



the yellow nineties online

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AUSTIN DOBSON (1840-1921)



“Mr. Austin Dobson.” Photograph. *The Critic*, 49.2 (August 1906): 112. Rpt. Wikimedia Commons.

Henry Austin Dobson was the son of Augusta Harris Dobson and George Clarisse Dobson, a civil engineer. His childhood was spent in Holyhead, Wales, and he attended the Beaumaris Grammar School, J. W. Knight’s school in Coventry, and the Gymnase Strasburg. At 16, he returned to England and began working as a clerk at the Board of Trade in London where he would spend the rest of his working life, moving up through the professional hierarchy until his retirement as a principal clerk in 1901. Like Anthony Trollope, whom he admired, Dobson fit his considerable production as a poet, biographer, and essayist around his daily office job. At 28, he married Frances Mary Beardmore, with whom he had five daughters

and five sons. They lived in Ealing, a London suburb, until his death in 1921.

As a young man at the Board of Trade, Dobson became friends with the poet and critic William Cosmo Monkhouse, who encouraged his literary interests. He published his first poem, “A City Flower,” in *Temple Bar: A London Magazine for Town and Country Readers* in 1865, which was followed by several poems and essays in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. In 1868 he published additional poems in *St. Paul’s Magazine*, which was edited by Trollope, who encouraged Dobson. These early

poems were all signed with the initials A.D., which led to a small controversy in 1870 when a female friend of Dobson's acquaintance Richard Webster (later Lord Alverstone) claimed that she had written his poem "The Drama of the Doctor's Window." Dobson was understandably upset by this, and issued a pamphlet in 1872 presenting evidence of his authorship. This was his first work to be published under his full name.

Around 1870 Dobson became especially interested in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, and a Pre-Raphaelite influence can be seen in several of his early poems, such as "A Song of Angiola on Earth" and "The Dying of Tanneguy du Bois." He soon moved away from this style, however. Many of Dobson's most admired poems offer a nostalgic look at a society long gone, and are frequently set in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. He was influenced by the popular *vers de société* of Frederick Locker-Lampson and W. Mackworth Praed, although he himself did not participate in high society, but rather lived an abstemious, orderly life. The wit and social commentary his poems offered drew on his historical research and his imagination. He dedicated his first published volume of poems, *Vignettes in Rhyme and Vers de Société* (1873), to Trollope. Subsequent revised and expanded editions of this collection were issued under the titles *Vignettes in Rhyme and Other Verses* and *Old-World Idylls*. Although the book was well received, critics generally noted that Dobson would need to continue to develop his poetic style in order to maintain his reputation.

The next phase of Dobson's poetic career is notable for his use of French forms. Prompted by his study of Théodore de Banville's 1872 *Petit Traité de la Poésie Française*, Dobson began adapting the triolet, ballade, and rondeau forms to English. He recited one of his rondeaux at a meeting of the Pen and Pencil club in 1874, where Edmund Gosse recognized the influence of Banville, whose work he was also studying. Gosse would become a close friend to Dobson, particularly after 1875 when he too became employed at the Board of Trade. (One of the caricatures in Max Beerbohm's 1904 *The Poet's Corner* shows Gosse and Dobson composing a ballade at the office.) Gosse read most of Dobson's works in manuscript and wrote several memorial essays about the poet after his death. Dobson's contribution to the second volume of *The Yellow Book* (1894), "Sat est scripsisse," consists of lines addressed to Gosse that

celebrate their friendship and their shared interests: “And much they talk’d of Metre, and more they talked of Style.”

Dobson was among the first English poets to publish in these French forms: “Rose Leaves,” a group of six triolets was published in the *Graphic* in May 1874, followed by a villanelle (“When I first saw your eyes”) in the *Examiner* in October. In 1876 he published several rondeaux (“Rose in the hedge-row grown,” “You bid me try,” “Farewell, Renown!”, “More Poets Yet!” and “A Dedication”) in the *Spectator* and *Evening Hours*. Dobson republished many of these poems in his second collection, *Proverbs in Porcelain* (1877), which also contained “Ars Victrix,” a loose translation of Théophile Gautier’s 1857 poem “L’Art,” an outline of the ideals of art for art’s sake. Other participants in the English Parnassian movement included Robert Bridges, William Henley, Andrew Lang, and Monkhouse.

Dobson’s poem “A Postscript to ‘Retaliation’,” which opened the second volume of *The Pageant* (1897), builds on his own reputation as well as that of the eighteenth-century writers he admired. Goldsmith’s last work, “Retaliation: A Poem,” was a satirical collection of “Epitaphs on the Most Distinguished Wits of this Metropolis,” written in response to a meeting of literary men at which they read verses mocking Goldsmith’s appearance and speech. Goldsmith met with the same group a few weeks later on 9 March 1774 and read his “Retaliation,” which was well received (Dircks 51-52). It was published as a pamphlet on 18 April 1774, shortly after Goldsmith’s death on 4 April. The fifth and subsequent editions of his “Retaliation” included a postscript with an additional epitaph on Caleb Whitefoord, forwarded to the publisher from Whitefoord who claimed it was written by Goldsmith (*Complete Poetical Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 222-24). As Dobson’s introductory note to his own poem points out, many suspected that verse to have been written by Whitefoord himself. Dobson’s poem poses as another such forgery, pretending to be by an imitator of Goldsmith writing about Samuel Johnson. The footnote at the bottom of the page in *The Pageant* reinforces the performativity of Dobson’s poem, Goldsmith’s poem, and the meetings of literary men by pointing out that Dobson’s “A Postscript to ‘Retaliation’” was “Read for the author, by

the Master of the Temple, at the dinner of the ‘Johnson Society’ in Pembroke College, Oxford, on the 22nd June of 1896.”

One of Dobson’s most influential prose publications was undoubtedly the *Civil Service Handbook of English Literature* (1874, revised 1880), which narrated the history of British literature from the year 600 to 1873 in about 200 pages, supplemented with selected extracts. In 1879 Dobson published a well-received biography of the painter William Hogarth, the first of many biographies and studies of various eighteenth-century figures, including Thomas Bewick, Fanny Burney, Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith, Samuel Richardson, Richard Steele and Horace Walpole. In these studies, Dobson focused on the correspondence and literary works of the subject, including copious quotations, as was typical of Victorian biography. He soon became recognized as a leading authority on eighteenth-century literary culture. In addition to his own numerous prose studies, he edited or introduced many editions of authors ranging from Jane Austen, Oliver Goldsmith, and Izaak Walton to contemporaries such as Andrew Lang, Frederick Locker-Lampson, and William Makepeace Thackeray.

Although these prose studies are often considered his predominant work after 1880, Dobson continued to publish books of poetry, including *At the Sign of the Lyre* (1885, rev 1889); *The Sun Dial: A Poem* (with illustrations by George Wharton Edwards, 1890); *The Ballade of Beau Brocade and Other Poems of the XVIIIth Century* (1892); *The Story of Rosina and Other Verses* (1895); *Carmina Votiva and Other Occasional Verses* (1901); and *De Libris: Prose and Verse* (1908, rev 1911). One of the challenges for any bibliographer of Dobson’s work is that he frequently reprinted, rearranged, and revised his poems, and new volumes often contained a mixture of new and previously printed material.

When critic Brander Matthews asked Dobson to articulate “a code for the composition of familiar verse,” the first rule was “Never be vulgar” (134). As he advanced in age, the contrast between Dobson’s personal moral code and that of some of the eighteenth-century figures he worked on became more evident. Gosse recounts how Dobson

“deprived himself of some of his beloved eighteenth-century authors because of the profane expressions they contained” (*Silhouettes*, 189).

Dobson was well known and admired as a poet and biographer in his own day, even though many critics felt the need to qualify their praise of his verse. Thomas Bailey Aldrich admitted, “he is not one of the deep organ-voices of England. He is a very fresh, polished, and graceful poet, whose right to a seat in the choir is as incontestable as that of the leading singer” (776-77). Arthur Symons acknowledged that “to distinguish between light verse, which is poetry, and *vers de société*, which is what it calls itself, will certainly not be easy for the casual reader” (224). The deliberate artifice and historical setting of much of his verse has meant that Dobson has received relatively little attention in recent decades and is today rarely included in anthologies of Victorian literature.

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