

1 Researching a single journalist

Alfred Austin

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In the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, Alexis Easley, Andrew King, and I identified several periodical types our volume had not dwelt on in detail. Among these were party political journals. While several journals with loose political affiliations were discussed in passing (for example, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*, which was founded as something of a Tory corrective to the Whig *Edinburgh Review*), they were not treated primarily as organs of political ideology. Before co-writing the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook*, I had already decided to undertake a study of Alfred Austin for this chapter; it is a genuine coincidence, although not an unhappy one, that at every stage of his career Austin betrayed a definitively Conservative outlook and founded one of the most influential late Victorian Conservative journals, the *National Review*. This chapter, in addition to considering Austin as a political journalist and establishing this as the primary factor behind his appointment to the laureateship, will also through practice demonstrate the difficulty – in fact near-impossibility – of researching one nineteenth-century journalist in isolation.

Austin is nowadays remembered for what many would term the wrong reasons, chief among these his status as the apparently least deserving poet laureate in British history. I first came across his work when writing my PhD thesis, which investigated the critical and cultural legacy of Alfred Tennyson in the sixty or so years after his death. Once Victoria's laureate passed away, there was a gap of more than three years before the next was appointed, and the successor could only pale in comparison with someone as eminent as Tennyson. Yet the obviously political nature of the appointment (which is one of the main focuses of this chapter), coupled with Austin's own minor stature (as a poet, although mockery often conflated this with his diminutive physical size), combined to secure his unfortunate place (or lack of place) in posterity.

There is no doubt that Austin is seen today, almost always scornfully, as a poet. However, if he had not been gifted the laureateship, he might have been remembered rather differently. He was of the opinion that poetry was the highest form of art (demonstrated in his assessment of Elizabeth Barrett

Browning as the “greatest poetess, and, therefore, the greatest woman, that ever lived”¹ and that verse alone was capable of “kill[ing] the chimæra” of “dreadful, mysterious, unsatisfying life.”² Yet he spent much of his life in the day-to-day world of prose journalism, particularly political journalism. In their introduction to the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor briefly discuss figures who, despite ostensibly belonging to separate professions, “were so regularly associated with journalism that their primary profession might arguably be designated journalist” – and their first example is Austin.³ Yet his journalism has not often been studied. This is partly because he downplayed its role in his literary career. He often mentions his journalistic work in his 1913 two-volume *Autobiography* but usually as a springboard for a typical late Victorian recollection of interactions with eminent men. Norton B. Crowell’s biography of Austin focuses primarily on his poetical career, and his bibliography of Austin’s contributions to periodicals begins, strangely, in 1880. (The first periodical piece attributed to Austin by *British Periodicals* is “In Sutton Woods,” a short poem published in August 1861.) There has been some interest from scholars in the *National Review*, which Austin edited for ten years, yet this interest has focused largely on its later years, when editor Leo Maxse was the first to denounce the campaign against Dreyfus as fraudulent.⁴ Stephen Koss gives a brief outline of Austin’s political connections and journalistic work in *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*.⁵ A few accounts of Austin’s appointment to the laureateship mention his journalism as a motivating factor in his appointment but say little more.⁶ In this chapter, I will investigate his journalistic career in detail, focusing on how his political affiliations, marked by his work as a journalist, influenced his selection as laureate.

In order to research Austin’s career as fully as possible, my first port of call was the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*. Volume 5 provides a list of 142 pieces by Austin primarily located in the *National Review* and *Temple Bar*; I photocopied this list and endeavored to read them all. I had planned to do so in the British Library using physical copies of the journals but then discovered that almost all were available via ProQuest’s *British Periodicals I & II*. My institution’s library does not subscribe to this database, so I went to Senate House Library and downloaded the articles to print out and read remotely in order to annotate them by hand. Searching for Austin in this database alerted me to many more attributions to Austin than listed in the *Wellesley*, which increased the number of articles in my to-read list, including poems, which (as I will discuss later) were omitted in the *Wellesley*. In addition to trying to read everything he wrote, I also consulted as many biographical sources as possible (there are not many): the entry in *The Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*; the essay by William H. Scheuerle in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; the only book-length biography (by Norton B. Crowell); and Austin’s own 1913 *Autobiography* (which I had previously consulted in

the British Library but which is now available for free via Archive.org and Mocavo). It quickly became apparent that an attempt to read everything Austin wrote would be fruitless as he spent many years writing anonymous leaders for the *Standard*. As many contributors to this collection observe, just as important to reading the work of one writer is “reading across” – looking at articles in context rather than in isolation, especially the context of the periodical in which they appear. This chapter will demonstrate some of these approaches through the material I discovered, focusing especially on Austin’s route to the laureateship.

Despite Crowell designating him “Alfred Austin, Victorian,” Austin in fact outlived the Queen; he was born in Headingley, Yorkshire, on May 30, 1835, and died on June 2, 1913.⁷ The son of wealthy Roman Catholics, he spent his schooldays at Stonyhurst College and was deprived of the otherwise inevitable Oxbridge education on religious grounds, instead taking his degree in London. He tried, for a while, to establish himself as a barrister (and in fact shared rooms in the Inner Temple with Sir John Pope Hennessy, the source of his first contact with a Tory grandee, in this case Disraeli), but his share of an inheritance from his uncle, secured in 1857, meant that he was free to abandon a career that held little interest and to begin writing verse. He had already published *Randolph, a Poem* in 1855 and produced *The Season, a Satire* in 1861. This Byron-inspired mockery focuses mainly on the activities of the upper classes during the London season. After reading a hostile *Athenaeum* review of *The Season*, Austin demonstrated his enthusiasm for a squabble, producing a short poem in book form titled *My Satire and Its Censors*. In the following year, *The Human Tragedy*, later the subject of many revisions, appeared.

There are difficulties in fully establishing Austin’s status as a periodical poet during the 1850s and 1860s. *The Wellesley Index* does not include entries for poetry, and ProQuest’s *British Periodicals I & II*, the best source currently available, does not include many poems by Austin from the period. One can only assume that he was not prolific, although to fully assess his output one would need to peruse every periodical issue in which his work appeared, not least *Temple Bar*. My assumption in this chapter is that the editors of *British Periodicals* were thorough in their attributions. Austin published a poem per month in *Temple Bar* from August to November 1861, when two of his poems were published therein. A good example of the tone and style of these poems is “Euthanasia,” from the *Temple Bar* of November 1861, which dramatizes the speaker’s struggle with suicidal thoughts. Somewhat archaic in its construction and phrasing, lines 5–9 of the poem read:

It would be so sweet to lie
Under wavering grasses,
Where a maiden’s footsteps sly,
Tremulous of a lover nigh,
Sometimes passes.⁸

There seems to be a grammatical error here: “footsteps” should surely be singular, which in turn would ameliorate the surfeit of “s” sounds in the line; alternatively, “passes” should be “pass,” which would upset the rhyme scheme. Such an error might well have been overlooked by a casual reader, but the inconsistency of tone is still problematic: the poet advises a young, potentially suicidal “boy” to “bear with this harsh exile” but also asserts that “Graves are a mother’s dimples, / When we complain.”⁹ The poem’s slightly jocular tone and archaic form (which recalls Tennyson’s poetry of some thirty years before) are perhaps less demonstrative of Austin’s poetical genius than of his ability to write for an audience. The poetry in *Temple Bar* in its first year of publication was, if anything, slightly more literary in tone than Austin’s generally light-hearted offerings, yet these must have been popular. Indeed, “Euthanasia” was the first item in the November 1861 issue, which might reflect the tastes of what the *Wellesley* calls the “comfortable, literate, but ill-educated middle-class which read magazines for pure entertainment and easy instruction,” whose favored magazine was edited by one of the eventual leading lights in Victorian journalism:— George Augustus Sala.¹⁰

Austin’s “Sonnet,” published in the *Fortnightly Review* on September 15, 1866, is far more elaborate in phrasing than his *Temple Bar* poems. The speaker asks whether he should “ ’Gainst arduous truth my feeble falseness use, / Like that worst foe, a vain splenetic friend?”¹¹ Like “Euthanasia,” it carries a message of continuation in the face of defeat, perhaps alluding to (thanks to its Florence location and date of August 16, 1866) the failure of the Italian forces in the Third Italian War of Independence which ended with the signing of the Armistice of Cormons on August 12. “Sonnet” is more serious in tone than “Euthanasia,” its phrasing perhaps reflecting the taste of the readers of the *Fortnightly*, which in the late 1860s published poetry infrequently. When it did include verse, its contributors were of the stature of George Meredith, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.¹²

The Florentine location of “Sonnet” betrays the frequent Italian focus of Austin’s journalism. His inheritance was clearly sufficient enough to allow him to travel extensively, and a first trip to Italy in 1862 led to many more. In Italy, thanks in no small part to his wealth, he made several useful acquaintances, chief among them Edward Bulwer Lytton and Edward F. S. Pigott.¹³ While it is true that writers without this kind of social capital (itself of course a product of economic capital) were able to succeed in nineteenth-century journalism, it is also the case that many journalists came to prominence as a result of their connections rather than their ability. This also highlights a problem in how Austin’s life has been recorded. Crowell does not mention Lytton or Piggott at all in his biography, although the latter is credited by T.H.S. Escott with securing Austin’s “path” to journalism.¹⁴ His connection to Lytton must also have helped; Austin certainly produced enough tributes to Lytton in print for this to be likely.¹⁵ Given the editorial structure of

periodicals, nineteenth-century journalists never worked fully in isolation, and much recent work has focused on networks of writers, as indeed does another chapter in this collection. The central problem here for researchers is a lack of access to the correspondence of writers, especially if they were not considered eminent or famous in their own time. Another difficulty is that so much networking of the period was conducted face to face. I am here relying on the few biographical accounts of Austin's life – his autobiography and Crowell's book – as well as the sources for the latter. Access to Austin's correspondence could improve our understanding of his networks, but in general his letters, scattered such as they are, have primarily been retained because of their frequently significant addressees.¹⁶

In comparison to his periodical poetry, most of Austin's contributions to periodicals are relatively easy to locate. A good number of them are signed, and the attributions in the *Wellesley Index* and *British Periodicals* seem exhaustive. He was initially a travel writer; his European trips led to what seems to have been his first piece of prose for a periodical – “At Florence,” which appeared in *Temple Bar* in December 1861 and was attributed to “A. A.” (The attentive reader could potentially, although not definitively, link this to the Alfred Austin who had been providing a steady stream of poetry in previous issues, although this more recent work feels quite English in its focus.) It is a wide-ranging piece of travel writing taking in the grave of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the interiors of various churches, the life of Dante, and the ongoing Italian independence movement. Austin's travel writing has aged better than most of his prose. Despite the fact that its intended audience was invariably well off or at the very least aspired to live in luxury, his accounts often managed to convey something of the atmosphere and highlights of the places he visited. For example, “A Reverie on the Riviera” (1886), signed “Rambler” and published in the *National Review*, takes a rather grumpy tone, informing the reader that “no one can say Monte Carlo is respectable” but that the south of France is still worth visiting – at least the undiscovered areas, which have “no shops, no inns, no streets.”¹⁷ The grumpy persona Austin adopted in some of his travel writing does, on occasion, spill over into mild racism, especially in two essays on Ireland in *Blackwood's* (published in 1894 and 1895), wherein he professes that the country's physical beauty is a by-product of its being a “fair and feminine” land, whose population is a “little undisciplined; for it has remained tribal and provincial, with the defects as with the virtues of a tribal and clannish race.”¹⁸ The Irish, according to Austin, are characterized by their “sadness,”¹⁹ which provides the country with a general inertia and impedes the production of outstanding poetry. It might say something about the standard of writing about Ireland at the time that Austin claimed to have been inundated by “characteristic offers of gratuitous hospitality from the landlords of certain inns in Connemara” as a result of his first *Blackwood's* piece on Ireland.²⁰

Austin's prose for *Temple Bar* is not often attributed to him in the magazine itself (it has subsequently been catalogued by the editors of the *Wellesley*

Index and British Periodicals I and II), yet it appeared more or less every other month from 1869 to early 1876, with a few pieces published in subsequent issues. In contrast to his later journalism, these contributions were often light in tone. Titles such as “The Frolics of Fashion” and “Modern Manners,” which appeared in consecutive months in 1872, provide a fairly clear overview of their contents. Austin did not mention *Temple Bar* in his *Autobiography*, despite its being the location for his controversial essay series *The Poetry of the Period* (which I discuss later). Norton B. Crowell makes only a brief mention of the magazine in his biography and does not include Austin’s *Temple Bar* articles in his bibliography. It is a tribute to the compilers of the *Wellesley Index and British Periodicals* that we now know just how much Austin contributed to the periodical. These contributions included several series. One, “Our Novels” (May–July 1870), offers a pessimistic view of the quality of English novels (notwithstanding Austin’s own less-than-successful forays into fiction and his unreserved praise, elsewhere, for the fiction of his acquaintances Bulwer Lytton and Disraeli). Another gives an account of “The Cycle of English Song” (May 1873–March 1874), which, working backwards, includes the renewed “boyhood” of nineteenth-century poetry, which followed the “old age” of Pope and the “manhood” of Shakespeare. Most importantly, his first series, “The Poetry of the Period,” provides a series of in-depth assessments of the major living poets of the day, published anonymously between May and December 1869.²¹ In each installment in the series, he considers the leading poetical lights of his day and finds almost all of them wanting. In his piece on Tennyson, he writes that the “laureate is beginning to totter on his throne. The signs of mutiny against his long unchallenged supremacy are unmistakable,” thus taking aim at the preeminent poet of his day.²² We read in a later part of the series, “It is not we alone who doubt if Mr. Tennyson is a great poet. His quondam flatterers do the same. We deny it explicitly. They deny it implicitly.”²³ Austin claims that “Tennyson’s flowers of poesy are flowers of the garden,” rather than a more sweeping, sublime landscape (a slightly unfortunate metaphor given his own later focus on gardens in verse and prose). However, if Austin was skeptical of Tennyson’s merits, arguing that the great poet’s work declined after his 1842 collection, he was far more withering in his assessments of other poets. For example, he quips, “Had a really great, adequate poet been alive, Mr. Swinburne would have failed to attract much attention.”²⁴ He claims to offer a vindication of American poets, writing, “Mr. Walt Whitman and his successors, constitute the balm that still abides in Gilead. The Old World is done up, no doubt; but Apollo has taken refuge in the United States.”²⁵ Yet the main reason for the essays having been remembered is Austin’s vitriolic attack on Robert Browning, who, in his assessment, is not a poet at all. “Paracelsus,” Austin argues, is “not a poem” but a prose-like piece written by a man who is “muddy and unmusical.”²⁶ He repeats this critique in the *Standard* and elsewhere, with the consistent refrain that Browning disguised prose as poetry. These articles

provide the context for an implicit attack on Austin in “Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper” (1876):

While as for Quilp-Hop-o'-my-thumb there,
 Banjo-Byron that twangs the strum-strum there –
 He'll think, as the pickle he curses,
 I've discharged on his pate his own verses!
 “Dwarfs are saucy,” says Dickens: so, sauced in
 Your own sauce, . . .²⁷

The ellipsis invites readers to supply Alfred Austin's name. As Britta Martens has noted, Browning's reference to Pacchiarotto's failed career as an artist and politician is intended to evoke Austin, who unsuccessfully stood several times as a Conservative Party candidate.²⁸ It is clear that Browning took an interest in Austin, as is shown by his allusion to Austin's frequent defence of Byron in print²⁹ and his mockery of the cult of Dickens in *My Satire and Its Censors*.³⁰ Yet the awareness of Austin's desire for a feud, reflected in the seemingly general iconoclasm of *The Poetry of the Period*, makes Browning's seemingly lasting irritation at Austin seem all the stranger.

The revelation of Austin's authorial identity when *The Poetry of the Period* (1870) was published in book form does not seem to have created the stir its author perhaps desired. *The Athenaeum* claimed that Austin “has got hold of many half truths, and he puts them before the reader in a lively though flippant fashion,” adding, however, that his response to Tennyson was an inevitable reaction to the great poet's popularity.³¹ Austin was too self-important (and too fond of a quarrel) to back down fully on his opinions, yet he withdrew the book from circulation in 1873 (which, again, makes Browning's lasting ire hard to understand). Indeed, in his *Autobiography* he claimed *The Poetry of the Period* “was so frankly outspoken throughout that it was not unnatural the author should have to pay the penalty of his candour for many a year to come, and of this he had no right to complain.”³²

In his journalism, Austin returned to the merits of the supposedly mediocre Tennyson. In an 1890 review of *Demeter and Other Poems*, he claimed that Tennyson “belongs already to the Immortals” and praised “Crossing the Bar” in typically fervent manner:

What a masterpiece! What a gem of purest ray serene, from the deep unfathomed caves of the poet's imagination! How lucid! how pellucid! Simple as the utterance of a child, profound as the utterance of a sage, finished as the utterance of an artist.³³

This amelioration of Austin's critical opinion corresponded with the beginning of his personal acquaintance with the poet, something he recorded in print in December 1892, two months after the laureate's death, where he described a visit to the Tennysons' home along with their discussion of

politics and versification.³⁴ In this account, he also reveals that he had sent, on hearing of Tennyson's death, a branch of poet's bay which was originally cut for him on a trip to Delphi, and that this was ultimately placed inside Tennyson's coffin.³⁵ An understanding of Austin's shifting attitudes toward fellow poets helps to explain his eventual rise to the laureateship.

Samantha Matthews has recently provided an excellent account of the last days and funeral of Tennyson, where she claims that Austin, in his elegy "The Passing of Merlin," "cannibalized the *Idylls [of the King]*" in order to demonstrate his own fitness to succeed to the laureateship.³⁶ It would seem that Austin was laying the groundwork for this poem in his 1890 review, where he repeatedly returned to the idea of Merlin having "followed the gleam."³⁷ Yet despite Austin's Tennysonian elegy, it was not his ability to mimic Tennyson's style that eventually secured him the laureateship. Austin's change in attitude to Tennyson might have been in part a genuine shift in perspective, or he might have recognized that an anti-Tennysonian stance had served its purpose in terms of advancing his career. Another possibility is that he might have been attracted to Tennyson's Conservative sensibilities, which he undoubtedly shared.

There has, of course, been much written on nineteenth-century British Conservatism in historical writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, yet the dominant focus of periodical studies has been of Liberal and progressive periodicals. Journals such as the *National Review*, which I discuss later, have received less attention in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, for instance, than radical periodicals. In much of the following discussion, I am indebted to Stephen Koss's *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Vol. 1: The Nineteenth Century*, in addition to the aforementioned biographical accounts of Austin, but there is much work still to be done on Tory journalism of the nineteenth century.

Even when writing anonymously and semi-frivolously in *Temple Bar*, Austin's journalism assumed an unmistakably Tory stance, not least in his approach to women. Despite the fact that *Temple Bar* employed contributors such as Eliza Lynn Linton and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Austin contributed a piece titled "Women's Proper Place in Society" in 1871. He writes,

Now and then, we imagine men not sufficiently strong-armed do turn blacksmiths, and either they or their clients will be sure to suffer in consequence. And that is precisely what would happen if women were to become lawyers, doctors, &c., though, as we shall see, even worse than that will happen.³⁸

Austin maintained the same opposition in an 1874 *Temple Bar* piece on women's rights, arguing that a change to the franchise was unnecessary because "women might largely influence their husbands' political views, and thereby the politics of the country, without themselves possessing a vote."³⁹ He also adopted the guise of an "old fogey" in 1877 for a piece

titled “On the Excessive Influence of Women,” which bemoaned women’s taste for “journals frivolous . . . [and] a daily paper which is crammed with gossip, personality, and scandal.”⁴⁰

While Austin was writing for *Temple Bar*, and some time into his tenure as laureate, he was also a leader writer for the *Standard*, which throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century became a “powerful force in conservative journalism” with a clear Tory affiliation.⁴¹ In his account of his appointment to the position, Austin observed, somewhat unusually, “Never, I suppose, did any one have so easy an entrance into Journalism.”⁴² He claims that he simply wrote a letter (from Italy) to the editor enquiring after work and was offered an opportunity to write a leader on “Victor Emmanuel and Garibaldi’s upcoming meeting in newly liberated Venice.”⁴³ Once he had been “leaded,” he was contracted to produce “five leaders a fortnight.”⁴⁴ From the outset, he told his editor, “I must be allowed to consider, in all I wrote, the interests of my country and the State,” by which he meant adherence to Conservative policies and beliefs.⁴⁵

Austin’s leaders were, of course, unattributed, yet one can potentially identify the author by their anti-Gladstone political stance. A leader from December 12, 1868, predicts a short life for Gladstone’s administration: “The Cabinet Mr. Gladstone has formed gives little promise of a long and vigorous life, but the Cabinet which his Radical advisors wanted him to form would certainly have broken up in a very few months.”⁴⁶ The ability to convey a Tory line on most, if not all, current affairs might well have been the reason Austin was afforded the opportunity to contribute “The Liberal Victory, from a Conservative Point of View” in the *Fortnightly Review* of June 1880. Again demonstrating an ability to write to his audience (in this case, readers with a classical education, which of course excludes most women of the period), he announced himself “like Themistocles when he sought shelter with the Persian king”⁴⁷ and then outlined various conclusions resulting from the Liberal victory. For example, he writes, “The Liberal Party are not really a Party at all, but a conglomeration of persons periodically agreeing to differ, and differing to agree, from the pain it gives them to see the Conservatives in office.”⁴⁸ One can already see Austin’s steadfast adherence to Tory dogma, which might explain why he was able to maintain his position as a leader writer for the *Standard* for over thirty years under various editors. He was also given the opportunity to report on significant overseas events, including the Ecumenical Council of 1869–70. (Again, these articles are unsigned; Austin later claimed authorship in his *Autobiography*.) Despite the appearance of these accounts in a newspaper, which naturally requires brevity and concision, Austin maintained a level of detail characteristic of his travel writing. For example, he was given space in which to detail his journey to Rome, including an intricate description of the “disorder” caused by baggage security checks during the railway journey to Rome.⁴⁹ The January 11, 1870, report is one and three-quarter columns long and assumes a familiar tone, encouraging readers to review previous reports as if they were

part of a long series that was worthy of following and even collecting. In the same year, Austin also covered the Franco-Prussian War, emphatically siding with Bismarck, who seems to have afforded Austin close access to the Prussian headquarters on the understanding that his reporting would reflect Prussian interests. One must take such claims of intimacy with a pinch of salt, however. In his essay “Minor Poets,” T.H.S. Escott includes Austin’s claim, as reported by Laurence Oliphant, that “only an hour or two ago I met Bismarck, and saw great coldness in his bow to me.”⁵⁰

Even without extensive access to his correspondence, it is clear that networks were all-important to Austin’s journalistic career. Despite his professions of intimacy with many major figures, including Bismarck, Tennyson, and Queen Victoria, there was perhaps no more significant acquaintance in his career than Lord Salisbury, to whose fortunes his services to the Tory cause were tethered. Political journalists rarely work fully apart from the influence of those they write about, and while Austin’s appointment to the *Standard* appears to have been independent of political patronage, it is nonetheless clear from later accounts and research that his developing friendship with Salisbury was a key motivation for many of his political writings, be they leaders or essays. Salisbury’s daughter, Lady Gwendolyn Cecil, summed up the relationship by saying that Austin

was a wholehearted supporter of Lord Salisbury’s policy both at home and abroad, was personally attached to him, and a frequent visitor at Hatfield. Their intercourse enabled him to forward the Minister’s policy by calling anonymous attention to aspects of it upon which Lord Salisbury could not himself dwell publicly, and this assistance was certainly welcomed, though there is no record of its ever having been directly invited.⁵¹

If we choose to believe this, it again underlines Austin’s skill as a leader writer – his ability to provide copy that was beneficial to his political allies without consulting them directly. However ambiguous Lady Cecil’s phrasing (“no record” is usefully vague), Stephen Koss has demonstrated just how closely linked Austin and Salisbury were. Koss argues that Salisbury, through his close attention to Austin’s leaders, “tried to shape the editorial views of the *Standard*,” and in letters he occasionally bemoaned the “dreadfully careless” staff at the *Standard* office when material he disapproved of was included – presumably, in part, because at least some of its readers understood its proximity to his own views.⁵² Letters from senior politicians to Austin confirm that he was fed information for inclusion in the newspaper. Bristol University’s holdings on Austin include Earl Balfour’s four-page letter, sent from Salisbury’s residence at Hatfield House on June 22, 1884, which provides Austin with an outline of the Conservative Lords’ position on franchise reform, stating their desire for a counter resolution which would support the expansion of the franchise only if it were matched by a

redistribution of parliamentary seats, citing Lord John Russell's approach to the Reform Bill of 1859 as precedent. The letter implores its recipient, "If you could prep this advice in the manner you know of, you would I am sure be doing a service to the party."⁵³ The *Standard* of June 25, 1884, includes a 1,509-word piece predicting, with what it claims is "perfect accuracy," that the Tory Lords will make exactly the preceding case for redistribution as a precondition for enfranchisement and which, among other details, cites exactly the case mentioned in the letter as precedent (this was, in the end, successful, and a redistribution did take place).⁵⁴ This helpfulness in print was not a one-off, as is demonstrated in the tone of a letter Salisbury wrote to Austin following the fall of his administration in 1892: "I cannot leave office without telling you how useful you have been on more than one occasion."⁵⁵ Perusal of the Austin letters still in existence, scattered as they are in places as diverse as the University of Iowa and West Sussex Record Office, would potentially reveal further details on Austin's collaborative methods. Budgetary and time constraints limited my ability to travel widely while researching this piece (having consulted library and archive websites to locate the most important material, I visited Bristol University and the Bodleian Library, but would have benefitted from extended access to several other collections, not least that at Stanford), demonstrating that some of the old problems of accessibility remain in the digital age.

Austin's services to the Tory (or Salisbury) cause were not, however, limited to his role as leader writer; if anything, he should be remembered as a Conservative editor. In the early 1880s, he and William Courthorpe began drumming up support for a new Tory journal which would promote the Conservative cause both directly, through political opinion pieces, and indirectly, through general criticism by writers linked to Conservatism. The project secured backing from Disraeli shortly before his death, which provided the momentum necessary to establish the *National Review* in 1883. Any account of Austin's career as journalist will inevitably overlap with the history of this journal. Its appearance coincided with the founding of the Cecil Club, which Austin, in a letter to Salisbury, called the "nursery of the magazine."⁵⁶ In the first issue, Austin recalled his discussions with Disraeli, quoting the elder statesman as saying,

But, above all, no Programme. [. . .] Opponents are unfair, and would simply avail themselves of a programme to misrepresent it. Besides, we are all of us short-sighted; and, therefore, the fewer promises men make the better. Moreover, it is unnecessary. The Review itself, and what was written in it, would be the programme.⁵⁷

Austin tried, in his opening article in the *National Review*, to claim that "to no Party is it under the faintest obligation, and by no Party will it be enslaved," but on the next page he claimed that it would be the "glass hive of Conservative thought and Conservative opinion."⁵⁸ As editor, he would

surely have overseen the capitalization of the word “Conservative” here. Later in the same article, he claimed that the review would help promote Conservatism regardless of the subject matter of its articles because its contributors would invariably be Conservative.⁵⁹ And in the second issue of the journal, Austin, never one to shy away from conflict, took on the journal’s critics in a piece written in the persona of “Thomas Tantity,” wherein he assailed *Punch* as the “official comic organ of the Radical Party.”⁶⁰ In his article, he also took on the *Telegraph* over its surely accurate claim that the *National Review* did indeed have a party allegiance.⁶¹ Letters to Austin from senior figures in the Conservative Party demonstrate the frequency with which he asked them for contributions.⁶²

Despite the *National Review* appearing at the height of Britain’s imperial power, it was less replete with jingoism and racism than one might expect. Nonetheless, “Are We Despoiling India?” expresses fairly strong support for the civilizing mission, emphasizing the “generally barbarous, in some places even savage, and at best but semi-civilised condition of the country.”⁶³ The article emphasizes that the British have tried

introducing into a far distant country [. . .] the English civilisation of the reign of Queen Victoria, the most advanced type of modern Aryan civilisation yet developed in the West. There were no roads in India until we made them, no bridges, no ports for its ocean-borne trade, no peace, no abiding order, no justice, no education in our modern utilitarian sense. All now have been supplied.⁶⁴

As a writer for the *National Review*, Austin shied away from the topic of empire, preferring instead to focus on subjects such as the deficiencies of Gladstone. In July 1886, an editorial titled “Gladstone’s Coming Defeat” accused the prime minister of “tergiversation and selfishness” as well as “imitating a jealous and angry woman” (Gladstone would indeed go on to suffer a defeat in July’s election).⁶⁵ Betraying the Conservative viewpoint of the periodical, this piece also bemoaned the expansion of the franchise, which meant that the “vote of the most ignorant and unlettered yokel will weigh as much, in the ballot box, as the judgment of extensive culture and ripe experience.”⁶⁶

As a journalist but especially as poet, Austin was also something of a literary celebrity. He edited the *National Review* for ten years while maintaining his position as leader writer for the *Standard*, undertaking most of this work from his home near Ashford in Kent. A piece in the *English Illustrated Magazine* of 1896 gives some idea of the atmosphere at this house in the early 1890s:

After lunch you find that, apparently, his one ambition is to bowl everybody out, excepting some pretty girl, over the lawn-tennis net. Then he disappears for an hour, having fired off a leading article which next

morning will encourage the readers of the *Standard* to swear by Church and State, or the Union, or the gallows, or the city corporation, or what institution soever be in need of vindication.⁶⁷

This account, which was occasioned by Austin's appointment to the laureateship in 1896, also noted the influence of two of his friends, the Queen and Lord Salisbury, on his literary success. Given their alliance over a number of years, there is no doubt that Salisbury would have wanted to reward his friend, not just for the promotion of the Tory cause in the *National Review* but also for his journalistic support of British Conservatism over his lifetime. Austin somewhat unintentionally confirmed this in a letter to the *Critic*, wherein he claimed that Salisbury "doubtless acted in conformity with what he believed to be the preponderant genuine literary opinion of his fellow countrymen."⁶⁸ In reference to this passage, Salisbury's recent biographer Andrew Roberts correctly notes the "pomposity of the five-foot hack," yet it is surely the combination of his Tory pomposity and willingness to undertake hack work that secured Austin the laureateship, perhaps along with his publication of a long poem, *England's Darling* (1896), which extolled the virtues of Alfred the Great.⁶⁹ But this hack work – or to put it more kindly, his ear for the Conservative political mood – was also his ultimate undoing, at least in literary history. His first poem as laureate, "Jameson's Raid," was an obvious attempt to ape Tennyson's rhythmic celebration of heroism on horseback in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," but the verse was poor quality and the raid the poem praised was opposed by the British (Conservative) government. Austin's talent for up-to-the-minute "vindication" in *Standard* leaders was clearly ill-suited to the demands of the laureateship, even if he was succeeding a Conservative poet.

Austin continued writing for the *Standard* for two years after his appointment but relinquished his journalistic position in 1898. Salisbury wrote to him,

I am very sorry to hear that you are meditating a retirement from public work. The readers of the *Standard* will be great sufferers from your resolution, and so will the interests of the Conservative party. But health stands before everything; and no one can doubt that you do rightly and wisely.⁷⁰

While Austin did continue to publish occasional verse in periodicals along with the odd article on topics such as American copyright law, by the dawn of the twentieth century he had retreated from the world of journalism, seemingly to spend more time writing poetry and his two-volume *Autobiography*, which even by late Victorian standards was self-aggrandizing.

Despite the accessibility of almost all of Austin's journalistic output, there are methodological problems inherent in researching a single journalist. Even though Austin's output, particularly for the *National Review*, was prolific

(*British Periodicals I and II* attributes twenty-one single-authored articles to Austin between March 1883 and February 1884) and can tell us a great deal about journalistic practice and his fairly unusual career, the practice of focusing on one writer it is nonetheless directly counter to most nineteenth-century experiences of reading periodicals. Readers could have been attracted to contributions by particular “star” writers, turning first to their publications. Subscribers to the *National Review* might well have eagerly anticipated contributions from Austin’s various alter egos, but nineteenth-century readers would rarely have bought or picked up a periodical and only consulted the work of one writer, especially because articles, not least the leaders which (probably) constitute the bulk of Austin’s prose journalistic output, were so often unattributed. As such, researching a single journalist will inevitably only provide a partial understanding of nineteenth-century periodical culture.

However, exemplary recent studies of individual journalists, including Fionnuala Dillane’s *Before George Eliot*, have gone beyond the typical biographical approach of mining journalistic output for quotations that reflect aspects of a writer’s art. Instead, they provide a fuller appreciation of the links between authors and journalistic context. In this article, I have demonstrated that in order to fully understand Austin’s career, it is necessary to consider the relationship between his poetry and prose as well as his signed and unsigned publications. It is also important to examine his exchanges with fellow critics and writers in periodicals; his journalistic collaborations with political allies; and the relationship between his biography as a journalist and the history (and politics) of the *National Review*.

Notes

- 1 Austin, “At Florence,” 136.
- 2 Austin, “On the Killing of the Chimæra,” 404.
- 3 Brake and Demoor, “Introduction,” vi.
- 4 Parry, “*National Review* and the Dreyfus Affair.”
- 5 See Koss, *Rise and Fall*, 249–50, 301–2.
- 6 For instance, see Matthews, “After Tennyson,” 322–5; Petersen, “On the Appointment”; and Matthews, *Poetical Remains*, 270–2.
- 7 For a fuller biography, see Scheurle, “Alfred Austin.”
- 8 Austin, “Euthanasia,” 472.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Houghton, *Wellesley*, 3:386–7.
- 11 Austin, “Sonnet,” 357.
- 12 For more on the *Fortnightly* see North, *Waterloo*, 5:189.
- 13 See Escott, “Minor Poets,” 75.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 15 These include Austin’s “Edward Bulwer,” “Late Lord Lytton,” and “Owen Meredith,” which praises Bulwer Lytton’s son.
- 16 Austin’s correspondence is held a variety of locations, including Bristol University (letters from A. J. Balfour and Robert, Marquis of Salisbury, among others); the University of Iowa (letters from Austin to various people); Stanford University

- (letters to Austin from Salisbury); and the West Sussex Record Office (letters from Austin to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt).
- 17 Austin, "Reverie on the Riviera," 359, 363.
 - 18 Austin, "That Damnable Country," 310, 324.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 312.
 - 20 Austin, "Ireland Revisited," 636.
 - 21 Austin, "Poetry of the Period: Mr. Tennyson," 184.
 - 22 Austin, "Poetry of the Period: Mr. Browning," 317.
 - 23 *Ibid.*
 - 24 Austin, "Poetry of the Period: Mr. Swinburne," 458.
 - 25 Austin, "Poetry of the Period: The Poetry of the Future," 314.
 - 26 Austin, "Poetry of the Period: Mr. Browning," 318, 327.
 - 27 Browning, *Poetical Works*, 527.
 - 28 Martens, *Browning, Romantic Poetics*, 214–20.
 - 29 Austin's *The Season* was a Byronesque satire on the London "season"; he also wrote several magazine pieces in defence of Byron.
 - 30 Austin, *My Satire*, 40; Austin, "Charles Dickens," 554.
 - 31 "Poetry of the Period," 386.
 - 32 Austin, *Autobiography*, 2:2–4.
 - 33 Austin, "Lord Tennyson's New Volume," 696, 702.
 - 34 Austin, "Tennyson's Literary Sensitiveness." In Austin's *Autobiography*, there is a long account of this trip, wherein Austin reveals that Tennyson took issue with Austin's earlier criticisms. He claims that the notoriously sensitive Tennyson bristled at the charge that his early work was Keatsian. See Austin, *Autobiography*, 2:219–30.
 - 35 Austin, "Tennyson's Literary Sensitiveness," 460.
 - 36 Matthews, *Poetical Remains*, 272.
 - 37 Austin, "Lord Tennyson's New Volume," 698.
 - 38 Austin, "Women's Proper Place," 174.
 - 39 Austin, "Burning Question," 34.
 - 40 Austin, "On the Excessive," 221.
 - 41 Wood, "Standard," 597. For more on the early years of the newspaper, see Griffiths, "Early Management."
 - 42 Austin, *Autobiography*, 1:215.
 - 43 *Ibid.*, 214.
 - 44 *Ibid.*
 - 45 *Ibid.*, 215.
 - 46 Austin, Untitled Leader, 4.
 - 47 Austin, "Liberal Victory," 834.
 - 48 *Ibid.*, 836.
 - 49 Austin, "Œcumenical Council," 5.
 - 50 Escott, "Minor Poets," 74.
 - 51 Quoted in Crowell, *Alfred Austin*, 152–3.
 - 52 Koss, *Rise and Fall*, 238; see also page 300. Letter from Salisbury to Austin, January 4, 1887 [mistakenly written as 1886], Bristol University Special Collections, DM668.
 - 53 Letter from Earl Balfour to Austin, June 22, 1884, Bristol University Special Collections, DM668.
 - 54 Untitled Leader, *Standard*, June 25, 1884, 4.
 - 55 Austin, *Autobiography*, 2:179.
 - 56 Quoted in Koss, *Rise and Fall*, 249.
 - 57 Austin, "Above All," 25.
 - 58 *Ibid.*, 25–6.
 - 59 *Ibid.*, 35–6.

- 60 Austin, "Our Critics," 165.
- 61 Ibid., 168–70.
- 62 See, for instance, Salisbury to Austin, July 19, 1886; Salisbury to Austin, September 16, 1884; Goschen to Austin, undated, where it appears Goschen has been soliciting contributions on Austin's behalf; and Chamberlain to Austin, July 5, 1887. All from Bristol University Special Collections, DM668.
- 63 Birdwood, "Are We Despoiling," 47. The *Wellesley Index* identifies "John Indigo," the author of the article, as George Birdwood. Even though Austin did not write the essay, he would probably have edited it.
- 64 Ibid., 47–8.
- 65 Austin and Courthorpe, "Gladstone's Coming Defeat," 580, 579.
- 66 Ibid., 577.
- 67 Hodgson, "Mr. Alfred Austin," 613.
- 68 Quoted in Crowell, *Alfred Austin*, 27.
- 69 Roberts, *Salisbury*, 628.
- 70 Quoted in Austin, *Autobiography*, 2:178–9.

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