

**LITTLE MASTERPIECES OF  
ENGLISH POETRY. VOL. I.  
BALLADS OLD AND NEW**

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Little Masterpieces of English Poetry. Vol. I. Ballads Old and New by Henry van Dyke & Hardin Craig

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**HENRY VAN DYKE & HARDIN CRAIG**

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Robert B. Whiting.

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LITTLE MASTERPIECES  
OF ENGLISH POETRY

BY BRITISH AND AMERICAN AUTHORS

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VOLUME I

BALLADS OLD AND NEW

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tion into the Scandinavian languages*

## GENERAL PREFACE

THIS is a collection of *Little Masterpieces of Poetry*. The title of the collection gives the clue to the principle of choice. This is not an attempt to make another historical anthology of English verse, giving illustrations of the work of every acknowledged poet more or less famous, and carefully apportioning the number of selections from each writer according to the supposed measure of his fame. That question, indeed, has not entered into the process of choice, to disturb and hamper it. It has not been necessary to ask whether too much has been taken from one poet, or too little from another. I have looked only at the value and the beauty of the poems themselves, at their perfection as poetry, at the clearness, strength, and depth of their feeling, at the truth and vividness of their imagery, at the power or the loveliness of their expression and form. Those that seemed the best have been chosen out of many, not to illustrate a theory, but for their own sake, because they are good to read.

A masterpiece, of course, cannot be a fragment or an extract. It must stand alone, complete and rounded; and no matter how small it may be, it must carry within itself its own claim to excellence. For this reason I have not included any

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disconnected portions of longer poems, or brilliant passages from works which as a whole are not of even merit. Each poem that has been chosen is given in its entirety, as the author wrote it. The only exception is in the case of certain songs and lyrics, which can be taken out of their setting in a play or a story, without marring either their form or their effect; and this is not an exception in reality, but only in appearance.

Some poems of great beauty, like Milton's *Comus* and Tennyson's *Maud*, reluctant as I am to omit them, are ruled out by the limitation of space. The same reason explains the fact that dramas are omitted, and that the epic element also is lacking, except in its minor forms, the idyll and the story in verse, and in its lyrical modification, the ballad.

It has seemed best to confine the selections to the work of those poets who have already "gone over to the majority." It would be difficult, and perhaps embarrassing, to choose from the writings of the minority who are still living.

I have thought it wise, also, not to include any metrical translations of poetry from other languages; for, however admirable they may be as renderings of the originals, they can hardly rank as English masterpieces. To deserve that title a poem must be conceived and composed, as well as written, in the English language. It makes no difference where the poet was born, in Scotland or England or Ireland or America, if his poetry *came to him in English*, it belongs to English

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literature, the common heritage of all the races and tribes which use that noble language as their own.

In the gathering and the sifting of the materials for this collection my colleague, Dr. Hardin Craig, has rendered much valuable assistance, which is here gratefully acknowledged. The selection of the particular text of the poems, the reading of proofs, and the insertion of dates have been entrusted to his scholarly care.

The poems have been grouped on a principle of arrangement which seems to me both new and good,—the principle of poetic form. Thus in one volume we have ballads, in another idylls and stories in verse, in another lyrics, in another odes, sonnets and epigrams, in another elegies and epitaphs. This method of grouping not only brings together the poems which are most alike in their effect (a matter of the first importance to the reader's comfort and pleasure), but also serves to show how significant and how vital the element of form is in poetry. It is not a mere accident or an unimportant adjunct. The spirit and the body are the man; the substance and the form are the poem. There is usually more kinship, for example, between two ballads dealing with different subjects, like *Thomas the Rhymer* and Longfellow's *Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, than there is between a ballad and a sonnet dealing with the same subject, like Coleridge's *Love* and one of Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

This arrangement by poetic form has also an-

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other advantage, which I have had in view in anticipating a possible use of these volumes in colleges and schools and by private students. It will enable the reader to follow, without effort, the development of the various forms of verse, and to see how a ballad or a lyric or a sonnet of the sixteenth century differs from one of the nineteenth. As far as possible, the date of the publication of each poem has been printed with the author's name. When the date of composition is widely different from that of publication it has also been added; such dates are printed in italics.

Within the main divisions, the poems have been grouped in a rather loose way, according to their subjects; and within these minor groups again, a chronological order has been generally followed. Thus it will be found, unless I am mistaken, that one can read on from poem to poem without serious discord, and with a certain continuity of interest and feeling.

The amount of verse taken from the British poets is, of course, much greater than that which comes from the American poets. The reason is plain. In the former case there are four centuries of poetry to choose from, and in the latter case less than a hundred years. But unless these volumes altogether fail in their purpose, one result of reading them will be a clearer understanding and a deeper sense of the vital relationship of that *which is best*, that which is permanent, in British *and in American* verse. They are not sepa-