

Alfred Austin: The New Poet Laureate

By Hamilton W. Mabie

IT is forty-five years since Tennyson was made Poet Laureate, a stretch of time so long that, to the great majority of readers of English poetry, it seems as if the great poet and the great place were indivisible. Nothing shows more clearly the national and representative character of Tennyson's poetry than the splendid tradition which he has created about the Laureateship. He has so exalted the place that men have forgotten that it is merely an official position; they have come to regard it as formal recognition of primacy among contemporary singers. As the crowning of Petrarch was simply a public recognition of a genius which had already thrown its spell over Italy, so we have come to think of the Laureate as a child of the Muses rather than an appointee of the English Prime Minister. The vacant place confirmed the general impression; the golden crown was above the grasp of any living singer. Lord Salisbury has rudely dispelled the illusion by a selection which compels us to remember that of the fourteen men who have been Laureates only four have been singers of high rank; four others have been men of respectable gifts and achievements; six have been minor poets of such slender talent that they have been forgotten. Ben Jonson, Dryden, Wordsworth, and Tennyson seem, in the long historical perspective, to have happened among the Laureates rather than to have been of them; the lines of Olympian descent and of official recognition have four times run parallel, but for the greater part they have had widely different directions.

Mr. Alfred Austin carries us back, not to Davenant and Colley Cibber and the singers of the second grade of Laureates, but to Eusden and Pye, poets of the lower rank—the rank from which the official singers have usually been taken. And yet Mr. Austin is an English gentleman of culture, dignity, and ability; a man of scholarly tastes and attainment, of high character, and of unquestioned ability. He does not lack talent, but he lacks the kind of talent which the world has come to associate with the position to which he has been called. He is essentially a prose writer, and it has been his ill fortune to be thrust into a place which two great poets have held in succession. His clear-cut face expresses virility, decision, energy; but there is no imagination in it. It is the face of a strenuous rather than of a spontaneous man; of a poet who has formed himself by deliberate and laborious effort rather than one who has had the help of heaven in following the lines of his own inclination. All that high aims, hard work, a wholesome life, and an honorable ambition can accomplish in a man to whom the higher gifts have been denied has been wrought in Mr. Austin; but the ease, the spontaneity, the freshness, and the magical charm of the poet he has never compassed. They are beyond him; in spite of all his striving and his painstaking effort he remains an artisan,

unable to cross the invisible line which separates the man at work from the man at play, the craftsman from the artist.

Carefully educated, not in the historic English schools, but in Catholic institutions, taking his degree at the London University, called to the Bar at the Inner Temple, forsaking the law at an early age for the more congenial work of the pen, a writer of verse since his eighteenth year, a journalist of skill and intelligence, Mr. Austin has come to the full maturity of his sixtieth year with a very honorable record of work, which is widely respected but which has never set the pulse beating or the imagination aflame. A stout Conservative of the Tory type, he has felt the charm of English scenery, history, and life in their imposing and impressive attitudes. He is well equipped to write an ode on the death of a Prime Minister or the

birth of an heir to the throne, but he has never touched the heart of the English people. He has, it is true, written a number of short lyrics which have some singing quality in them, touches of ease and abandon such as a poet by the grace of God always has at command. It ought to be added that he has also feeling; indeed, feeling is his truest gift. But it is significant that even his smoothest and sweetest verse has never found lodgment in the memory of his readers, and the men are probably few who can recall a line of his writing. His love of nature is sincere and intelligent, but the magic of English skies and woods never steeped his lines in the enchantment which lies on Wordsworth's "Daffodils." In the expression of this love he is always self-contained and conventional. He has never felt the throb of passion which Wordsworth knew. He is always rational and sophisticated; his contact with nature is always through the medium of thought, as the first line of the verses



ALFRED AUSTIN

entitled "A Birthday" shows:

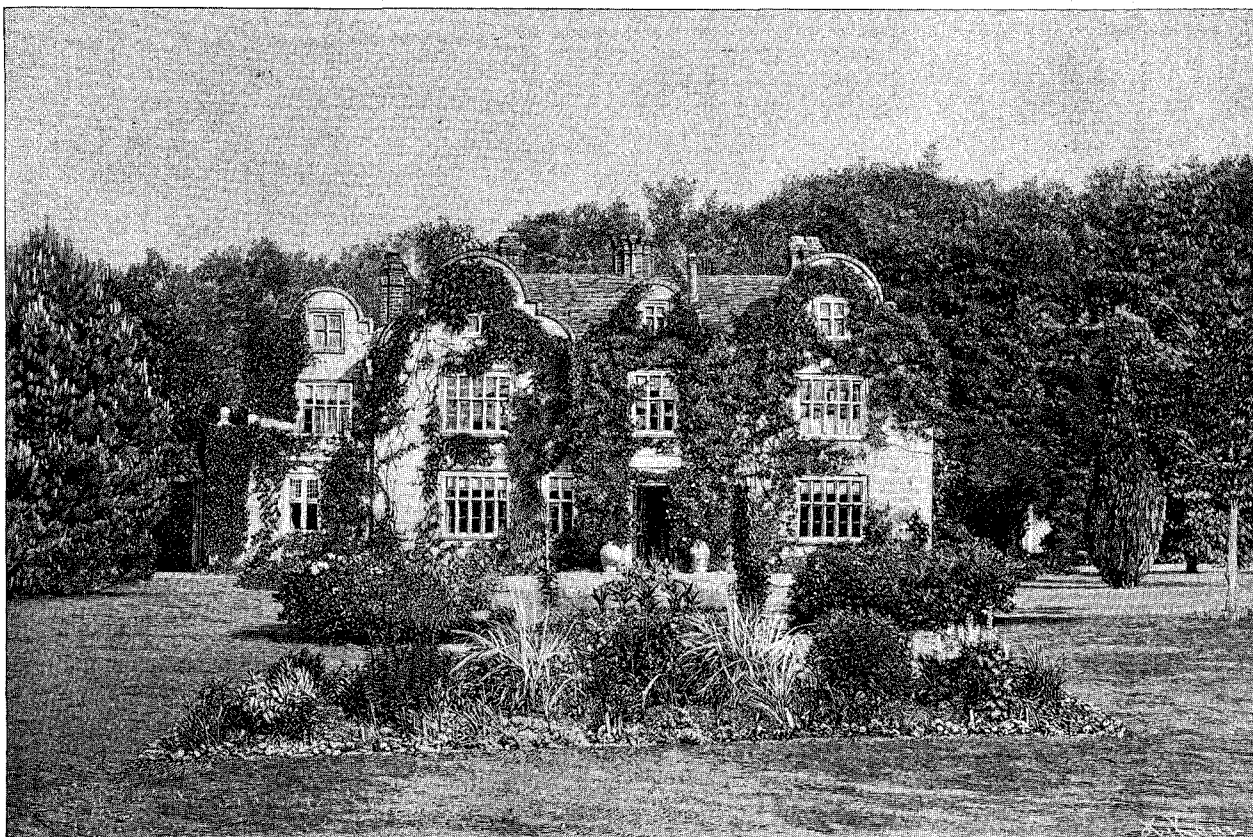
I love to think, when first I woke
Into this wondrous world,
The leaves were fresh on elm and oak,
And hawthorn laced and pearled.

The earliest sound that greeted me
Was the ousel's ringing tone;
The earliest sight, lambs frisking free
Round barked oaks newly thrown.

The gray-green elder whitened slow
As in my crib I slept;
And merles to wonder stilled my woe
When I awoke and wept.

When held up to the window-pane,
What fixed my baby stare?
The glory of the glittering rain,
And newness everywhere.

It is Mr. Austin's misfortune that, while he can write



SWINFORD HOUSE, ALFRED AUSTIN'S HOME IN KENT

about the glory and the newness of the world, he cannot make us see and feel them. Mr. Watson has said of him that he "may, in a special sense, be styled the Laureate of the English seasons," and it certainly is true that, in picturing the changes of the year and expressing the spirit of the seasons, Mr. Austin is at his best. The following lines have been widely quoted, and come very near the felicity and freshness of poetry:

I.

The Spring-time, O the Spring-time!
 Who does not know it well?
 When the little birds begin to build,
 And the buds begin to swell.
 When the sun with the clouds plays hide-and-seek,
 And the lambs are bucking and bleating,
 And the color mounts to the maiden's cheek,
 And the cuckoo scatters greeting;
 In the Spring-time, joyous Spring-time!

II.

The Summer, O the Summer!
 Who does not know it well?

When the ringdoves coo the long day through,
 And the bee refills his cell.
 When the swish of the mower is heard at morn,
 And we all in the woods go roaming,
 And waiting is over and love is born,
 And shy lips meet in the gloaming;
 In the Summer, ripening Summer!

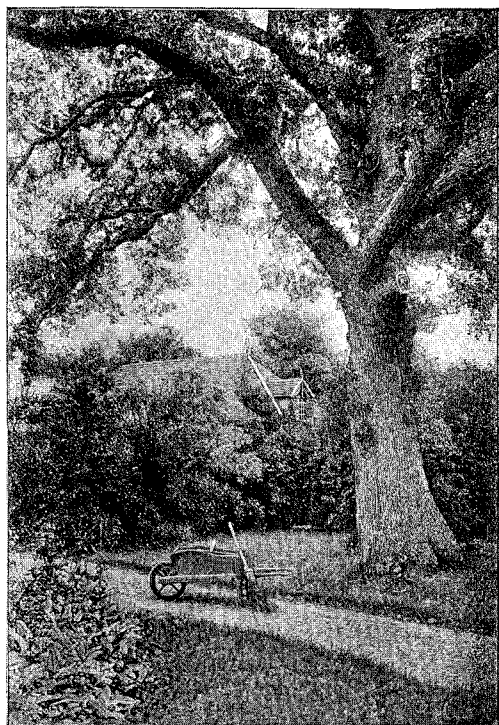
III.

The Autumn, O the Autumn!
 Who does not know it well?
 When the leaf turns brown, and the mast drops down,
 And the chestnut splits its shell.
 When we muse o'er the days that have gone before,
 And the days that will follow after,
 When the grain lies deep on the winnowing-floor,
 And the plump gourd hangs from the rafter;
 In the Autumn, thoughtful Autumn!

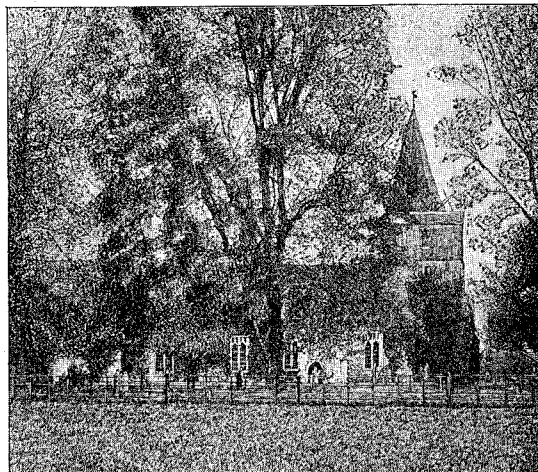
IV.

The Winter, O the Winter!
 Who does not know it well?
 When, day after day, the fields stretch gray.
 And the peewit wails on
 the fell.
 When we close up the
 crannies and shut
 out the cold,
 And the wind sounds
 hoarse and hollow,
 And our dead loves sleep
 in the churchyard
 mould,
 And we feel that we
 soon shall follow;
 In the Winter,
 mournful Winter!

The range of Mr.
 Austin's ambition is indicated
 by the long list
 of his published works.
 In verse alone many
 volumes have come



IN "THE GARDEN THAT I LOVE"



VILLAGE CHURCH NEAR ALFRED AUSTIN'S HOME



BEN JONSON
Poet Laureate 1619-1637
By permission of D. G. Francis

from his tireless hand, and of these four are devoted to long and elaborate poems. Such titles as "The Human Tragedy," "Savonarola: A Tragedy," "The Tower of Babel: A Celestial Love Drama," "Fortunatus, the Pessimist," "Prince Lucifer," suggest the gravity of the themes with which Mr. Austin has dealt and the seriousness with which he has taken himself and his work.¹ Seriousness is the note of great poetry, but it is also the note of a great deal of mechanical verse. Both Wordsworth and Tennyson took themselves, as we say, very seriously; but so also did Mr. Tupper and Mr. Bailey.



JOHN DRYDEN
Poet Laureate 1670-1700

Mr. Austin is a careful, conscientious, and often skillful workman; he understands the technical side of his craft; but he has neither the intellectual force which gives long poems their architectural strength and beauty, nor the freshness and variety of touch which lends continuous charm to massive structure. Like Keats's friend, the ambitious painter Hayden, Mr. Austin has epic hopes and desires with only a lyric gift of very slender substance. He is best in his shorter and less pretentious pieces. Love of nature and love of country are familiar notes in these lyrics. He shares with his greater brethren that national feeling which is rarely lacking in poets of force and originality. The England of which Shakespeare sang with such majesty of epithet and adjective—"this sceptered isle," "this teeming womb of royal kings," "this seat of Mars;" which evoked from Tennyson so many noble lines illustrative of civic progress and of the continuity of national growth and power, appeals also to Mr. Austin. But it is not the heroic England of Shakespeare nor the progressive England of Tennyson of which he sings; it is imperial England of world-wide trade and sea-wide supremacy:

I see the deep-plowed furrows of the main
Bristling with harvest; funnel, and keel, and shroud,
Heaving and hurrying hither through gale and cloud,
Winged by their burdens; argosies of grain,
Flocks of strange breed, and herds of Southern strain,
Fantastic stuffs and fruits of tropic bloom,
Antarctic fleece and equatorial spice,
Cargoes of cotton, and flax, and silk, and rice,
Food for the hearth, and staples for the loom;

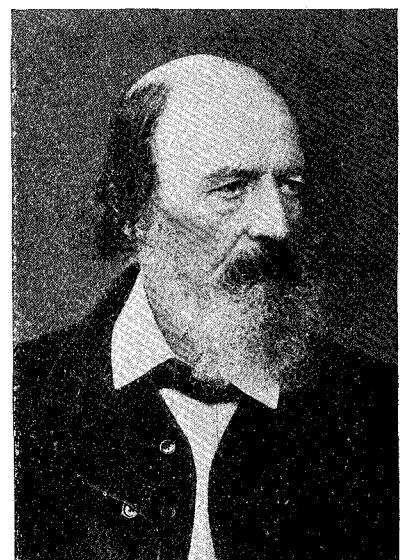
Huge vats of sugar, casks of wine and oil,
Summoned from every sea to one sole shore
By Empire's scepter; the converging store
Of Trade's pacific universal spoil.
And, heaving and hurrying hitherward to bring
Tribute from every zone, they lift their voices,
And, as a strong man revels and rejoices,
They loudly and lustily chant, and this the song they sing.

Mr. Austin's work as a journalist has been varied and ardent. He reported the Franco-German War and the last great Vatican Council for the "Standard," and he has long contributed editorially to this Conservative organ. He has written three novels, which, in this country at least, have attracted no attention. It was as a critic of trenchant style that he first became known in England. The essays on "The Poetry of the Period" had an audacity and dash which stimulated curiosity. They were keen and epigrammatic, and they dealt frankly with great reputations. Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, and Morris were sharply called to account by a writer who sounded a clarion note in behalf of virility, passion, stir, and power. It is singular that when this voice crying in the wilderness of conventionality began to chaunt the burden of its own prophecy it was devoid of every tone which it had demanded from other voices; of all the voices of the time which have tried to sing, it has been most tame, unimpassioned, and mechanical. In two books of prose, "The Garden That I Love" and "In Monica's Garden," Mr.

Austin makes his nearest approach to literature; for in these books he writes of things he knows and loves; of flowers, hedges, secluded walks, leafy retreats, the stillness of afternoons in old gardens, the beauty of summer on ancient sward. His tastes are the tastes of a cultivated English gentleman, born to intelligence, integrity, and the opulence of an old and ripe civilization. He loves the beautiful English scenery, and he glories in the splendid force and achievements of the English race. He has had long practice with the pen, and he is an excellent craftsman. All this must be said of the new Laureate. He is well furnished with all the external qualities which ought to go with his office. He lacks, however, the one quality which would have given official recognition confirmation by the inexorable Muses—the gift of genius.



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
Poet Laureate 1843-1850



ALFRED TENNYSON
Poet Laureate 1850-1892

¹ Mr. Austin's books are published in this country by Macmillan & Co., of New York. For the photograph from which our portrait of Mr. Austin is made we are indebted to the "Literary Digest."

From Atlanta to the Sea

I.—Atlanta and Macon¹

By Willis John Abbot



THE traveler who approaches Atlanta from the north and finds himself suddenly whirled into the center of a great and populous city, with electric cars clanging in every direction, a great hotel such as might stand on Fifth Avenue, New York, towering beside the smoky, squalid railway station, with a din of traffic over the granite pavement of the streets that fairly drowns the rumble of the trains and the clangor of the engines—a traveler in such case is almost certain to ask, as I have heard during the past six months a score or more inquire, how it came about that a great city and a modern city had been set down at such a point. If he came from any northern point to the westward of Atlanta, he passed through Chattanooga, and from that town to Atlanta saw



A REMINISCENCE OF THE OLD SOUTH

much to remind him of the fratricidal strife which is not forgotten though the bitterness of its memory has died away. The droning voice of the conductor calling the stations seemed that of one reading a page of history. Where the train plunged through the range of mountains dividing the Atlantic from the Mississippi watershed, the passenger, if observant, might see one mute reminder of the days of war, one evidence that a railroad company can, on occasion, be sentimental, for there in the narrow cut is a lonely grave, kept green by railroad hands, and marked with a simple tablet inscribed "To an unknown hero." One of Sherman's men lies buried there, and you will note as clear a tone of pathos in the voice of the Southerner who may point out the little mound as in that of any Northern man who speaks of it. Then from the car windows the passenger can see Rocky Face, Kenesaw, and Stone Mountains, and hears men speak of Resaca, Allatoona, and Marietta, but the suggestions of war-time are only in the names and in the mountains and rivers—nature's imperishable monuments. Scan the face of the country as he will, the most keen-sighted traveler on this railway, which traverses every inch of the pathway of Sherman toward Atlanta, will find no trace of the war.

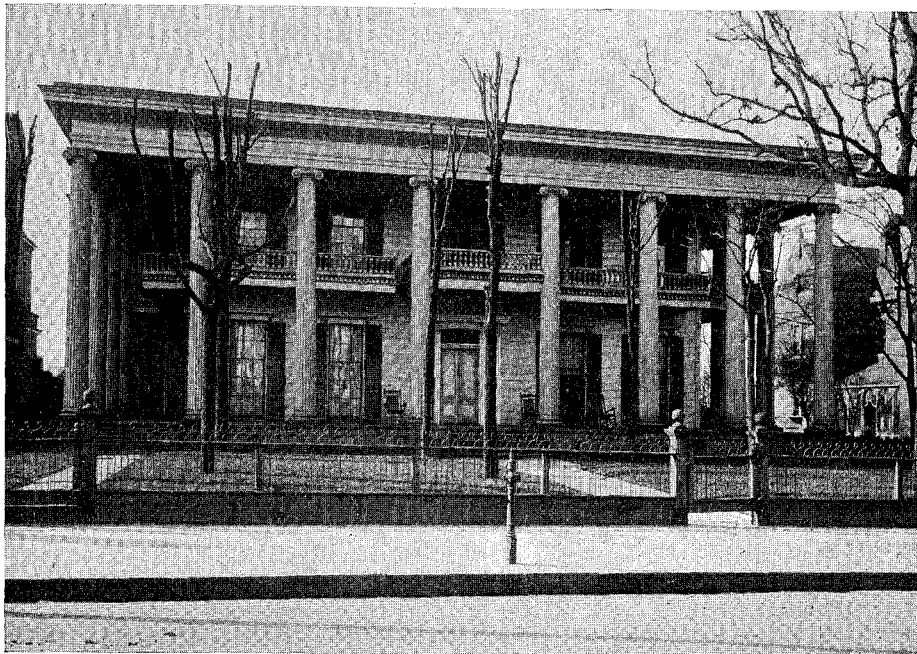
¹In the series of three illustrated articles of which this is the first, Mr. Abbot will trace the present conditions in that part of the New South falling within the route of Sherman's famous march "from Atlanta to the Sea."

Nature has healed the scarred fields and forests. Frost and rain have leveled the earthworks, or kindly foliage and vines have covered them. And a new spirit bred of new conditions has repaired whatever damages the little hamlets and villages along the railway suffered. Nor has the kindly hand of time been less successful in removing from the minds of men the memorials of war-time hatreds. Last summer I traversed that railroad in a car full of Sherman's veterans, fresh from the G. A. R. encampment at Louisville, and eagerly pointing out to each other old landmarks. At every station was the usual throng of idlers. Nowhere was there a sign of disrespect for or aversion to the blue coats and brass buttons, and at more than one stopping-place the invaders were greeted with cheers. The nearest approach to a hostile voice was that of a coal-black "mammy" who alternately berated the "Yankees" and besought them to buy her fried chicken.

But I digress. Though there is much in the country about Atlanta to interest the traveler, there is nothing to suggest the reason why a town left prostrate and in ruins little over thirty years ago should have since grown from barely 12,000 to more than 110,000, and, what is more, should have discarded every characteristic of an easy-going Southern village and taken on the appearance and manners of a bustling Northern city. For, even at the risk of offending local pride, it must be insisted that Atlanta is essentially Northern or perhaps Northwestern. It is more like Chicago or Minneapolis than it is like its neighbor Savannah. It is Northern in its rush and hurry, in its "strictly business" air, in the opportunities it offers to newcomers and the eagerness with which it invites newcomers, in its smokiness, in its architecture, in its unpicturesqueness, and in its push. Unlike a good many Northern, or rather Northwestern, cities, Atlanta has proved its capacity to enjoy that most dangerous of municipal dissipations, a "boom," and recover almost without sign of disaster.

I put to a lifelong resident of Atlanta the almost universal questions: "What has made your city? Why does it stand here in the midst of a country not overpopulous, gifted undoubtedly with natural resources of unusual richness, but not needing a market-place of 110,000 people? Why are you growing at double the pace of Georgia's seaport, Savannah?"

His response sounded queerly, coming from that source. "Sherman made Atlanta," said he; "Sherman taught all



LEYDEN HOUSE, THE HEADQUARTERS OF GENERAL SHERMAN IN ATLANTA