

Context: Alfred Tennyson and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'

Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892)

Alfred Tennyson was one of eight brothers and four sisters born into a large, impoverished family in Lincolnshire. His father was a clergyman who had been disinherited by his own father in favour of his younger brother.

Tennyson was plagued by the family's financial insecurities and the fear of inheriting epilepsy and poor mental health throughout his life. He was initially educated at a grammar school and at home, before studying at Cambridge University, where he became part of an elite, intellectual group called 'The Apostles'. This secret society included Arthur Hallam, who was to become his closest friend. He published his first collection of poems, written with his two elder brothers while at Cambridge, when he was just 17, but he was forced to leave university before completing his degree when his father died.

Although some of his early collections received a mixed reaction from critics, by 1842 with the two volume collection *Poems*, Tennyson firmly established himself as one of the leading poets of his generation, despite being so short-sighted that he found it difficult to read and write, and often composed poems in his head.

The death of Arthur Hallam in 1833 affected him greatly and in 1850 he wrote his famous elegy 'In Memoriam' in mourning for him. In the same year, he was appointed Poet Laureate and finally married Emily Sellwood (a woman he had been unable to marry earlier for financial reasons). His poetry was admired by both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who offered him a baronetcy which he finally accepted in 1884. He was buried in Poets' Corner, in Westminster Abbey.

'The Charge of the Light Brigade'

First published in *Maud* (1855), the poem tells the story of the failed charge of the British cavalry in the Battle of Balaclava in October 1854. Britain was fighting with France, Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire against Russian forces in the Crimean War, which was about control of the Dardanelles, a narrow sea straight in Turkey. If the Russians had power over the Dardanelles, British sea routes (and trade) would have been threatened.

Although it is unclear who was actually responsible, a cavalry group, the Light Brigade (led disastrously by Lord Cardigan who miraculously survived), was ordered to attack a very strongly defended Russian position. Part of his account to Parliament reads:

‘We advanced down a gradual descent of more than three-quarters of a mile, with the batteries vomiting forth upon us shells and shot, round and grape, with one battery on our right flank and another on the left, and all the intermediate ground covered with the Russian riflemen; so that when we came to within a distance of fifty yards from the mouths of the artillery which had been hurling destruction upon us, we were, in fact, surrounded and encircled by a blaze of fire, in addition to the fire of the riflemen upon our flanks.

As we ascended the hill the oblique fire of the artillery poured upon our rear, so that we had thus a strong fire upon our front, our flank, and our rear.

We entered the battery – we went through the battery – the two leading regiments cutting down a great number of the Russian gunners in their onset. In the two regiments which I had the honour to lead, every officer, with one exception, was either killed or wounded, or had his horse shot under him or injured. Those regiments proceeded, followed by the second line, consisting of two more regiments of cavalry, which continued to perform the duty of cutting down the Russian gunners. Then came the third line, formed of another regiment, which endeavoured to complete the duty assigned to our brigade. ...’

(Lord Cardigan’s address to the House of Commons, 29 March 1855)

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