**Alfred Austin (1835-1913)**

‘Across the wires the electric message came

He is no better, he is much the same.’

Ironically these abominable lines, describing the illness of Edward VII, have proved to be the most enduring legacy of Poet Laureate Alfred Austin.

As the successor to Tennyson in 1896, Austin already had a lot on his plate. On his appointment he was described by one periodical as ‘an English gentleman of culture, dignity, and ability’.[[1]](#footnote-1) But the critic broke down almost immediately afterwards, warning readers that ‘the higher gifts have been denied’[[2]](#footnote-2) to him and that he had ‘epic hopes and desire with only a lyric gift of very slender substance.’ It was not in poetry but in two prose works that he made his ‘nearest approach to literature’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One of these works was \_*The Garden That I Love\_* (1894), in which he describes the garden of Swinford Old Manor, near Ashford, on a:

quiet August afternoon, with its long motionless shadows, its slight intimation of silver haze, and its soothing noises of neighbourhood rooks; the music of a mill stream I could just overhear, the melodious monotone of contiguous ringdoves, the colour of the nectarines on the wall, the recollection of the ripe and ruddy orchard; - all of these seemed to imbue my mind with a sense of autumnal mellowness, when everything one longs for awaits the plucking, and there is nothing more to be desired.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Fellow gardening enthusiast [Elizabeth von Arnim](/20c/20c-vonarnim-biography) was so taken with the book that she wrote a fan letter (which she was too embarrassed to send).[[5]](#footnote-5) She later described the garden as the loveliest she had ever seen.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Austin and his wife had lived here since their marriage in 1867, entertaining guests including John Everett Millais and Wilfred Scawen Blunt as well as sustaining friendships with local Tories such as Aretas Akers-Douglas, later 1st Viscount Chilston. But not everyone was delighted by the poet’s presence among them or by his political stance. The \_Thanet Advertiser\_ took him to task for his description of Gladstone as a ‘verbose poltroon’ at a local meeting, predicting that the minister would be revered by thousands who failed to remember ‘the wild poet’. [[7]](#footnote-7)

In February 1896 the paper offered a prize ‘to the reader who will send the best reason for appointing Mr Alfred Austin to the office of Poet Laureate’ a feat it considered the more difficult because ‘A poet ought to be able to write poetry, and poetry is not necessarily all drivel.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Poignantly at his death Austin’s own library was found to include works by much greater authors, including [Dickens](/dickens), [Christina Rossetti](/19c/19c-rossetti-biography) and Tennyson.

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[Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Late Alfred Austin.](<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015079885359&view=1up&seq=13&skin=2021>)

1. ‘Alfred Austin: the New Poet Laureate’. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Alfred Austin: the New Poet Laureate’. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Alfred Austin: the New Poet Laureate’. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Garden That I Love*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walker 46-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Walker 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘The Cherub’. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1 February 1896. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)