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AN INTERVIEW WITH TENNYSON ON POE

Terry L. Meyers

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IN 1926 Mary E. Phillips was able to refer casually and without documentation to a time "when Alfred Tennyson said that the only thing he wished to see in America was the grave of Edgar Allan Poe."¹ By 1973 Gerhard J. Joseph, properly cautious, had to characterize Tennyson's remark as "reputed."² Now, however, a source for Phillips' claim has come to light. The following note appears in the *New York Times*, February 13, 1886 (p. 2, col. 6):

A VISIT TO TENNYSON

AN AMERICAN DESCRIBES HIS CALL UPON HIM AT HIS ISLE OF WIGHT HOME.

From a London Letter to the Chicago Inter Ocean.

Tennyson is not a sociable man, and he takes no special pleasure in communion with his fellows. His happiest hours are spent alone in his secluded study, engaged in poetical meditation or wrapt in elysian dreams, his pipe always in his mouth and a great tobacco jar on the floor beside him. The poet is tall and slightly bent by the 75 Winters that have also left their mark upon his whitened hair and beard, both of which are long and flowing.

His eyes are large, dark and dreamy. His manners are shy and awkward — the result of long seclusion from the world. He wore a suit of badly fitting gray clothes, a loose turned-down collar, a carelessly tied cravat, and low, wide shoes, made more for comfort than beauty. He speaks slowly and with great deliberation in a dull, rolling Saxon accent which might be called provincial, but his words are well chosen and his language refined, plainly showing that he is a college man and the student of many languages.

'At one time I thought of visiting America,' said the poet, 'but I was afraid.'

'Afraid of what? Certainly you would have been received most cordially.'

'Yes, and that's what I was afraid of. I recollect Dickens's first visit — the receptions, dinners, hand-shakings — and I concluded that I would not venture to show myself in the great Republic. There is one spot in your country which I should like to visit — a spot which, as your poet, Fitz-Greene Halleck, finely expressed it, is hallowed ground, a pilgrim shrine, a Mecca of the mind.'³

'You mean Mount Vernon, where Washington is entombed?'

'No; I mean a long-neglected spot in the provincial town of Baltimore, where the greatest American genius lies buried. I mean the grave of Edgar Allan Poe.'

'I believe you have a great admiration for Poe?'

'Indeed I have. In my opinion your Bryant, Whittier, &c., are pigmies compared with Poe. He is the literary glory of America, and yet his grave was left unhonored for more than 26 years.'

'More than 35 years have elapsed since his death, and his fame is constantly increasing. That's the true test of genius.'

'No poet, certainly no modern poet, was so susceptible to the impression of beauty as Poe,' said Tennyson. 'He had all the Greeks' appreciation of beauty and much of their power of expressing it in poetry.'

This enthusiastic admiration of Tennyson for Poe reminded me that, more than 40 years ago, when the English poet was struggling for the recognition which he at that time failed to receive from his own countrymen, Poe pronounced him 'the noblest poet'⁴ that ever lived.

In a microfilm of the *Daily Inter Ocean* of Chicago, for the days, weeks, and months preceding February 13, 1886, I have repeatedly sought the origin of the *New York Times* article. To no avail. I may note, however, that the report by the correspondent of the *Inter Ocean* probably had a wide circulation — besides appearing in the *New York Times*, it also appeared, shortened, in *The Bookmart* (March 1886), p. 303.

NOTES

- 1 *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Winston, 1926), II, 1606.
- 2 "Poe and Tennyson," *PMLA*, 88 (May 1973), 418.
- 3 See "Burns," *The Poetical Works of Fitz-Greene Halleck* (New York: Appleton, 1859):

And consecrated ground it is,
The last, the hallowed home of one
Who lives upon all memories,
Though with the buried gone.

Such graves as his are pilgrim shrines,
Shrines to no code or creed confined --
The Delphian vales, the Palestines,
The Meccas of the mind.

(p. 26)

- 4 In "The Poetic Principle."

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TENNYSON FOR RECTOR: A NOTE

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SO FAR as I know there is no biographical record of one incident which concerns Tennyson, and which shows both his national reputation and his sound good sense. This is that, when Carlyle came to the end of his three year period as student-elected Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh, Tennyson was invited to stand in his place. He declined; but a note on the incident (in 1868) may have some interest.¹

The institution of the Lord Rectorship originated with the Universities of Scotland Act of 1858. Immediately thereafter the position was held by Gladstone for a double term, and it was evident that he had been an exceptionally strong candidate because he was not only a prominent national figure, but because he was a Liberal. He was followed by Carlyle, who had the advantage of his special connection with Edinburgh, and who defeated Disraeli in his election. As Carlyle's term came to an end and the question arose of who was to follow him, it seems clear that the choice