

The Oxford Book of English Verse

From Oxford University Press USA

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Here is a treasure-house of over seven centuries of English poetry, chosen and introduced by Christopher Ricks, whom Auden described as "exactly the kind of critic every poet dreams of finding." *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, created in 1900 by Arthur Quiller-Couch and selected anew in 1972 by Helen Gardner, has established itself as the foremost anthology of English poetry: ample in span, liberal in the kinds of poetry presented. This completely fresh selection brings in new poems and poets from all ages, and extends the range by another half-century, to include many twentieth-century figures not featured before--among them Philip Larkin and Samuel Beckett, Thom Gunn and Elaine Feinstein--right up to Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney.

Here, as before, are lyric (beginning with medieval song), satire, hymn, ode, sonnet, elegy, ballad, but also kinds of poetry not previously admitted: the riches of dramatic verse by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster; great works of translation that are themselves true English poetry, such as Chapman's Homer (bringing in its happy wake Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'), Dryden's Juvenal, and many others; well-loved nursery rhymes, limericks, even clerihews. English poetry from all parts of the British Isles is firmly represented--Henryson and MacDiarmid, for example, now join Dunbar and Burns from Scotland; James Henry, Austin Clarke, and J. M. Synge now join Allingham and Yeats from Ireland; R. S. Thomas joins Dylan Thomas from Wales--and Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet, writing in America before its independence in the 1770s, are given a rightful and rewarding place. Some of the greatest long poems are here in their entirety--Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'--alongside some of the shortest, haikus, squibs, and epigrams. Generous and wide-ranging, mixing familiar with fresh delights, this is an anthology to move and delight all who find themselves loving English verse.

The Oxford Book of English Verse From Oxford University Press USA Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Let's get one thing straight. Christopher Ricks's 1999 version of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* contains some of the finest poetry the world has ever seen. Judiciously selected and beautifully produced, this anthology will reward both poetry virgins and over-versed roués with its canny, sometimes inspired conjoining of the familiar and the obscure. (It's also the first edition to let dramatic verse through the gate, meaning that some of the Bard's greatest lines have now made the cut.) From the medieval "Sumer is icumen in" through Seamus Heaney's "The Pitchfork," Ricks selects 822 poems from more than 200 writers. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare comes out on top. But Wyatt, Sidney, Jonson, Milton, Pope, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Hardy also make strong showings, as do such under-anthologized females as Mary Robinson, Jane Taylor, and Frances Cornford. In addition, the editor includes an assortment of mnemonically irresistible nursery rhymes.

Anyone who cares about literature in the English language will want this on their shelf. Yet some of those same devotees may have serious reservations about what Ricks has done with this literary institution. When Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote his preface to the first *Oxford Book of English Verse* in October 1900, his agenda was quite clear. He had

tried to range over the whole field of English Verse from the beginning, or from the Thirteenth Century to this closing year of the Nineteenth, and to choose the best. Nor have I sought in these Islands only, but wheresoever the Muse has followed the tongue which among living tongues she most delights to honour. To bring home and render so great a spoil compendiously has been my capital difficulty.

The metaphors of imperial colonialism spoke confusedly as the Muse followed the English tongue throughout the world and the anthologist brought back the rewards it wrought and wreaked. A century later, the project of "English verse" has lost its imperial certainty, and Ricks is no longer interested in exploiting the former colonies for raw material. Instead, he states categorically that his "does not seek to be a book of Anglophone verse, of verse in the English language whatever its provenance." This leads to some anomalies. He takes American verse only through the 1770s, but is happy to include verse from the Republic of Ireland. As for the linguistic products of the pre-independence Commonwealth: "I judged reluctantly that pre-independence poetry had not achieved poetic independence (freedom from diluted fashion), had not given to the world such poetic accomplishments as would constitute a claim to the pages of an anthology of the best in English poetry." Please discuss!

Ricks's "English verse," then, is predominantly verse from England, and of a fairly senior variety at that--the juniors here are such golden codgers as Thom Gunn, Derek Walcott, and Seamus Heaney. Ricks admits that "most of us are not good at appreciating the poetry of those appreciably younger than we are." That's a shame, because it denies *The Oxford Book of English Verse* a role in disseminating the work of the younger generation (and we're talking under 60 here) from a diversity of backgrounds. What he has undoubtedly produced, however, is an invaluable record of the past glories of English poetry, which will continue to inspire both readers and poets--whatever their age, wherever they are. --Alan Stewart

From Publishers Weekly

First compiled in 1900, the Oxford Book has been one of the few giant poetry anthologies intended more for

bedsides and train rides than for classrooms. Author of books about Keats and T.S. Eliot, and creator of *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, Ricks must be one of the few people on the planet both famous enough to be asked to remake this book and widely enough read to do it well. His new version (the first since 1972) starts with anonymous 13th-century lyric and ends with Seamus Heaney; in between are seven centuries' worth of poems in English from Britain and Ireland. (Poets from other countries are excluded except Derek Walcott.) Ricks brings in plenty of dialect verse, excerpts from long poems and verse plays, and a few translations into English. Some choices from major poets seem eccentric: of Pope, eight excerpts, and not one complete major poem? Of Wordsworth, eight poems, one in two versions? Twentieth-century choices look either "conservative" or idiosyncratic: William Empson (4.5 pages) gets almost as much space as Yeats (5.5), Basil Bunting only a page and a half (of translations). But such anthologies stand or fall on findings from minor authors, and Ricks offers a bounty of obscure good poems, among them Richard Corbett's sharp-tongued "Farewell, rewards and fairies"; Caroline Oliphant's wrenching Scots lament; a resonant story-in-verse from the second James Thomson; a harsh condemnation of war from Rudyard Kipling; and enjoyable silliness from W.M. Praed ("I'll cultivate rural enjoyment/ And angle immensely for trout"). Ricks also includes poems famous for nonliterary reasons: "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," for example (by one Jane Taylor). Long after reviewers stop debating how Ricks chose each item, readers will keep returning to these pages to find yet another good poem they've not before seen. (Nov.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From *Library Journal*

This new edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* celebrates the centennial of the first edition (produced by Arthur Quiller-Couch) and the first revision since Helen Gardner's 1972 edition. This latest version, prepared by the prolific critic Ricks (English, Boston Univ.) anthologizes writings that come mostly from the British Isles. Arranged in chronological order, the poems contained here range from the old, anonymous "Summer is icumen in" to the work of Seamus Heaney. But, in fact, Ricks's treatment of modern poetry is inexplicably thin. And in the end, although he adds a scattering of fresh names to this classic work and places some new pieces alongside the old standards, he has broken little ground. A Thomas L. Cooksey, Armstrong Atlantic State Univ., Savannah, GA
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Users Review

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