application—or perturbed if my judgement should often agree with that of good critics. The best is the best, though a hundred

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judges have declared it so; nor had it been any feat to search out and insert the second-rate merely because it happened to be recondite. To be sure, a man must come to such a task as mine haunted by his youth and the favourites he loved in days when he had much enthusiasm but little reading.

A deeper import  
Lurks in the legend told my infant years  
Than lies upon that truth we live to learn.

Few of my contemporaries can erase—or would wish to erase—the dye their minds took from the late Mr. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*: and he who has returned to it again and again with an affection born of companionship on many journeys must remember not only what the *Golden Treasury* includes, but the moment when this or that poem appealed to him, and even how it lies on the page. To Mr. Bullen's *Lyrics from the Elizabethan Song Books* and his other treasures I own a more advised debt. Nor am I free of obligation to anthologies even more recent—to Archbishop Trench's *Household Book of Poetry*, Mr. Locker-Lampson's *Lyra Elegantiarum*, Mr. Miles' *Poets and Poetry of the Century*, Mr. Beeching's *Paradise of English Poetry*, Mr. Henley's *English Lyrics*, Mrs. Sharp's *Lyra Celtica*, Mr. Yeats' *Book of Irish*

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*Verse*, and Mr. Churton Collins' *Treasury of Minor British Poetry*: though my rule has been to consult these after making my own choice. Yet I can claim that the help derived from them—though gratefully owned—bears but a trifling proportion to the labour, special and desultory, which has gone to the making of my book.

For the anthologist's is not quite the *dilet-tante* business for which it is too often and ignorantly derided. I say this, and immediately repent; since my wish is that the reader should in his own pleasure quite forget the editor's labour, which too has been pleasant: that, standing aside, I may believe this book has made the Muses' access easier when, in the right hour, they come to him to uplift or to console—

ἄκλειτος μὲν ἔγωγε μένοιμί κεν· ἔς δὲ καλεύντων  
Θαρήσας Μοῖσαισι σὺν ἀμετέραισιν ἰκοίμαν.

October, 1900

## PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

BY favour of the Public, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* has held its own in request for close upon forty years. The editor would stand convicted of dullness indeed if in these years he had not learnt, revising his judgement, to regret some inclusions and omissions; of indolence, moreover, the industry of scholars having rescued to light meanwhile many gems long hidden away in libraries, miscellanies, even scrap-books. In this new edition, therefore, I have risked repairing the old structure with a stone here, a tile there, and hope to have left it as weather-proof as when it was first built.

I have added a hundred-odd pages, and close upon Armistice Day 1918, admitting a few later numbers by poets who, whether consciously or not, had indicated before that date the trend of their genius. I shrank, of course, from making the book unwieldy; but in fact also I felt my judgement insecure amid post-War poetry. Although I cannot dispute against Time, this is not to admit a charge of crabbed age: since it has been my good fortune to spend the most part of these later years with the young and to share—even in some measure to encourage—their zest for experiment. The Muses' house has many mansions: their hospitality has outlived many policies of State, more than a few

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religions, countless heresies—*tamen usque recurret Apollo*—and it were profane to misdoubt the Nine as having forsaken these so long favoured islands. Of experiment I still hold myself fairly competent to judge. But, writing in 1939, I am at a loss what to do with a fashion of morose disparagement; of sneering at things long by catholic consent accounted beautiful; of scorning at ‘Man’s unconquerable mind’ and hanging up (without benefit of laundry) our common humanity as a rag on a clothes-line. Be it allowed that these present times are dark. Yet what are our poets of use—what are they *for*—if they cannot hearten the crew with auspices of daylight? In a time no less perilous Wordsworth could write

In our halls is hung  
Armoury of the invincible knights of old.

—‘armoury’, not museum-pieces, still less tear-bottles. ‘Agincourt, Agincourt, know ye not Agincourt?’.

The reader, turning the pages of this book, will find this note of valiancy—of the old Roman ‘virtue’ mated with cheerfulness—dominant throughout, if in many curious moods. He may trace it back, if he care, far behind Chaucer to the rudest beginnings of English Song. It is indigenous, proper to our native spirit, and it will endure.

A. Q.-C.

Whitsun, 1939

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**G**RATEFUL acknowledgement is here made for permission given during their lifetime to include poems by the following authors now deceased: H. C. Beeching (for two poems of his own and for his redaction of *Quia Amore Langueo*); A. C. Benson; Robert Bridges; John Davidson; Aubrey de Vere; Austin Dobson; Sir Edmund Gosse; Bret Harte; W. E. Henley; Katharine Tynan Hinkson; W. D. Howells; Andrew Lang; George Meredith; Alice Meynell; Sir Henry Newbolt; Sir Gilbert Parker; T. W. Rolleston; G. W. Russell ('Æ'); Mrs. Clement Shorter (Dora Siger-son); A. C. Swinburne; Francis Thompson; Sir William Watson; W. B. Yeats.

My thanks are also due to publishers and others for kind permission to include copyright poems by the following:

Lascelles Abercrombie: Messrs. John Lane the Bodley Head, Ltd.

William Allingham: the late Mrs. Allingham.

William Barnes: the executors.

Hilaire Belloc: Mr. Belloc and Messrs. Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd.

Laurence Binyon: Mr. Binyon.

Edmund Blunden: Mr. Blunden.

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: Sir Sydney Cockerell.

Gordon Bottomley: Mr. Bottomley.

F. W. Bourdillon: the executors.

Robert Bridges: The Clarendon Press.

Rupert Brooke (from *Poems*): the author's representatives; Messrs. Sidgwick & Jackson; Messrs. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York; Messrs. McClelland & Stewart, Toronto.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- T. E. Brown (from *Collected Poems of T. E. Brown*): the author's representatives; Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.; The Macmillan Co., New York.
- Bliss Carman: the executors.
- Mrs. Browning: the proprietors of Mr. and Mrs. Browning's copyrights and Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., Ltd.
- J. A. Chapman: Mr. Chapman.
- G. K. Chesterton: Miss Collins, Messrs. Methuen & Co., Ltd., and Messrs. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York (for 'The Rolling English Road'); Messrs. J. M. Dent & Co., Ltd. (for 'The Donkey').
- Mary Coleridge (from *Poems*): Sir Francis Newbolt and the executors of the late Sir Henry Newbolt; Messrs. Elkin Mathews.
- Padraic Colum: Mr. Colum; The Macmillan Co., New York.
- W. H. Davies: Mr. Davies; Messrs. Jonathan Cape, Ltd.; Oxford University Press, New York.
- Walter de la Mare: Mr. De La Mare.
- Lord Alfred Douglas (from *Sonnets*): Lord Alfred Douglas and Messrs. Rich & Cowan, Ltd.
- Ernest Dowson: Messrs. John Lane the Bodley Head, Ltd.
- Mary Duclaux (Darmesteter): the author.
- George du Maurier: Lady du Maurier.
- Sir Samuel Ferguson: the late Lady Ferguson.
- Edward FitzGerald: the late William Aldis Wright and Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.
- James Elroy Flecker: Messrs. Martin Secker & Warburg, Ltd.
- Norman Gale: Mr. Gale.
- Oliver St. John Gogarty: Mr. Gogarty.
- Julian Grenfell: Lord and Lady Desborough.
- Thomas Hardy: the executrix; Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.; The Macmillan Co., New York.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Ralph Hodgson: Mr. Hodgson; Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.; The Macmillan Co., New York.  
G. M. Hopkins: the Oxford University Press.  
Lord Houghton: the Marquis of Crewe.  
A. E. Housman (from *Last Poems* and *A Shropshire Lad*): the literary executors; Messrs. Henry Holt, Inc., New York.  
Dr. Douglas Hyde: Dr. Hyde.  
Selwyn Image: the executors.  
Jean Ingelow: Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd.  
Lionel Johnson: Messrs. Elkin Mathews & Marrot, Ltd.  
James Joyce (from *Collected Poems*): Mr. Joyce; Messrs. Faber & Faber, Ltd.; The Viking Press, New York.  
Rudyard Kipling (from *Rewards and Fairies*): Mrs. Kipling; Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.; Messrs. Doubleday Doran & Co.; The Macmillan Co. of Canada, Ltd.  
Hon. Emily Lawless: Hon. Kathleen Lawless.  
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John Masefield (from *The Collected Poems of John Masefield*): Mr. Masefield; Messrs. Wm. Heinemann, Ltd.; The Macmillan Co., New York.  
George Meredith: Messrs. Constable & Co., Ltd., and Messrs. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.  
Thomas Sturge Moore: Mr. Moore.  
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Sir Henry Newbolt (from *Poems New and Old*): Sir Francis Newbolt and the executors of the late Sir Henry Newbolt.  
Alfred Noyes: Mr. Noyes.  
Arthur O'Shaughnessy: Messrs. Chatto & Windus, Ltd.  
Wilfrid Owen: Mrs. Owen; Messrs. Chatto & Windus, Ltd.; The Viking Press, New York.  
H. E. Palmer: Mr. Palmer.  
Eden Phillpotts: Mr. Phillpotts.  
Stephen Phillips: Messrs. John Lane the Bodley Head, Ltd.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- William Philpot: the executor.  
W. B. Rands: Messrs. John Lane the Bodley Head, Ltd.  
Ernest Rhys: Mr. Rhys.  
Christina Rossetti: Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.  
John Ruskin: Mr. George Allen.  
George William Russell ('Æ'): Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd., The Macmillan Co., New York.  
Siegfried Sassoon: Mr. Sassoon; Messrs. Wm. Heinemann, Ltd.  
W. B. Scott: the executors.  
Walter C. Smith: Messrs. Jackson, Son, & Co., Ltd., Glasgow.  
Charles Sorley: Mrs. Sorley; Cambridge University Press.  
James Stephens: Mr. Stephens; Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.; The Macmillan Co., New York.  
R. L. Stevenson: the executors; Messrs. Chatto & Windus, Ltd.; Messrs. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.  
A. C. Swinburne: Messrs. Wm. Heinemann, Ltd.  
Frederick Tennyson: the executors.  
Lord Tennyson (from *Works of Alfred Tennyson*): the author's representative; Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.; The Macmillan Co., New York.  
Edward Thomas (from *Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*): Mrs. Edward Thomas and Messrs. Faber & Faber, Ltd.  
Francis Thompson: Mr. Wilfrid Meynell.  
James Thomson: the late Bertram Dobell.  
F. Herbert Trench: Messrs. Jonathan Cape, Ltd.  
Thomas Traherne: the late Bertram Dobell.  
C. T. Turner: Sir Franklyn Lushington.  
Charles Williams: Mr. Williams and the Oxford Univ. Press.  
Mrs. Woods: Mrs. Woods.  
W. B. Yeats (from *Collected Poems*): Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.