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THE  
ORIGIN OF THE OFFICE OF POET LAUREATE.

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IN a recently published work the author has presented biographical details of the Poets Laureate of England; the object of this paper is to place before the Royal Historical Society in a concise form all the reliable information he has obtained as to the origin of the office. From the appointment of Chaucer about five hundred years have elapsed, and during that period a long line of poets have held the title of Laureate. For the first two hundred years they were somewhat irregularly appointed, but from the creation of Richard Edwards in 1561, they come down to the present time without interruption.

The selection of the Laureate has not always been a wise one, but the list contains the names of a few of our greatest authors, and the honour was certainly worthily bestowed upon Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and Alfred Tennyson. As the custom of crowning successful poets appears to have been in use since the origin of poetry itself, the office of Poet Laureate can certainly boast of considerable antiquity, and the laurel wreath of the Greeks and Romans was an envied trophy long before our Druidical forefathers held aloft the mistletoe bough in their mystic rites.

From what foreign nation we first borrowed the idea of a King of the Poets is doubtful, but in order to fully understand the title and the office as we now possess them, it is necessary to examine the traditions of other European countries, where the knowledge of letters existed, prior to their introduction

into this country. The ancient Greeks and Romans in their public games and ceremonies crowned their favourite bards with laurel. When Domitian held the Capitoline Games he himself placed the laurel wreath upon the head of the successful author; Statius was thrice crowned in this manner. The custom was observed in Rome until about 393 A.D., when Theodosius suppressed it as a heathen practice, though surely of a harmless description. In the Middle Ages the Romans publicly conferred the title of Laureate upon Francis Petrarch in 1341, and particulars of the ceremonies then observed have been preserved.

Petrarch visited the court of Robert King of Naples, by whom he was much admired, and at whose suggestion he underwent an examination in history, literature, and philosophy. Having passed through this preliminary ordeal with *éclat*, King Robert wrote to the Roman Senate urging them to offer the laurel to Petrarch, and the notification of their intention to do so was sent to the poet at Vaucluse, in August, 1340. King Robert presented his state robe to Petrarch, desiring him to wear it on the day he should be crowned; the poet proceeded to Rome, on the 8th of April, 1341, he was publicly crowned on the Capitoline Hill and proclaimed Poet Laureate and Historiographer.

The following was the formula used on the occasion by the Count d'Anguillara when he placed the laurel on the poet's brow :—

“ We, Count and Senator for us and our College, declare Francis Petrarch, great poet and historian, and for a special mark of his quality of poet, we have placed with our hands on his head *a crown of laurel*, granting to him by the tenor of these presents, and by the authority of King Robert, of the Senate and the people of Rome, in the poetic as well as in the historic art, and generally in whatever relates to the said arts, as well in this holy city as elsewhere, the free and entire power of reading, disputing, and interpreting all ancient books, to make new ones, and compose poems, which, God assisting, shall endure from age to age.”

Petrarch acknowledged the honour in a sonnet he then

recited, he placed his chaplet on the high altar of St. Peter's Church, and returned home.

Another equally celebrated Italian Poet Laureate was Torquato Tasso, born at Sorrento, near Naples, on the 11th March, 1544, and educated in the university of Padua.

His career was a chequered one, his poems brought him fame, and he found much favour at the Court of Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara, but at times a restless spirit urged him to wander about the country in a state bordering upon destitution, and finally he became so peculiar in his habits that he was for some years detained in a lunatic asylum. On his release he resumed his wandering career; his fame as the author of *Jerusalem Delivered* had, however, reached Rome, and Pope Clement VIII. sent an invitation to Tasso, then at Mantua, and in November, 1594, Tasso arrived in Rome, where he was received with much distinction by the Pope, who intended to confer the laureate crown upon him in the Capitol.

“ ‘I will give to you the laurel crown,’ said Clement, ‘that it may receive as much honour from you as it has conferred upon those who have had it before you.’ ”

Preparations were made for the ceremony, which was fixed to take place on the 25th day of April, 1595, but during the winter Tasso's health rapidly declined, and he died on the very day appointed for his coronation, in the monastery of St. Onofrio, at the age of fifty-two.

About 1514, Pope Leo X. named a wretched Neapolitan poetaster, one Camillo Querno, *Archipoeta*.

The inauguration was attended by much ceremony, probably only intended as a burlesque, but it affected the poet to tears. His crown was composed of a spray of the time-honoured laurel, with vine leaves, emblematic of Bacchus, God of wine, and the fine arts, and cabbage, which, according to an old superstition, was an antidote to drunkenness; history, however, records that in this instance it failed to keep the poet sober.

This man appears to have been the butt of the Roman nobles, who incited him to repeat one of his works, an almost interminable epic poem entitled *Alexias*; emboldened by this encouragement Querno incautiously boasted his power to make extempore verses for a thousand poets, when he was reminded that he also drank sufficient for a thousand bards as good as he.

“ Archipoeta facit versus pro mille poetis !  
Et pro mille aliis archipoeta bibit ! ”

The perquisites allotted to this individual were the leavings of the Pope's dishes and flagons, whilst all the circumstances of his appointment were so absurd that Englishmen would long since have forgotten his name but for Alexander Pope's well known lines in the *Dunciad* :—

“ Not with more glee, by hands Pontific crown'd,  
With scarlet hats wide-waving circled round,  
Rome in her Capitol saw Querno sit,  
Throned on seven hills, the Antichrist of wit.”

The present Poet Laureate of the kingdom of Italy is Signor Giovanni Prati, a poet whose works are greatly admired by his countrymen. This gentleman was born at Dascindo, January 27, 1815, he studied law at Padua, and was elected a member of the Italian Parliament in 1862.

In the empire of Germany the office appears to have been regularly maintained; the honour of laureation was usually conferred by the State, or by some university, and was by no means confined to one poet at a time, as has usually been the case in England. Latterly indeed the title was so lavishly bestowed by the German Emperors as to bring it into contempt, and numerous satires were directed against those who received and those who conferred the dignity.

The first Poet Laureate of the German empire, of whom mention can be found, was Conradus Celtes Protuccius, who was created by the Emperor Frederick III. about the year 1466. This Laureate afterwards received a patent from Maximilian I., naming him Rector of the College of Poetry and Rhetoric in Vienna, with power to confer the laurels on

approved students. Thus was the office handed down, the laurels being conferred either by Imperial authority under the Emperor's own hand, or by the Counts Palatine, or by others having official instructions and full authority. The poets were crowned with sprays of the tree of their old patron Phœbus, and the ceremony was invested with considerable importance. Apostolo Zeno (1669-1750), the Venetian composer and father of the Italian opera, was one of the most notable men who received the title *Il Poeta Cesareo*.

His successor was the still more celebrated Pietro A. D. B. Metastasio (1698-1782), upon whom the Emperor Charles VI. conferred the title in 1729, with a pension of 4,000 guilders. Frederick, another of the German Emperors, presented the laurels to Pope Pius II., as a mark of his appreciation of that Pontiff's writings.

The University of Strasbourg enjoyed the special privilege of creating Laureates, and availed itself of its prerogative with more freedom than discrimination. Probably the candidates for the laurels had to pay very heavy fees for the honour, which was doubtless considered in the light of a diploma, or degree, as we find that in the year 1621 no less than three Poets Laureate were created. The formula used on the occasion by the Chancellor of the University of Strasbourg was as follows:—

“I create you, being placed in a chair of state, crowned with laurel and ivy, and wearing a ring of gold, and the same do pronounce and constitute, Poets Laureate, in the name of the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.”

John Selden, in his work on “Titles of Honour,” gives an interesting account of the manner in which the ceremony of investing a poet with the laurels was performed at Strasbourg in 1616 by the Count Palatine, Thomas Obrechtus. The recipient—Joannes Paulus Crusius—attended at the time and place appointed by the public proclamation of the Count, and the assembly being full, Crusius commenced the proceedings by reciting a petitioning epigram. The Count Palatine then

delivered a long oration in praise of the art of poetry, and addressed Crusius in a Latin exordium. Then Crusius recited a poem consisting of 300 verses, which were called in the ceremony of the creation specimens *pro impetranda Laures*, and were composed upon a subject selected by the candidate. Count Obrechtus now displayed his patent as Count Palatine granted by the Emperor, citing from it the clause which conferred the power of creating Poets Laureate.

Crusius then took an oath of allegiance to the Emperor and his successors, whereupon the Count crowned him with laurels, and proclaimed him *Poetam et Vatem Laureatum*. A gold ring was placed upon his finger, and the Count made a speech exhorting Crusius to uphold the dignity conferred upon him. The Laureate replied in another poetical recitation expressive of his thanks, and of his desire to preserve the honour of the office, upon which the ceremony ended, as one would imagine to the great delight of the fatigued spectators.

The French do not appear to have adopted the title of Poet Laureate, nor have they applied it to any of their writers. Some of their historians have entitled Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1586), the *Regal* poet, but this would seem to have been but an idle compliment.

During the Middle Ages a curious institution existed known as *Les Feux floraux*, consisting of poetical competitions or tournaments, the prizes consisting of flowers fashioned in gold and silver. Clemence Isaure, Countess of Toulouse, revived these poetical contests in 1498, which henceforth were held annually in May. The conquerors were crowned with chaplets of natural flowers, degrees were conferred, and he who had three times won a prize was created a *Docteur en gaye Science*, the instrument of creation being in verse. Clemence Isaure, by her will, left a sum of money to be expended in prizes, which continued to be contested for until the floral games were suppressed in 1790. Napoleon re-established them in 1806, and the successful poems have been published from time to time. These games derived a certain air of importance from the fact that in 1694 Louis XIV.

granted by letters patent the title of *Academy* to the floral games. (See "Curiosités Littéraires," by L. Lalanne, Paris, 1857.)

The institution was known as early as 1323 as the *Collège du gai Sçavoir*, or *de la gaie Science*. The title *Feux floraux* appears to have come into use at the time of the revival of the ceremonies by the Countess Isaure. Some historians have cast doubts on the history of that lady, but the French people implicitly believe in the main facts as herein detailed, and have erected a statue to her memory in the gardens of the Palais du Luxembourg, at Paris, with the inscription

CLEMENCE ISAURE.

*Fondatrice des Feux floraux.*

The title of *Poet Laureate* is used in Spain as a degree conferred by the universities, as it was once in England, the University of Seville having, it is said, established that custom.

Cervantes contemptuously alludes to the title in the second part of *Don Quixote*, where he makes Sancho say:—

"Forgive me, honest Dapple, and entreat fortune in the best terms thou canst use, to deliver us from this vexatious misery in which we are equally involved; in which case I promise to put a crown of laurel upon thy head, so as thou shalt look like a Poet Laureate; and withal, to give thee a double allowance of provender."

To turn our attention to the office as it exists in our own islands, we can trace it, under one form or another, back to a very remote period.

From very ancient records it appears that the old Scandinavian nations not only had royal bards, but that the Irish and Welsh kings were constantly attended by their poets. Some regulations dating from 940 show that the bards of the Welsh kings were domestic officers in the royal household, to each of whom the king allowed a horse and a woollen robe, and the queen a linen garment. Numerous were the fees and privileges enjoyed by the royal bards in Wales, whilst some of

the duties required were sufficiently singular and quaint. Witness the following :—

“ The Governor of the castle was privileged to sit next to him in the hall, on the three principal feast days, and to place the harp in his hand, and on those days the poet was to receive the steward’s robe as a fee. The bard was to sing a song in the queen’s chamber if desired ; he was to have an ox or a cow from the booty taken from the enemy ; and when the king’s army was in array, he was to sing the song of the British kings. When invested with the office the king was to present him with a harp (according to some authorities the gift was a chessboard) of the value of 120 pence, and the queen was to give him a ring of gold. When the king rode out of the castle, five bards were to accompany him ; if the poet asked a favour, or gratuity of the king, he was fined an ode or a poem ; if of a nobleman or chief, three ; if of a vassal *he was to sing him to sleep.*”

In 1078 Gryffith ap Conan, King of Wales, placed the bards under certain rules and restrictions, at the same time that he drew up stringent laws for the protection of their lives and property. Thus whoever even slightly injured a bard was to be fined six cows and 120 pence, whilst the murderer of one of these highly prized individuals was to be punished by the infliction of a fine of 120 cows.

An early connection had existed between the Welsh and the Irish poets, and many of the regulations in Ireland were of a similar character to those observed in Wales, and all pointed strongly to the high estimation in which the bards were held.

Various circumstances conspired to sweep away these customs from England and Ireland, notably the introduction of large foreign elements into the population, and the various changes in the language. But with the Welsh, remarkable for their descent from the early Britons, for the ancient language they speak, and for their intense love of nationality, these bardic festivities were long preserved in memory of the days of bygone greatness.

The City of London had for many years an officer entitled

the *City Poet*, whose talents were to be devoted to the interests of the metropolis and the glorification of its Mayors. The following is a list of some of the principal holders of the office:—

	BIRTH.	DEATH.
John Heywood ... ..	—	1565
George Peele ... ..	1552	1598
John Webster ... ..	Early part	17th century
Thomas Middleton ... ..	—	1626
Anthony Munday ... ..	1554	1633
Ben Jonson ... ..	1573	1637
Thomas Dekker ... ..	—	1641
John Taylor (the Water Poet) ...	1580	1654
John Tatham ... ..	—	1658
John Ogilvy ... ..	1600	1676
Thomas Jordan ... ..	—	—
Matthew Taubmann ... ..	—	1685
Elkanah Settle ... ..	1648	1724

The exact origin of the title of Poet Laureate in England is involved in considerable obscurity; the two greatest authorities on the point—namely, John Selden, in his “Titles of Honour,” and Thomas Warton, in his “History of English Poetry”—are unable to trace back the appointment to its source.

In the first instance there can be little doubt that the idea of conferring honour upon their poets by crowning them was imitated by the English from the later Roman Empire. The universities conferred the title as a reward for skill in Latin versification; works in the vulgar tongue were not taken into consideration.

Of the university Laureates those of Oxford appear to have been the most celebrated. The title or degree was accompanied by a wreath of laurel. From the Oxford University registers it appears that on the 12th day of March, 1511, Edward Watson, student in grammar, obtained the laurels on the condition that he would compose a Latin poem in praise of his university. In 1512 Richard Smyth obtained the same dignity, subject to his composing 100 Latin hexameter verses to be affixed to the gates of St. Mary’s Church.

Maurice Byrchenshaw, another Laureate, was desired to write the same number of verses, and to promise not to read Ovid's "Art of Love" with his pupils.

The celebrated John Skelton also laureated at Oxford, and was permitted to wear the Cambridge laurel and robe as a mark of particular favour—honours to which he somewhat boastfully refers in his poems.

" At Oxford, the University,  
Advanced I was to that degree ;  
By whole consent of their Senate,  
I was made Poet Laureate."

He was also permitted to wear a special robe of white and green, the king's colours, decorated with gold and silk embroidery, the name of the poetical muse being worked upon it, as appears from his own description :—

" Why were ye, Calliope,  
Embroider'd with letters of gold ?  
SKELTON LAUREATE, ORATOR REGIUS,  
Maketh this answer :—  
Calliope,  
As ye may see,  
Regent is she of poets all,  
Which gave to me  
The high degree  
Laureate to be of fame royal.  
Whose name enrolled  
With silk and gold  
I dare be bold thus for to wear."

Robert Whittington was the last recipient of a rhetorical degree at Oxford. He wrote some panegyrics on Henry VIII. and Cardinal Wolsey, but there is no reason to suppose that he held the title of Laureate by royal appointment.

In addition, however, to these university Laureates, there had been from time immemorial an officer in the Royal household called the King's Poet, or King's Versificator. Of this office, and of those who held it, little can be learnt ; no records are known to exist of any coronation ceremony on their investiture, nor can it be said for what period the office was held. The first record of payment to the *King's Versifier*

occurs as early as 1251, when Henry III. made a grant of 100 shillings per annum to Henri d'Avranches, a French poet and minstrel. These royal bards appear to have composed most of their poems in Latin, the first of whom mention is made being William Peregrinus, or "The Foreigner," who accompanied Richard Cœur-de-Lion to the Crusades, and celebrated his warlike deeds in a Latin poem dedicated to Stephen Turnham, a renowned Crusader.

Robert Baston held the same appointment under Edward II., whom he accompanied to the siege of Stirling. The operations inspired Baston with a subject for a poem in Latin hexameters; but he was soon afterwards captured by the Scots, who forced him to write an eulogium on Robert Bruce, which he also performed in the same language and metre. Having thus taken a mild revenge upon the bard, the Scots set him at liberty.

Baston died in 1310. He is usually styled Poet Laureate and Oxford Orator.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the first poet of any eminence who wrote in the mother tongue, was styled Poet Laureate by his contemporaries, and received several royal grants and offices. He died on the 25th October, 1400, when his friend Sir John Gower, a lawyer of some eminence and the author of the "Confessio Amantis," appears to have obtained or to have assumed the title.

James I. of Scotland, during his captivity in this country, cultivated the friendship of these learned men, and in his own poem, entitled "The King's Quhair," speaks respectfully of them as "superlative as poetes laureate."

Sir John Gower died in the autumn of 1408.

In the time of Edward IV. John Kay was appointed to the office, probably by the King himself. No poetical works of his remain to show what pretensions he had to the title of *poet*, but one book of his survives which is more famous on account of its excessive rarity than from any intrinsic merit. It is a prose translation of a Latin history of the Siege of Rhodes, printed by W. Caxton in 1490, entitled "The Dylect-

able Newesse and Tythynges of the Gloryous Victorye of the Rhodjans agaynst the Turkes," translated from the Latin of G. Caoursin by *Johan Kaye* (Poete Laureate). *W. Caxton, Westminster.*

The dedication runs thus :—

"To the most excellente, most redoubted, and most Crysten King, King Edward the Fourth, Johan Kaye, hys humble poete laureate and most lowley seruante, kneying unto the ground, sayth salute."

As, however, Edward IV. died in 1483, the work must have been written some years before Caxton printed it.

Andrew (or Andrea) Bernard, a French Augustine monk, received the title, with a pension of ten marks, direct from the Crown, about 1486. All the pieces written by Bernard as Laureate were composed in Latin, although he held office as late as the reign of Henry VIII.

Prior to the appointment of Bernard very little regularity appears to have been observed, and it is impossible to clearly distinguish the Royal Laureates from the numerous university poets who received that title.

From the time of Andrew Bernard, about 1486, to that of Ben Jonson in 1616, several Royal Laureates were appointed, but without any legal or poetical ceremony, and in most cases without any fixed emolument.

It is usual, therefore, to style Jonson's predecessors *Volunteer Laureates*, he being the first to receive the title and pension by Letters Patent under the great seal, bearing date at Westminster, the first day of February, in the thirteenth year of the reign of King James, *i.e.*, 1616.

The pension then granted was 100 marks of lawful money per annum, during his life, but soon after the accession of Charles I., Ben Jonson petitioned for an increase, and new Letters Patent were issued, dated March, 1630.

After reciting the previous grant, the Patent proceeds :—

"Know yee nowe, that wee, for divers good considerations vs at this present especially movinge, and in consideration of the good and acceptable service done vnto vs and our said father by the said

Benjamin Johnson, and especially to encourage him to proceede in those services of his witt and penn, which wee have enjoined vnto him, and which we expect from him, are graciously pleased to augment and increase the said annuitie or pension of 100 marks, vnto an annuitie of 100 pounds of lawful money of England for his life. . . . And further know yee, that wee of our more especial grace, certen knowledge and meer motion, have given and granted, and by these presents for us, our heires and successors, do give and graunt unto the said Benjamin Johnson, and his assigns, one terse of Canary Spanish wine yearly; to have, hold, perceive, receive, and take the said terse of Canary Spanish wine unto the said Benjamin Johnson and his assigns during the term of his natural life, out of our store of wines yearly, and from time to time remayninge at or in our cellars within or belonging to our palace of Whitehall." Endorsed,—*Expl. apud Westm. vicesimo sexto die Martii anno R. Ris Caroli quinto.*

The successors of Ben Jonson were Sir William Davenant, John Dryden, Thomas Shadwell, Nahum Tate, Nicholas Rowe, Laurence Eusden, Colley Cibber, William Whitehead, Thomas Warton, Henry James Pye, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson.

Our Court Poets Laureate have never been solemnly crowned in public, nor have any examinations ever been held to inquire into the fitness of candidates for the post.

Political feeling has more frequently influenced the selection than poetical merit, and although the appointment has in most cases been held for life, Dryden was displaced on the accession of William III., and Nahum Tate lost the office on the death of Queen Anne, being succeeded by Rowe, who was in favour with George I.

Until the appointment of Shadwell by King William III. there were no official duties attached to the office, but he commenced to perform a certain duty by composing an ode to the Sovereign on his birthday, and another on New Year's Day, and such odes were regularly written by all his successors down to the year 1813, when on the death of H. J. Pye the custom fell into disuse.

The Laureate odes were sung to music, composed by the Court musician, in St. James's Palace, before the Sovereign and Court.

The Queen of the United Kingdom is probably the only Sovereign in the Christian world who does not hold a State reception on New Year's Day, and it is somewhat difficult to account for the decline of all ceremonial observances on the opening of the new year. Our ancestors appear to have carried matters to the other extreme; costly presents were given and accepted, the lawyers used to wait upon the Lord Chancellor, each man bringing with him a bag of gold as tribute; the Lord Mayor of London, with the Aldermen and Masters of the different City Companies, carried gifts of their special wares to the Sovereign, wine and beer being always included amongst the offerings; and the Poet Laureate used to compose an ode which was set to music by the Court musician, and sung before the King and Royal Family.

Many of these courtly festivities were suspended during the long illnesses of George III., some of them have never been revived, and the birthday odes and New Year's odes ceased to be performed a short time before the office of Laureate was conferred upon Robert Southey.

The present Poet Laureate has occasionally written poems laudatory of members of the Royal Family, but these have been voluntary offerings, and issued at irregular intervals.

#### NOTES ON THE EMOLUMENTS OF THE OFFICE.

1251. Henry III. grants 100 shillings per annum to Henri d'Avranches, the *King's Versifier*.

1368. Edward III. grants a daily pitcher of wine to Geoffrey Chaucer, to be charged on the Port of London.

Shortly after his accession Richard II. commuted that allowance for an annual payment of twenty marks.

November, 1486. Henry VII. grants a pension of ten marks to Andrew Bernard, Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal.

D

1591. Queen Elizabeth grants a yearly pension of £50 to Edmund Spenser, to commence February, 1591.

February, 1615-1616. James I. grants a pension of 100 marks to Ben Jonson.

1630. Charles I. appoints Ben Jonson to be Poet Laureate by Royal Letters Patent, with £100 pension and an annual allowance of a butt of canary, commencing March, 1630.

As City Poet Ben Jonson for many years received a pension of 100 nobles.

1660. In the list of the King's household at the Restoration no mention is made of a Poet Laureate. Davenant nominally held the post, but probably received no direct salary.

1670. More than two years elapsed between the death of Davenant and the grant of Letters Patent to Dryden in August, 1670.

1685. James II. disallows the annual butt of sack, but increases Dryden's pension.

On the flight of James II., Dryden loses his offices and retires into private life.

1688. William III. appoints Thomas Shadwell his Poet Laureate, with £100 a year and the allowance of wine.

These continue to be granted to each succeeding Laureate, until the appointment of Henry James Pye in 1790, when he accepts an annual payment of £27 in lieu of the butt of sack.

1702. On the accession of Queen Anne, Nahum Tate was re-appointed Laureate, and was also named Historiographer Royal, the latter post carrying a pension of £200 a year.

1714. The office of Poet Laureate being placed in the gift of the Lord Chamberlain (as it still is), it was necessary to reappoint Mr. Nahum Tate.

