

# ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

## Hymnwriter 1809-1892

[Return to contents](#)

Born 6<sup>th</sup> August 1809 at Somersby Rectory in Lincolnshire, the third son of the rector G.C. Tennyson LL.D. He was educated at Louth Grammar School and Trinity College, Cambridge. Suffered from poverty, ill-health and bad eyesight beset his early career.

1850

Marries Emily Sellwood and so attaining happiness  
'In Memoriam' published thus acquiring confidence  
Became Poet Laureate thereby gaining pre-eminence

1853

Visit Charles and Mrs Kingsley at Eversley - wives become friends  
Alfred and Emily discover Isle of Wight and Farringford is leased

1862 summoned to Osborne. Queen Victoria moved by the dedication to the Prince Consort of the third edition of Idylls that year. The correspondence lasted between then until his death

1869 Tennyson begins to learn Hebrew at 60 yrs in contemplation of a metrical version of the book of Job.



But by now Freshwater Bay, at first a mere gap in the cliffs, was showing symptoms of becoming a gay and very promising seaside resort, while Freshwater itself, over the hill, had blossomed out into an hotel area. The amenities of Farringford were seriously threatened by "roofs of slates hideousness", and so from this year onwards he spent the summer and early autumn at a second home he acquired at Aldworth, Haslemere, Surrey.

1884 A peerage was conferred on him in 1884 with the title of Baron Tennyson of Aldworth and Farringford. Tennyson possessed an almost feminine sympathy for the tender delicacies of the home. It was the slow movement of Lymington harbourmouth which inspired what is perhaps the finest of all his references to the sea:

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam

When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

But the story of "Crossing the Bar", written in the poet's eighty-first year, will bear telling in full. It was October 1889, and Tennyson was recovering from rheumatic gout. The necessary restrictions imposed by the doctors began to chafe him and he would relieve himself by grumbling to his nurse, Emma Durham. One day she scolded him sharply for this, saying that instead of complaining he ought to write a hymn to show his gratitude for the marvellous recovery. During the twenty-minute crossing over to Yarmouth from Lymington, on his way from Aldworth to Farringford, there came to him this most famous of all his lyrics. He unfolded a used envelope and jotted down the sixteen short lines on the inside of it, but showed them to no one at the time. That evening when Nurse Durham went to light the candles in his study at dusk, she found him sitting at his desk, with a paper before him, "Will this do for you, old woman", he asked, remembering what she had said to him about writing a hymn of thanksgiving for his recovery - and he recited the poem, almost in the form in which it is now printed. The lines came as a great shock to her, for, as she listened, it seemed to her that he had written his own death song. Without a word, she turned and ran from the room. When she came back a few minutes afterwards, he was still sitting silent in the darkness. After dinner that night he showed the lines to his son Hallam, who said: "That is the crown of your life's work". He replied: "It came in a moment". He explained the "Pilot" as "That Divine and Unseen Who is always guiding us". A few days before his death on 6 October 1892, Tennyson said to his son: "Mind you put 'Crossing the Bar' at the end of all editions of my poems". "Crossing the Bar" was sung at Tennyson's funeral in Westminster Abbey.

Probably no poem in our language ever created so profound impression on its first appearance. During the weeks succeeding its publication it was quoted in countless newspapers and periodicals, and read from thousands of pulpits in church and chapel throughout the country. In all the years during which he had been the acknowledged poet of the people, no poem of his had spoken so directly and so intimately to the hearts of his countrymen. Certainly it set a crown upon his lifetime's effort. Its simple dignity is yet consonant with a fine patterning and subtle variety. Two sentences, each of two stanzas, each beginning with an exclamation which is vibrant rather than exclamatory and whose vibrations then die away. From the many tender adjectives of the first two stanzas, the poet moves through the third stanza, where there is only the ghostly adjective in "evening bell" (echoing "evening star"), to the last stanza, where there are no adjectives at all. Instead a final destination which is also home, and a vision that is also a simple sight, without epithets, face to face® Six times it speaks of "I" or "me", and yet no poem was ever less self-absorbed. And it is the single occurrence of the word "our" which gently but inexorably claims the poem and which vindicates Tennyson's unclamorous claim to the central humanity of a great poet. He died on 6 October 1892.

## SOME WORKS

### Strong Son of God, immortal Love

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone embrace,  
Believing when we cannot prove:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust;  
Thou madest man, he knows not why;  
He thinks he was not made to die;  
And thou hast made him, thou art just.

Thou seemest human and divine,  
The highest, holiest, manhood thou;  
Our wills are ours, we know not how;  
Our wills are ours, to make them thine.

Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be:  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou O Lord, are more than they.

### Strong Son of God, immortal Love

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, who have not seen Thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove;

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust;  
Thou madest man, he knows not why:  
He thinks he was not made to die;  
And Thou hast made him: Thou art just.

Thou seemest human and divine,  
The highest, holiest manhood, Thou:  
Our wills are ours, we know not how;  
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.

Our little systems have their day:  
They have their day and cease to be:  
They are but broken lights of Thee,  
And Thou, O Lord, are more than they.

Sunset and evening star,

Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,  
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell  
When I embark;  
For though from out our bourn of time and place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar.



Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

Ring out wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bell, and let him die.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,  
those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

[Return to contents](#)

[Biography and Further Information](#)