

REVIEWS

Tennyson: To Strive, to Seek, to Find by John Batchelor. London: Chatto and Windus, 2012. 422 + xv pp. ISBN 9780701180584. £25.00.

Alfred Tennyson hated the very idea of biography. His friend Julia Margaret Cameron recalled his telling her that satisfying curiosity about the lives of famous men was tantamount to “treating them like pigs to be ripped open for the public.” In Tennyson’s case, this intense antipathy towards biographical enquiry was associated with a passionate concern for personal privacy. Realizing that he would inevitably become a biographical subject, the poet tried to keep authorship in the family by establishing his elder son, Hallam, as the prospective author of the official “life.” He also left instructions for the destruction of personal material. This new biography of the poet closes with an account of the dutiful son’s “pageant”-like account of his father’s life, of Hallam’s “intention ... to confer immortality on a great man.”

John Batchelor explores this aspect of Tennyson’s personality, his need to remain private, throughout his long life. He concludes that even the poet’s practice of reading his work aloud on social occasions was a way of escaping from the strain of conversation. Certain factors in Tennyson’s childhood contributed to this wish to retain control of his life. The fury of his father, George Clayton Tennyson, at being the “disinherited” elder son of a wealthy self-made man, known in the family as “the Old Man of the Wolds,” is a motif in several major poems, including *Maud*. “In the narrative poem, *Aylmer’s Field* (1864), Tennyson would write with undiminished anger about the damage done to the lives of young people by a wealthy and powerful father.” Some research has been done to establish just how much money old George Tennyson gave to his elder son. More than was originally thought, but the sense of grievance at being driven into an unwanted career in the church dominated the life of the poet’s father.

When Tennyson, Poet Laureate and one of the great men of the age, became a peer, he investigated the possibility of taking the title after which his late uncle Charles, the favoured younger son, had yearned, Lord Tennyson d’Eyncourt. As Batchelor aptly comments: “This is a painful demonstration of the degree to which the old bitterness over his father’s disinheritance had corroded Tennyson’s judgement.”

Another damaging event in Tennyson’s early life was the death at the age of 22 of his close friend from his Cambridge days, Arthur Henry Hallam. Tennyson relied on Hallam for personal support and for help with the publication of his first volumes of poems. The poet’s grief found expression