

WILLIAM MORRIS
AND THE SEARCH FOR POET LAUREATE, 1892

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The Poet Laureateship is a literary honour dispensed by politicians. Because of this, an examination of the selection process gives remarkable insight into the standing of major poets in the eyes of important political figures. In October 1892, the death of Alfred Lord Tennyson created such a situation. William Ewart Gladstone, who was in his fourth term as Prime Minister, was faced with a myriad of conflicting issues in regard to the Laureateship and conscientiously attempted to balance the need for a writer of merit with political decisions about the acceptability of candidates to the establishment. In the deliberations concerning the Laureateship, William Morris was a central figure. As the most accomplished surviving British poet, he seemed an obvious choice but his political activities were unpalatable to many politicians, and his own beliefs prevented him from taking steps which might have gained the position for him. His role in the selection, however, says a great deal both about his place in Victorian life and his attitudes towards its institutions.

Tennyson had been appointed Laureate in 1850 and in the forty-two years he held the position had set his mark upon the office. In the nineteenth century, the Laureateship was officially a court appointment, although the selection was made by the government in power at the time of the vacancy. Tennyson himself was originally not eager for the appointment, writing to a friend, "I would not have been made Laureate if I could have helped it; As for writing court odes except upon express command from Headquarters that I shall not do."¹ However, he soon came to have a close relationship with Queen Victoria and turned out a series of generally second-rate poems for various events in the lives of the Royal Family. Such adulatory poems came to be an expected part of each royal occasion and Tennyson became an establishment figure, eventually receiving a peerage.

Morris's early admiration for Tennyson and Tennyson's influence on Morris are well documented. In later years, however, Morris became increasingly disillusioned with Tennyson's conservative outlook. This culminated in Morris's parody of Tennyson in his socialist play, *The Tables Turned*. In it Morris portrayed Tennyson as out of touch with contemporary life. On being asked about socialism,

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