The Annual Tennyson Memorial Address 2023

'On Tennyson's Legacy and His Family's Archive: Unique Opportunities in The Tennyson Research Centre'

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Friendship and the significance of friendships, those human relationships that continuously always enrich our private and professional lives, have been constantly on my mind as I prepared this 2023 Tennyson Memorial Address because of the theme I chose for this occasion. Alfred Tennyson's legacy is richly preserved in the archival material and volumes conserved in the Tennyson Research Centre (TRC) in Lincoln, a place of unique scholarly opportunities that I also value as a space for collaborations with colleagues and students. Working in the TRC, I have discovered a very human portrait of Tennyson and of his family, especially of Emily and Hallam Tennyson, who secured the first stage of the Victorian poet's legacy. In the TRC there are family libraries of Alfred Tennyson, of his father, G. C. Tennyson and of his brother, Charles Tennyson Turner, which open doors into their reading, as well as their writing, and into practices of reading and publishing of their times. The TRC also conserves wider connections to Tennyson's friendships, guests, and social interactions, and responses to his work, which at times are only sketched in journals and letters. They give a glimpse of the poet as the friend, the recipient, and the celebrity to whom readers from the whole British Empire write and send him tokens and samples of their own work. In this family archive, the projects I worked on turned my colleagues into friends. It is therefore fitting for my address to begin with the words of a long-time friend of Tennyson, James Spedding (1808-1881), and then continue to reflect on Tennyson's legacy and the TRC through the theme of friendship.

In 1835, writing to William Bodham Donne (1809-1882), Spedding remarked that Tennyson was, 'a man always discontent with the Present till it has become the Past, and then he yearns towards it, and worships it and, not only worships it, but is discontented because it is past' (in Tennyson 1981, 132). If indeed, Tennyson was, as his friend suggests, a man looking forward to the present turning into the past, he would be pleased to know that his poetry and life as a celebrated Poet Laureate of the Victorian age have become the past, the nineteenth century, that historical period which still resonates in our present: so many scholars and writers rethink, reframe, reconsider and renegotiate the nineteenth century to understand ways to transform and sustain how to be human in our time. As an academic who studies Victorian literature, I am certainly familiar with the value Victorian poetry has in understanding human experiences and creative expression in the nineteenth century, and I recognise the central role Tennyson has, both in terms of his work and his life, in facilitating a wider, more complex and multifaceted

appreciation of a historical period when so much changed because of those who, having a privileged social and financial status, believed in the value of progress, innovation, and the entrepreneurial spirit. Holding the position of Poet Laureate from 1850 to his death in 1892, Tennyson marked historical moments of Queen Victorian's reign but, more remarkably he also wrote about those people who experienced those moments reported in historical records. He aimed to capture human emotions, thoughts, and feelings, with a sensitive awareness of the unlimited spectrums and endless depths of being human. In a lyrical language that continues to inspire writers, artists, and readers more generally in this twenty-first century, Tennyson's poems express his unwavering faith in the value of poetry as a means of knowing and understanding what it is to be human, and as a tool of dialogue and conversation that reaches many and diverse audiences across time and space.

Today, Tennyson's lines permeate the English language. Speakers may not be aware that they are citing them, but his verses are echoed in the popular media too. The final lines from 'Ulysses', for example, were most famously recited by Dame Judy Dench as the character M. in the James Bond movie, *Skyfall* (2012). His verses are markers in the British urban and rural landscape: they can be found in the British Museum in London and in the residential area developed from the Olympic village constructed for the London 2012 Summer Olympics in Stratford, East London. They are also engraved in two memorials of the nineteenth-century Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin: one by Matthew Noble in Westminster Abbey and one by Charles Bacon which commemorates his life nearer Bag Enderby, in Spilsby, where Franklin was born. The memorial in Westminster Abbey has an epitaph that Tennyson composed purposely for the monument.[1] This epitaph is also engraved in the kerbstone on which the monument in Spilsby stands. In his native Lincolnshire, more recently Tennyson's verses appeared in Louth, where he went to grammar school from 1816 to 1820. They are carved in a Redwood heart, a wooden sculpture by Lincolnshire woodcarver Nigel Sardeson, which contributes to this year's St. Barnabas Hospice HeART trail. Sardeson carved this sculpture out of a piece of giant redwood timber he reclaimed from a Lincoln tree that fell because of subsidence. In this case too Sardeson chose a line from Tennyson's 'Ulysses', a poem that, like *In Memoriam*, was prompted by the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam. This time, the chosen quotation is line eighteen, 'I am part of all that I have met', which appears to show how Tennyson's lyrical attention to the natural world can voice our society's need to reassess the relationship between us, human beings, and the planet

[1] They are as follows: NOT here! the white North has thy bones; and thou, / Heroic sailor-soul, / Art passing on thine happier voyage now / Toward no earthly pole.

on which we live. The growing number of publications on his poetry and ecology through the lenses of ecocriticism continue to prove the relevance of his legacy today.

The statue of John Franklin in Spilsby is of interest to me because it represents the ways in which Alfred Tennyson's family was connected to the Lincolnshire communities and the history of the county. Franklin was born in Spilsby in 1786 and his sister Sarah was the mother of Tennyson's wife, Emily Sellwood. As her letters demonstrate, Emily Tennyson supported her aunt Franklin's attempts to secure 'a statue of Uncle Franklin by way of memorial in Lincoln Cathedral' (1974, 106). Emily Tennyson hoped that the sculptor Thomas Woolner, one of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, would create it. This wished-for statue was never made; however, the grounds of Lincoln Cathedral host instead another impressive statue, that of her husband wearing his famous cloak and holding his broad-brimmed hat in one hand and flowers 'pluck[ed] from the crannied wall'. A plaque on the stone plinth of the statue reproduces 'Flower in the crannied wall', the poem that inspired George Fredrick Watts's thoughtful portrayal of his friend with his dog, Karenina, which very symbolically captures Tennyson's illustrious career. As Anne Thackeray Ritchie recalls, the poet himself recounted how his first poetic lines were stimulated by garden flowers and prompted by his older brother's dare 'one Sunday at Louth' (Thackeray Ritchie 1892, 7). Similarly, in this monument we can image 'the flowers in the garden, the verses, the little poet with waiting eyes, and the young brother scanning the lines' (7) and the friend that Watts knew well, who, in 'To Ulysses', immortalised his trees at Farringford, on the Isle of Wight.

My favourite view of Lincoln Cathedral is from the spot where Watts's statue of Tennyson stands. Watts died just after completing this project and never saw it in the beautiful grounds where it still marks the legacy of Tennyson's poetry in the county's heritage. In my opinion, it celebrates two of the themes that studying Tennyson and his circle: firstly, the traces Tennyson, his family, and his friends left in the Lincolnshire landscape. Secondly, the remarkable contribution of nineteenth-century women to literature and the arts that is still to be recovered and celebrated. So many are the women whose life and work I discovered because of their connections and intersections with the international network that originates from Tennyson in the nineteenth century. Watts's statue of Tennyson at Lincoln Cathedral, for example, is not only a testament to the friendship between these two maestri, whose work stretched many decades and today still influences our comprehension of the arts and their development in the Victorian period. It is also evidence of the artistry of Mary Seton Watts (née Fraser Tyler, 1849-1938), Watts' second wife, a designer and craftswoman. When Watts died his Tennyson statue was missing the little flower from the crannied wall that the poet observes; there was no model for it,

so Mary Watts designed it in metal and worked on it for days in October 1904, as her diary shows (Watts 2016), to complete the monument. This testimony to the creative partnership between Mary and George Fredrick Watts is an apt reminder of the affinity of minds between Emily and Alfred Tennyson that is corroborated by Emily's life writing, as I will soon explain further.

Since I have moved to Lincolnshire, my interest in the ways in which the legacy of Alfred Tennyson connects with the county, its landscape and history has grown and deepened. Thanks to the work and initiatives of local historical and literary associations, I now envisage a map of a literary Lincolnshire that originates with Tennyson in the nineteenth century and flexibly develops a palimpsest of past and present layers. Tennyson leads me into pathways to other Lincolnshire writers and intellectuals who bring to the fore a Lincolnshire heritage that must be explored further. I understand how in the words of Richard Whittern, Tennyson 'created an identity for a region previously unappreciated' (in Tennyson 1999, 5). Tennyson grew up in this landscape whose features he 'invested with metaphoric meaning' (5). Furthermore, how remarkable it is to be here in Bag Enderby, where his father was rector, to commemorate his legacy in the landscape that Tennyson enriched with lyricism, on his actual birthday (Alfred Tennyson was born on 6 August 1809 in Somersby). In this place and on this commemorative occasion, we are especially reminded of the ways in which Tennyson and his family have enriched the Lincolnshire landscape and history, of how, then and now, people visit the county because of his poetry. As a member of the Tennyson Society and the head of an English department in a local university, I am keen for undergraduate and postgraduate students to discover Tennyson's poetry through Lincolnshire's landscape and for them to associate their literary studies and time in the county with its heritage.

In the archive of Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU), which opened in 1862 as a training college for women only, I found out that, since its first principal, lectures on and readings of Tennyson's poetry were regularly organised, and by the first half of the twentieth century, staff and students commemorated Lincolnshire's Tennyson Day. These institutional memories have inspired me and, though I have not been able to reinstate a Tennyson's Day yet, I have established a public National Poetry Day event that, since 2014, celebrates poetic lines, published and original, of any time and place, and the BGU Tennyson Poetry Award, which was introduced in 2015. I also developed a module at Master's level that focuses on Tennyson, his legacy and his Family's Archive. Before Covid19, this module's sessions were delivered in the Tennyson Research Centre, a space that I also associate with the Lincolnshire landscape, its history and literary heritage, and the Tennyson Society. Mindful of the wealth of unique opportunities

offered by the partnership with the Tennyson Research Centre, the module places works by Tennyson into their curatorial context and fosters students' curiosity and research skills by enabling them to engage with autobiographical and biographical material, out-of-print volumes, and manuscripts, as well as material objects collected in the TRC, such as photographs and illustrations. Through these materials, the students explore Tennyson's ideas and poetic techniques, and interrogate his legacy. The module in fact aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of his literary career development and reputation through a study of his family's archive and how this has created his literary persona for future generations. The module contextualises Tennyson historically as a poet and a celebrity that people wanted to meet and whose work had proud place in Victorian homes. It also presents the network of artists, intellectuals, and publishers the Poet Laureate and his wife, Emily, knew and with whom they corresponded. This Victorian network was the initial reason for conducting my research in the TRC.

Traces of the Tennysons' circle of writers, artists, publishers, politicians, intellectuals, and the British Royal Family can be found in the Research Centre and they come alive in the most unexpected way. Framed by his family, the archive secured Tennyson's legacy highlighting the historical and international significance of his work. At the centre of it, I place not only Tennyson's poetry but also the writings of Emily Tennyson and the family atmosphere she crafted for her family and for the Poet Laureate's creativity. In Emily's letters and journals there are lively, delicate, and funny sketches of family life that show the importance of domestic life for the sustainability of the poet's production. We grasp the brilliant talents of this woman who created an environment in which her family could flourish and the Poet Laureates' legacy be secured. However, when I first visited the Tennyson Research Centre, I also looked for other women who were part of the Tennysons' circle, knew him before he married, and continued their friendship with him. There is no strong evidence of them left in the archival material. Reading the correspondence and autobiographies of Victorian women writers who have been the subjects of my research, I have discovered other perspectives on Tennyson's life. Janet Ross (née Duff Gordon, 1842-1927), for instance, was present at his funeral and had childhood memories of him. In her memoirs, she defines him as 'rather gruff and monotonous' (1912, 16). Tennyson used to attend her mother's London literary salon. In *The Fourth Generation: Reminiscences by Janet Ross* (1912), Ross recalls 'how the fashionable beauties waited on him one [bringing] him a cup of tea, another press[ing] cream and sugar upon him, another fresh cakes or bread-and-butter' (1912, 40). She writes of a holiday at Freshwater in 1858 when she 'became very fond of' Emily Tennyson, whom she describes as being 'always patient and gentle,

thinking of others, not of herself.' (56) Ross also recalls with amusement how, during this holiday, Tennyson told her parents she was a 'clever girl, but extremely badly brought up' (56) because she refused to tie his shoestring during a walk and abruptly answered, 'No; tie your own shoe. Papa says men should wait on women, not women on men.' (56) Then, she writes, she regretted it and 'humbly tied' it (56). Ross's mother was Lucie Duff Gordon (nèe Austin, 1821-1869), an admired translator of literary and scholarly texts from the German and French, as well as being a travel writer, who is said to be among the intellectual minds that inspired *The Princess*. In her journal Emily records how Tennyson in 1851 stayed with Ross's parents, Lucie and Alexander Duff Gordon in London and their attendance at Hallam's christening on 5th October 1852. In October 1866, Emily writes, Alfred Tennyson read to her some of Lucie Duff Gordon's *Letters from Egypt*,[2] a text that was popular and critically acclaimed, and she comments on it being 'Very graphic' (1981, 254). I could not find letters or books by Duff Gordon or Ross in the TRC, but I could locate Tennyson's copy of the three-volume edition of *Characteristics of Goethe* by Sarah Austin, Lucie Duff Gordon's mother and Ross's grandmother, which is marked 'A. Tennyson Xmas Day 1838' on the half-title page of the first volume. Published for the first time in 1833, *Characteristics of Goethe* stems from Austin's translation of Johann Falk von Müller's reminiscences of the German seminal writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), and comprises relevant selected resources, including memoirs, articles, and a literature review of scholarly works on Goethe published in German.[3] It secured Austin's reputation as an excellent translator of German literature and her legacy as a central figure who, together with Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "spearheaded an industry that introduced German intellectual thought into England" (Johnston 2008, 101).

In the Tennyson's library, my research can be at times disappointing and at other times exciting; yet, I have come to realise how gaps and silences are as relevant as the material that be consulted because they reveal how the material that is collected in the TRC is the product of the choices and selection processes of family members. Furthermore, they unfold, in the words of Robert Bernard Martin, 'the complicated mind and awkward personality of one of England's greatest poets' (in Truss 2014, 41), that can be found behind the official, respectable version of his life that the archive projected. Marion Sherwood and Rosalind Boyce demonstrate such potential in *Letters and Lives of the Tennyson Women* (2022), a volume that narrates the lives of Alfred Tennyson's grandmother, her sisters, and her daughter-in-law by means of their letters, which are in the Lincolnshire Archives. This was a project started by Douglas Boyce that Rosalind and

[2] *Letters from Egypt* was firstly published in May 1865.

[3] A second edition was published in 1836 under the title *Goethe and his Contemporaries*.

Marion completed bringing to light the lives and gifts of four women who contributed to the environment in which Alfred Tennyson grew up until he left to study at the University of Cambridge. Their letters speak of the world in which the child who later became the Poet Laureate reflected on the most intimately meaningful moments in life through poetry from a very young age. His elegy for his 'Grandmamma Tennyson', written when he was sixteen years old, is a seminal example, which, Sherwood states, 'foreshadows [...] his greatest work' (2022, 208). It also demonstrates his determination, strength of character, and his life-long commitment to the value of poetry as a means of understanding human experience in the world.

I would like to conclude by returning to friendship on a more personal note. The Tennyson Research Centre has been, in my experience, a place that welcomes diverse audiences, recalling the lines from 'The Two Voices': '...let thy feet / Millenniums hence, be set / In midst of knowledge', which are engraved on the entrance floor of the Great Court in the British Museum, London. The TRC is a space of memory and scholarship in which both Victorian intellectual networks and family communities can be mapped. It is a place of dialogue and encounter where admirers of Tennyson from local and international communities meet. More significantly, it is a space that reaches beyond its walls through events, activities and projects that are designed and delivered by colleagues who forge friendships and new communities. The service of the Revd. Dr Peter Green today testifies to such friendships: the chaplain at Bishop Grosseteste University, Dr Green is a colleague and a friend. He conducted our commemorative service this year and, we hope, will continue to do so in the future. The Tennyson Research Centre is a place of value that is essential to Tennyson's legacy and that needs to remain accessible, and I am committed to working for it and its communities with Tennysonian spirit and determination.

There is a postscript that I am in need to add to this address for I would like to remember the late President of the Tennyson Society, Patrick, Lord Cormack (1939-2023), who attended the Service of Commemoration on Sunday 6th August 2023. This event became his last, as he sadly passed away on 25 February 2024, aged 84, after a severe heart attack the previous Friday. A long-standing member of the Society since its inception in 1960, Cormack was present at the historical dinner commemorating the 150th anniversary of Alfred Tennyson's birth, in the White Hart, Lincoln, in 1959 when the idea of the Society originated. In 2023, he had become the President of the Tennyson Society, and on 6th August 2023 he was privileged to welcome us to St. Margaret's Church, at Bag Enderby, as the President. He enjoyed this opportunity on a summer's day to share his love for Tennyson's poetry and his commitment to preserve Tennyson's legacy locally and nationally. It is the Tennysonian Lord Cormack who loved attending the Society's Service of Commemoration of the poet's birth in either Somersby or Bag

Enderby that I would like to remember. Cormack felt it appropriate to celebrate Tennyson's legacy in the places the poet evoked in his poetry, in the Lincolnshire landscape that was native to him too: Cormack was born in Grimsby in 1939. As Lord Lamont of Lerwick also recalled in his tribute at the funeral service in Lincoln Cathedral, if invited as a guest of Patrick Cormack and his wife Mary in Lincoln, you would be treated to a tour of Tennyson's county, the places where he grew up and practised his craft, forging a life-long poetic conversation with the natural world. Cormack, like Tennyson, had unwavering faith in the value of poetry as a means of understanding the world in which we live. His significant, vital contribution to the Tennyson Society will be forever remembered.

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