Tennyson Studies: The Local Historian’s Role

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Alfred Tennyson, the third surviving son of the Rev. Dr. George Clayton Tennyson, was born at Somersby Rectory in 1809. He and his elder brothers, Frederick and Charles, spent some of their childhood years away from Somersby at Louth Grammar School. Frederick left the school at Midsummer 1818, moving to Eton; Alfred was withdrawn at Christmas 1820 though Charles remained in the school for a further term until Midsummer 1821; thereafter both continued their education with their father at home, until they went up to Cambridge in 1827. As far as we can tell, only on two occasions during his pre-Cambridge years did Alfred leave Lincolnshire: in late June 1825 he accompanied his father and Charles to enter Frederick at St. John’s College Cambridge; two years later Charles, Alfred and their mother visited relatives at Market Street near St. Albans, journeying as well to London. The geographical centres of his experience at the time he was starting to produce serious poetry were Somersby and its environs (Fig. 1), Louth, Tealby and the Lincolnshire coast.

In 1942, W.D. Paden published Tennyson in Egypt: a study of the imagery in his earlier works, which traced the source of much of Alfred’s early poetry to volumes which were in the Rectory library at Somersby, the quest for literary parallels continues. Such scholarship is unquestionably important, but it may be that too much emphasis has been placed on literary influences: the significance of local environments and events, and the day-to-day experiences of life have to some extent been neglected by Tennyson scholars. By way of illustration, I propose to look at three poems, one from each of Alfred’s first three collections - Poems by Two Brothers, 1827, Poems Chiefly Lyrical, 1830 and Poems, 1832 - to indicate possible local influences which, I believe, have not been suggested before.

Poems by Two Brothers, containing works by Charles and Alfred (Frederick later admitted to being the author of four poems) was printed for the London publishers Simpkin and Marshall by J. & J. Jackson of Louth in April 1827, and is a rich quarry for those interested in the extent of the Tennyson brothers’ early reading. It includes Alfred’s substantial poem “The Vale of Bones”, the main literary influence of which appears to be Sir Walter Scott; yet I would suggest its inspiration — and a very potent inspiration — may be local, namely the site of the Civil War battle of Winceby, some three miles south west of Somersby.

In June 1885, Henry Winn of Fulletby (1816-1914) received a communication from John Lewis Fytche (1816-1902), then resident at Freshwater in the Isle of Wight, informing him he had received and presented to Lord Tennyson a copy of Winn’s Winceby Fight published that.
year. The association of Winn’s verses evidently unlocked Fyfe’s memory, for he was to add a note to his letter:

As a boy I have often walked over the historic field with Alfred Tennyson and my other cousins. It was our favourite walk from Somersby, and the tradition of Slash Lane running down with blood used to startle us.7

Compare this experience with part of Tennyson’s poem:

How with the red dew o’er thee raim’d
Thine emerald turf was darkly stained!
How did each innocent flower, that sprung
Thy greenly-tangled glades among,
Blush with the big and purple drops
That dribbled from the leafy cope! (lines 77-82)

“The Vale of Bones” has a hIGHLAND setting, but it is not inconceivable that any influence the battle of Winceby held - and surely a young boy’s impression of battle fields would be moulded by familiar local sites - was transferred in Alfred’s imagination to a romantic mountain region, a transference certainly achieved in his “Ode: O Bosky Brook”, a contemporary though unpublished work. Just to the east of the Winceby site is Snipe Dales, a small group of valleys and it is possible they may have played some role in shaping Tennyson’s image of his vale (Fig. 1).

Tennyson admitted to this early tendency to transform the local environment in an untitled poem written c.1833, the first stanza of which he gave to the *Manchester Athenaeum Album* of 1850 with the title “Mablethorpe”:

Here often when a child I lay reclined:
I took delight in this fair strand and free;
Here stood the infant Ilion of the mind,
And here the Grecian ships all seemed to be.
And here again I come, and only find,
The drain-cut level of the marshy lea,
Gray sand-banks, and pale sunsets, dreary wind,
Dim shores, dense rains, and heavy clouded sea?

Of all localities in Lincolnshire, the coast exerted a profound influence on Alfred. Dr. and Mrs. Tennyson stayed at Mablethorpe during the summer;10 although Skegness also was frequented, it was Mablethorpe that was relished, not just by Alfred but all members of the family: Matilda Tennyson (1813-1913) was to write in her nineties, ‘We all loved Mablethorpe ... There was no other sea place like it in my opinion!’11 The story of Charles and Alfred hiring a carriage and driving to Mablethorpe on publication of *Poems by Two Brothers*, where according to Charles, '[we] shouted ourselves hoarse on the shore, first one and then the other of us, reciting the poems with no other audience than deaf sand and sounding sea wave’12 is well known, as is Alfred’s statement about the sand-hills there, ‘I used to stand on this sand-built ridge and imagine that it was the spine-bone of the world’13 Mablethorpe, especially early in the year, was to remain a place of retreat for Alfred until the 1850s, though as he grew older, a degree of ambivalence - a case of loving something he did not always like - can be detected in his attitude to the place.14 He was to conclude “Mablethorpe” with a stanza unpublished in his lifetime:

Yet tho perchance no tract of earth have more
Unlikeness to the fair Ionian plain,
I love the place that I have loved before,
I love the rolling cloud, the flying rain,
The brown sea lapsing back with sullen roar
To travel leagues before he comes again,
The misty desert of the houseless shore,
The phantom-circle of the moaning main.

It is not surprising that images of the coast, no doubt inspired by his deep love of the Lincolnshire littoral, appear in his work.15 No one has as yet suggested that Alfred’s most remarkable sea poem, “The Kraken” first published in *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* of 1832 is related to the Lincolnshire coast, but I believe this may be the case. Most of the potential influences on the genesis of “The Kraken” again have been traced to material in the Rectory library at Somersby - including the Book of Revelation, ‘And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea’ (XIII, 1) - though it has also been suggested an important further source was Bulwer-Lytton’s first novel,

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Fig. 2 The sperm whale washed up on the beach at Gibraltar point in early March 1985. Was a similar occurrence in 1825 an influence on Tennyson’s “The Kraken”? (Ben Hardaker.)
**Falkland**, published in 1827. Yet I have often wondered if an occurrence during the summer of 1825 did not also help fire Tennyson's youthful imagination. The *Stamford Mercury* of 19 August 1825 contained a report obtained from the *Boston Gazette*:

On Sunday evening, about six o'clock, an enormous fish was seen by many spectators who were standing on the sea bank at Skegness: from the manner in which it was tossed about by the waves, it was evidently dead when first observed. Several attempts were made to secure it, but without effect, till some sailors came to the spot, who succeeded in staying the monster of the deep, until the water subsided, when it was left dry upon the shore between Mr. Enderby's and Gibraltar Point. We are incapable justly to describe its dimensions, but compute its length to be about forty feet. It is highly deserving of the attention of naturalists and others, as being a fish not exceeded in size by any other ever known to have been cast on this shore, and presenting to their observation one of the most powerfully constructed objects of creation.

Whales have regularly been washed up on the Lincolnshire coast; both the national and local press contained vivid pictures of a 45 foot sperm whale at Gibraltar Point early in March 1893 (Fig. 2). The 'monster of the deep' of 1825 may well have been a similar mammal. We know the Tennysons visited to the Lincolnshire coast; did Alfred and his brothers journey to Skegness to see the whale? Did he later transform this potent image into "The Kraken"?

In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die. (line 15)

The version of "The Dream of Fair Women" contained in *Poems of 1832*, is prefaced by what have been called the 'balloon stanzas':

As when a man, that sails in a balloon,
  Downloading sees the solid shining ground
Stream from beneath him in the broad blue noon,-
  Tilth, hamlet, mead and mound;
And takes his flags and waves them to the mob,
  That shout below, all faces turned to where
Glows rubylike the far-up crimson globe
  Filled with a finer air . . . . (lines 1-8)

In 1952 the distinguished Tennyson scholar, Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., published a short article arguing that these stanzas were probably inspired by an aerial ascent from Cambridge on 19 May 1829 by the celebrated aeronaut Charles Green (1785-1870), who took as one of his two passengers Tennyson's undergraduate friend Richard Monckton Milnes. Shannon's argument - that Tennyson was writing from his own experience of having witnessed an ascent rather than from newspaper or other accounts - is certainly convincing, but there is no reason that Tennyson could not have been drawing on his experience of earlier flights by Green witnessed in Lincolnshire during the remarkable summer of 1826.

Green's flights were made possible by the establishment of coal-gas works in a number of Lincolnshire towns during 1825 and 1826. His first Lincolnshire ascent was made from Stamford on 3 July 1825, a detailed account of which was published in the *Stamford Mercury*. In 1826, Green made a further four flights from Lincolnshire towns, all extensively reported in the *Mercury*: from Boston on 8 June and again on 30 August from Louth on 4 August, and from Stamford on 11 September. Those made in August are especially interesting in their possible Tennyson connections.

Louth was first lighted with gas on 6 April 1826 and Green made his ascent from the new works at the Riverhead. According to the *Mercury* account of 11 August the inflated Coronation Balloon, 'of superb silk in alternated stripes of bright crimson and yellow', was 'exhibited to a great number of admiring spectators in Mr. Hardy's coal yard' on Thursday 3 August, Friday at first 'seemed to promise a very windy if not a rainy day', but as the morning progressed 'the unfavourable signs gradually disappeared'. The final arrangements commenced between two and three in the afternoon:

*The balloon was released from the heavy weights which confined it to the earth, and the car, having the necessary quantity of ballast deposited inside, was affixed to the balloon, which was with difficulty restrained from rising by several men holding very tightly the ropes which confined it to the earth. A band of music . . . played the very appropriate air of Fly not ye, a short time previously to the ascent. The weather brightened up considerably . . . and everything wore a cheerful appearance. At half past three o'clock a pilot balloon was dispatched from the yard, and took nearly a South-west direction. A great number of spectators then crowded round the car, in which Mr. Green had placed*.

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**Royal Coronation Balloon**

Lord John Russell, in the name of the Emperor of France, presented to the Prince Regent a Balloon on the 1st of May, 1819, but it was not until the Summer of 1826 that Green brought his balloon to Louth.

**Mr. Green**

*The Wool-Mart Yard, Louth, On Friday the 4th of August, 1826, at three o'clock in the afternoon.*

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**The Balloon**

(fig. 3 Advertising handbill for Green's Louth ascent [Richard William Goulding Collection, Louth 33cm. x 21.5cm.]. A social distinction is evident: the Stewards were dominated by clergy, attorneys and surgeons; the Committee was composed of a broader group of tradesmen, including the Jacksons whose firm was to print 'Poems by Two Brothers' the following year.)
himself, and at twenty minutes to four o'clock, every arrangement being completed, Mr. Green gave the words "Let go," when the balloon rose rapidly yet magnificently into the air. Mr. Green himself cheering as he ascended. After attaining a slight elevation, he unfolded two very handsome flags, which he continued waving so long as he could be discerned . . .

The Coronation Balloon finally made its landfall after a flight of some four and a quarter hours at Partney, and the aftermath was recorded by Green himself:

The inhabitants of the neighbourhood, having witnessed the progress of the balloon during the voyage, hastened to the spot, and rendered every assistance. Shortly after the balloon was secured, I received invitations from several gentlemen to partake of refreshment with them, and accepted that of the Rev. John Banks, of Belle Vue Lodge, Spilsby, where I received the congratulations of a large party of ladies and gentlemen, and whence I proceeded in a chaise and four to the hospitable mansion of R. Cracroft, Esq., Harrington Hall. I was there again congratulated by the family, and by a party of ladies who witnessed my ascent. Having partaken of a sumptuous meal I again set off and arrived at Louth about two o'clock on Saturday morning, where I was welcomed by a number of the Committee, who were awaiting my return at the New King's Head inn.

During the afternoon of Wednesday 30 August, Green, accompanied by Henry Brooke, Jr., the editor of the Boston Gazette, made a second flight from Boston, descending, after an hour and ten minutes, at Manby:

The balloon was conveyed, in its inflated state, to Louth, for the purpose of gratifying Mr Green's friends in that neighbourhood; it was then taken through the town to Burwell, where, in consequence of the wind's being excessively boisterous, it was found necessary to discharge the gas which remained; otherwise it was Mr. Green's intention to have it conveyed in a state of inflation to Boston . . .

Henry Winn whose native village of Fulbeck was only some four miles distant from Somersby, writing late in his long life, also recalled this flight:

Mr. Green, the celebrated balloonist, made the ascent, in splendid weather . . . the balloon taking a northward direction; and for some time hanging over our village. Of course all the people were gazing at the novel sight, and expecting it would descend in the immediate neighbourhood, but it eventually proceeded further North.

Winn's account is important for it shows how deeply the events of this season (he also recalled the prolonged and severe drought), occurring when he was a boy of ten, had impressed themselves upon the local community and were etched into his memory.

We know remarkably little of Alfred Tennyson's activities in the summer of 1826. He and Charles probably visited Tealby and Louth early in July, a month in which Frederick may have approached their grandfather at Tealby about the possibility of seafaring at Skegness on account of Alfred's "ill-health." Whatever the success of this scheme, and the state of Alfred's health, in August Green's balloon would almost certainly have been observed by the residents of Somersby Rectory on one, if not two occasions. The Mercury account of the flight from Louth had noted that:

The balloon was distinctly visible at Boston, and indeed throughout the whole surrounding county, but the sight from Spilsby must doubtless have been very grand, as it would remain in view nearly from its first rising into the air until the period of its descent.

Indeed they could not have avoided hearing of the reception at Harrington - the Tennyson and Cracroft children appear to have been on friendly terms - may even have witnessed the landfall at Partney and, I would venture to suggest, that they probably attended Green's ascent from Louth.

Such events were great crowd-pulling spectacles attracting many from a wide area. The Mercury account of Green's 1825 Stampford flight from Boston noted that "persons accustomed to calculate the numbers comprised in large masses of human beings, state that from 25,000 to 30,000 individuals were collected on this occasion; and we know that many of them had come from distances of as much as 40 or 50 miles." It was estimated that Green's ascent at Boston on 8 June "afforded the greatest gratification to between 20,000 and 30,000 persons who were assembled in the town to witness it." It must be said that these estimates were probably over-generous: the populations of Stamford and Boston in 1821 were only slightly in excess of six and ten thousand respectively.

The Mercury account suggests only that Green's flight from Louth was 'witnessed by thousands', but it does record graphically the influx of visitors to the town:

The company who attended on the occasion were of the most respectable rank in society . . . Stage-coaches . . . came into the town on Thursday night loaded with individuals, whose countenances bore evident tokens of curiosity and anticipated delight. The rattling of wheels and the clattering of horses aroused the inhabitants from their beds on Friday morning . . . Tokens of recognitions, gratulations, and congratulations, were rapidly exchanging between numerous well-dressed parties, and the tout ensemble was certainly very gratifying. The fact of the many respectable farmers in the neighbourhood being compelled to mind their business at home . . . became more notorious, as the various visitors issued from the houses of their friends and the inns to which they had driven. Parties of four or five ladies sometimes contented themselves with only one gentleman, and very frequently they could not muster a single protector. On the other hand, all the 'professionals' within many miles made a point of attending, and the yard whence the balloon ascended . . . was very respectably, and indeed (considering all circumstances) numerously attended.

It seems unlikely therefore that some members of the Somersby household did not visit Louth to witness Green's ascent. Alfred's father certainly must be considered one of the 'professionals', though in this context it must be admitted that F.C. Massingberd, Rector of nearlly Ormsby-cum-Ketby, appears not to have journeyed to Louth: his brief diary entry for 4 August 1826 is, alas, somewhat unhelpful, 'Saw Mr Green ascend in his balloon'. Massingberd was, however, in Boston at the time Green made his second ascent (30 August), though he failed to report the event in his journal, concentrating instead on the effects of the drought. It must be remembered that Mrs Tennyson's connections with Louth make it certain that many of the Stewards and Committee (Fig. 3) were known to the family. Did the Tennysons join their Fytche cousins to witness Green's ascent? One of the Stewards, the Rev. T.A. Dale, was Usher at Louth Grammar School, then attended by Alfred's younger brother Arthur as well as John Lewis and George Augustus Fytche.

As with Green's flight from Cambridge, we have no
evidence that Tennyson witnessed the event, but if he failed to journey to Louth (or possibly Boston), he would no doubt have seen the balloon, as well as hearing and reading other accounts. Christopher Ricks has noted a copy of the _English Encyclopedia_ of 1802 in the library at Somersby with plates of balloon ascents as a further potential source, and of course there remains the possibility Alfred read about or even witnessed other exploits by Green, but the events of the Summer of 1826 (as much as those of May 1829) must be considered a likely formative influence on Tennyson's conception of the 1832 version of "The Dream of Fair Women".

In attempting to show the possible significance of local experiences and events on the subject-matter of some of Tennyson's early poetry, I hope also to have suggested that there remains some real potential for the historian of nineteenth-century Lincolnshire to help increase our understanding of his early verse; certainly the local historian may well be familiar with sources of which the literary critic is unaware. It is a truism that the childhood and youthful years of a poet represent a significant factor in the development of the poetic imagination, but until we have a fuller understanding of this - and it is far more than the family milieu - our appreciation of Tennyson's work will remain only partial.

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Notes.


4. Humanistic studies no. 27, University of Kansas.


7. L.A.O. Winn 5/1, p. 71, and letter of 30 June 1885, p. 73. See also Nance Campbell, comp., _Tennyson in Lincoln_, 1, 1971, no. 2538, p. 106. For J.A. Fyfe see _The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson_, 1, p. 160 n. 4.

It is perhaps worth noting that in 1844 Edward Fitzgerald, helping Thomas Carlyle research Civil War battle field sites, made extensive enquiries about Winchby, but apparently did not consult either of his close friends Alfred and Frederick Tennyson; see Alfred McKinley Teuhue, _The Life of Edward FitzGerald_, 1947, p.131; Alfred McKinley Teuhue and Annabelle Burdick Teuhue, eds., _The Letters of Edward FitzGerald_, 4 vols., Princeton 1980, I, pp. 416-434.


10. Note also in conjunction with the lines quoted from "The Vale of Bones", the opening stanza of "Maud", 1855, whose Lincolnshire association have been thoroughly explored in R.B. Rader, _Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genres_, (Perspectives in Criticism, 15), University of California Press, 1963: Mr. T. R. C. Stuart, _The Poems of Tennyson_, 2nd edn., 1, pp. 541-542; Sir Charles Tennyson and Christopher Ricks, _Tennyson's "Mabelthorpe"_, _Tennyson Research Bulletin_, 2, 1974, pp. 121-123.

11. L.A.O. T.E.E. H, 171/178 (quoted, the transcription is far from accurate, in Sir Charles Tennyson and Hope G. Tennyson, _The Tennysons, Background to Genius_, 1974, pp. 50-55).

12. James Conway Walter, _Mabelthorpe: its History and Associations_, Louth, [1907], p.27.


15. For example see _The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson_, 1, pp. 89, 171, 187, 190, 195 & 209; Philip Collins, _Tennyson, Poet of Lincolnshire_ (Tennyson Society Occasional Paper, 6), 1984, pp. 14-16; also Emily Tennyson to Ellen Hallam, 13 March 1836, "Alfred and Cecilia drove to Mabelthorpe yesterday in the open post chaise, ... any spoke of remaining there a week, Alfred has immense satisfaction in seeing a rough sea [...] he often goes to Mabelthorpe in this month", Tennyson Research Centre, Lincoln.


17. _The Poems of Tennyson_, 2nd edn., 1, pp. 96-120; Tennyson in _Egypt_, 1, pp. 155, n. 204; Kennedy, "Alfred Tennyson's _bilingual_ background", pp. 96-97.

18. _The Times_, 5 March 1826.


21. _Lincolnshire, Rutland and Stamford Mercury_ (subsequently _L.R.S.M._), 8 July 1825, (also 29 April, 10 and 24 June).

22. _L.R.S.M._, 16 June 1826, (also 2 June); 1 September 1826 (also 23 August).

23. _L.R.S.M._, 11 August 1826, (also 28 July).

24. _L.R.S.M._, 15 September 1826 (also 1 and 8 September).

25. _L.R.S.M._, 14 April 1826.

26. _L.R.S.M._, 1 September 1826.

27. L.A.O. Winn 5/3, p.38. These notes were written up in 1906-7, Winns's 91st year, but were compiled in 1889. Winn's account appears to be a somewhat confused collation of the two Boston and Louth ascents. He writes of a flight from Boston in July, witnessed by his father "who was then on his death bed; and requested to see the balloon, and he was carried out into the garden where his curiosity was granted". Green's flight from Boston on 8 June landed at Allington near Grantham; Winns father, who died on 9 August, would have witnessed Green's ascent from Louth on 4 August.


29. L.A.O. T.E.E. H, 1877. The letter, in a bundle of 1826 is dated Thursday 13th but no month is given: in 1826 this would be either April or July.

30. L.A.O. T.E.E. H, 1877/3. An undated letter for which 7 July 1826 has been suggested, the _Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson_, 1, pp. 7-8; see also R.B. Martin, _Tennyson, The Unquiet Heart_, 1980, p. 43. The letter, however, could date from any time between May and October: the Lincolnshire sea-bathing season in the 1820s, on the evidence of advertisements placed in the _Stamford Mercury_, certainly ran from May until September, and, to judge from one of Alfred's letters in 1825, even October. (The _Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson_, 1, p.6.) It is also tempting, as the letter is undated, to suggest it might be related to the whole episode in the previous year.

31. Sir Francis Hill, _The Croacock diary_, _Tennyson Research Bulletin_, 3, 1977, p.28 (entry of 21 November 1849): reprinted in Lang and Shannon, _The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson_, 1, p.31. R. Croacock and his wife began to let Harrington Hall from Michaelmas 1826; as far as Tennyson scholars are concerned (eide R.B. Rader's, _Tennyson's Maud_), their most celebrated tenant was Arthur Eden, whose lease commenced 4 August 1831. L.A.O. 3 TP.77 box 8; see also an unpublished paper, _Arthur Eden and Harrington Hall: a note._

32. _L.R.S.M._, 8 July 1825. The following year it was reported: "The influx of company to witness the ascent was not so great as last year; but we are happy to learn that the number of persons who paid to witness the balloon were far larger than on the former occasion" _L.R.S.M._, 15
September 1826.
31. L.R.S.M., 16 June 1826.
33. For Dale (1790-1855) see Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson, I, p. 86 & n.3; Tennyson in Egypt, pp. 124-125. n.71. Arthur attended Louth School from Christmas 1825 to Christmas 1827, L.A.O. LGS C/11; R.W. Goulding, ‘Some Louth Grammar School Boys’, Part VII, Goulding’s Louth Almanac, 1932, pp. 162-163. (Goulding, again, gives an incorrect date for leaving the school). The Tennyson brothers were all entered in the Grammar School Register (L.A.O. LGS C/11) amongst the scholars ‘who are boarded in the houses of the Head Master, the Assistant and other boarding-houses in the town’ (Nicholas Carlisle, A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools in England and Wales, 2 vols., 1818, I, p. 828). Whilst tradition says they lodged with their maternal relatives, there is no firm proof of this; Arthur could well have boarded with Dale and his family.
34. The Poems of Tennyson, 2nd. edn., I, pp. 479-480.