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AudioBooks

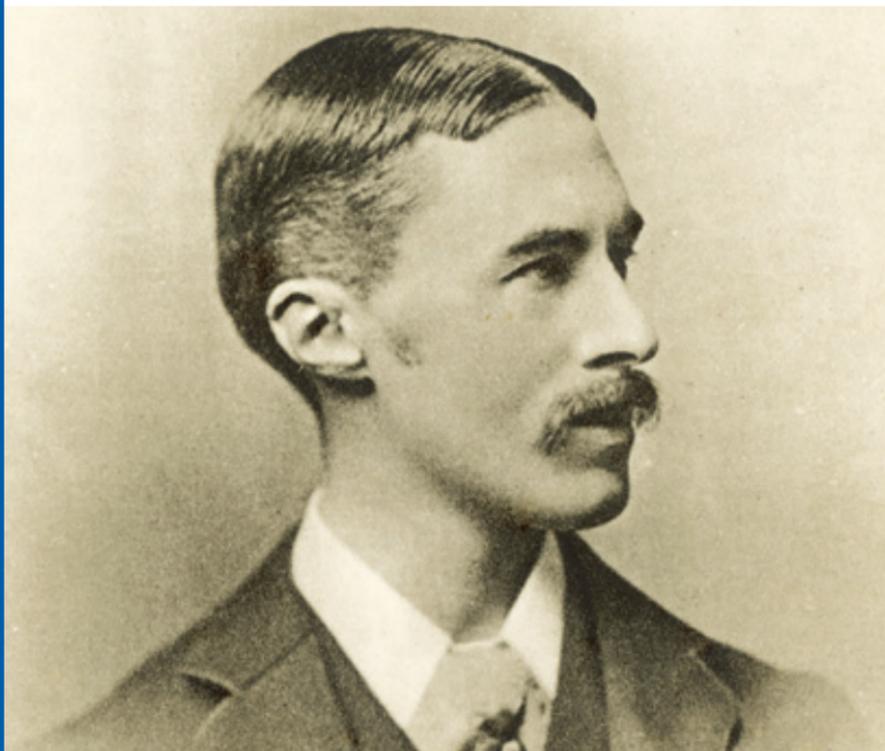
A.E. Housman

A Shropshire lad

THE
GREAT
POETS

POETRY

Read by Samuel West



1	1887 From Clee to heaven the beacon burns	1:25
2	Loveliest of trees, the cherry now	0:33
3	THE RECRUIT: Leave your home behind, lad	0:59
4	REVEILLE: Wake: the silver dusk returning	1:02
5	Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers	1:24
6	When the lad for longing sighs	0:31
7	When smoke stood up from Ludlow	1:10
8	'Farewell to barn and stack and tree'	0:57
9	On moonlit heath and lonesome bank	1:18
10	MARCH: The sun at noon to higher air	0:55
11	On your midnight pallet lying	0:36
12	When I watch the living meet	0:39
13	When I was one-and-twenty	0:39
14	There pass the careless people	0:50
15	Look not in my eyes, for fear	0:44
16	It nods and curtseys and recovers	0:24
17	Twice a week the winter thorough	0:30
18	Oh, when I was in love with you	0:19
19	TO AN ATHLETE DYING YOUNG	1:18
20	Oh fair enough are sky and plain	0:39
21	BREDON HILL: In summertime on Bredon	1:25
22	The street sounds to the soldiers' tread	0:31

23	The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair	1:03
24	Say, lad, have you things to do?	0:30
25	This time of year a twelvemonth past	0:37
26	Along the fields as we came by	0:51
27	'Is my team ploughing'	1:19
28	THE WELSH MARCHES: High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam	1:36
29	THE LENT LILY: 'Tis spring; come out to ramble	0:42
30	Others, I am not the first	0:45
31	On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble	1:02
32	From far, from eve and morning	0:29
33	If truth in hearts that perish	0:44
34	THE NEW MISTRESS	1:02
35	On the idle hill of summer	0:42
36	White in the moon the long road lies	0:45
37	As through the wild green hills of Wyre	1:33
38	The winds out of the west land blow	0:48
39	'Tis time, I think by Wenlock town	0:33
40	Into my heart an air that kills	0:25
41	In my own shire, if I was sad	1:24
42	THE MERRY GUIDE: Once in the wind of morning	2:17
43	THE IMMORTAL PART: When I meet the morning beam	1:59
44	Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?	1:27

45	If it chance your eye offend you	0:21
46	Bring, in this timeless grave to throw	1:01
47	THE CARPENTER'S SON: 'Here the hangman stops his cart'	1:13
48	Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle	1:16
49	Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly	0:27
50	Clunton and Clunbury, Clungunford and Clun	1:03
51	Loitering with a vacant eye	0:59
52	Far in a western brookland	0:41
53	THE TRUE LOVER: The lad came to the door at night	1:29
54	With rue my heart is laden	0:22
55	Westward on the high-hilled plains	0:39
56	THE DAY OF BATTLE: 'Far I hear the bugle blow'	0:40
57	You smile upon your friend to-day	0:18
58	When I came last to Ludlow	0:20
59	THE ISLE OF PORTLAND: The star-filled seas are smooth to-night	0:36
60	Now hollow fires burn out to black	0:20
61	HUGHLEY STEEPLE: The vane on Hughley steeple	0:57
62	'Terence, this is stupid stuff'	2:52
63	I Hoed and trenched and weeded	0:43

Total time: 64:03

A.E. Housman

(1859–1936)

A Shropshire lad

Alfred Edward Housman was not himself a Shropshire lad. He was born in Bromsgrove in neighbouring Worcestershire in 1859, relating in later life that ‘Shropshire was on our western horizon which made me feel romantic about it.’ *A Shropshire Lad* was in fact not written in a rural retreat at all, but many miles from the ‘blue-remembered hills’, in Highgate, London. When he could not find a publisher, Housman had the collection privately printed in 1895. Though not an immediate success, by 1898 the melancholic and nostalgic tone of the poems had struck a chord with the Victorian public, who were feeling that the 1890s had marked the end of a glorious era, and the beginning of an uncertain future. Themes of lost love, lost youth and early death suited the Victorians’ inclination for morbidity exactly. But the theme of *A Shropshire Lad*

that was to strike a chord with the next generation, so many of whose young men were to die on the battlefields of Flanders, was the militarism that recurs throughout the poems. Housman’s youngest brother Herbert had enlisted in 1889, and died in the Boer War in 1900. He was the model for the young men in Housman’s poems who become soldiers, recklessly seeking death and glory in war.

It was said that every ‘Tommy’ in World War I had a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* in his knapsack, and the sales figures of the poems go a long way to support that myth. The book averaged 13,500 sales a year during the Great War. Housman insisted that the price of his poems should be kept low to encourage soldiers to buy them; he never took a royalty for *A Shropshire Lad*.

Post World War I, *A Shropshire*

Lad became a set book for school examinations for several decades, its highly emotional themes appealing to adolescents. By 1940, 130,000 copies had been printed, and its position as a classic of English literature was assured.

A Shropshire Lad is a collection of 63 poems that were originally going to be published as *The Poems of Terence Hearsay*. Terence is the 'lad', and is our guide through the narrative that loosely links his verses. He talks of the untimely deaths of other young lads, thwarted friendships, unfaithful girls, male bonding, of losing one's sense of self in London, and the uncertain glories of being a soldier. Above all, the poems deal with the exuberance of youth – its aspirations and disappointments, its naïve certainties and tragic mistakes. An adolescent obsession with death overshadows the verses, and the death-count, whether by suicide, hanging, murder, or on the battlefield, is high. It appeals to young and old, and the collection has never been out of print.

Housman wrote the poems in an easy folk style, with jaunty rhythms and simple direct language, peppered

with colloquialism and local dialect. For example, Poem 9 refers to 'a careless shepherd once would keep the flocks by moonlight there.' 'Keeping sheep by moonlight' is Shropshire slang for a felon hanging in chains.

If the poems seem somehow familiar to us, it is because Housman draws on diverse and recognisable sources, such as Shakespeare (Poem 54) and Kipling (Poem 56), with a passing reference to Milton (Poem 62).

At times the verses recall the old English ballad tradition, and it is not surprising that so many of the verses have been set by composers, most notably Ralph Vaughan Williams and George Butterworth, himself a victim of World War I. Housman made it a principle never to refuse permission for his poems to be set to music. 'I always give my consent to all composers in the hope of becoming immortal', he once joked.

Housman was the eldest of the seven children of a country solicitor. When he was 12, his mother died. His sister Kate recalled: 'The cruel loss of her seems to have caused in him an early resentment

against nature's relentless ways of destruction... Death that cuts short both joys and sorrows became an obsession with him. It was already there in boyhood.' Despite being a natural scholar, winning a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford in 1877, Housman failed miserably in his exams there and left without a degree. His brother Laurence put the failure down to his intellectual arrogance, but he was going through a difficult emotional time. He had met and fallen in love with a fellow student, Moses Jackson. A deep friendship developed, but Jackson was heterosexual and did not return Housman's love. His rejection and subsequent marriage had a devastating effect on Housman.

Housman's homosexuality is a hidden theme throughout the collection. The 'luckless lads' and 'lads like me' that Housman refers to in the final poem may be hiding their sexuality as he did. But, startlingly, in Poem 44, Housman's anger erupts in a tribute to a Woolwich cadet driven to suicide by guilt about his homosexuality and fear of the persecution society would inflict on someone who did not conform to its sexual code. 1895, the

year of *A Shropshire Lad's* publication, was also the year of Oscar Wilde's trial for homosexuality which, after his imprisonment, left him a broken man. It is understandable that Housman, in Poem 30, reveals that 'fear contends with desire' within him. Poem 44's frank style is at odds with the rest of the collection, but obviously comes from deep in Housman's heart.

On leaving Oxford, Housman took a job as a civil servant at Her Majesty's Patent Office. Continuing his classical studies and publishing many erudite essays, he won, in 1892, the Chair of Latin at University College, London, despite not having an honours degree. In 1911 he became professor of Latin at Cambridge and a Fellow of Trinity College, becoming a virtual recluse there until his death in 1936. He was a brilliant classicist. There are references in *A Shropshire Lad* to the Greek myth of Narcissus in Poem 15, and the god Hermes who is the Merry Guide of Poem 42.

Some found Housman impossible; he could be cold, cutting, and sarcastic. Of Jowett's edition of *Plato* he commented:

'The best translation of a Greek philosopher which has ever been executed by a person who understood neither philosophy nor Greek.' Others, however, remember him playing with the Master of Trinity's grandchildren – and their toys. Housman carried the memory of Jackson with him to the end of his life, as his brother Laurence recalled: 'In Alfred's rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge, I asked him whose was the portrait which hung over the fireplace. In a strangely moved voice he answered, "That was my friend Jackson, the man who had more influence on my life than anyone else."'

Notes by David Timson



Samuel West was widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film *Howard's End*. Other film credits include *Carrington* and *Reunion*, and he has been seen on TV in *Persuasion* and *Heavy Weather*. Theatrical roles have included Valentine in *Arcadia* and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He also reads *The Great Poets – Keats*, *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age*, *Great Speeches in History*, *Peter Pan* and *Lord Windermere* in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for Naxos AudioBooks.

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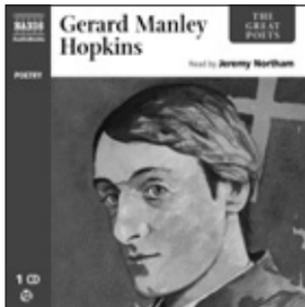
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Cover picture: *Alfred Edward Housman English scholar and poet at the age of 35*; courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library

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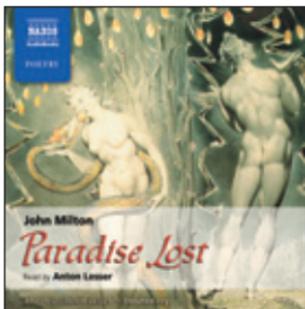
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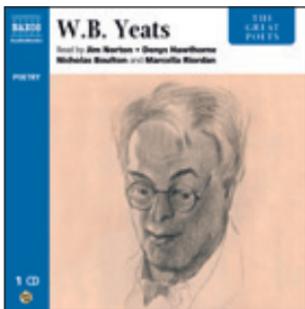
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THE
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POETS

Produced by
David Timson

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A.E. Housman A Shropshire lad

Read by Samuel West

In *A Shropshire Lad*, A.E. Housman recreates a nostalgic world of lost love, lost youth, thwarted friendships, unfaithful girls, male bonding, untimely death and the uncertain glories of being a soldier. The poems deal with the exuberance of youth – its aspirations and disappointments, its naïve certainties and tragic mistakes. Though written in 1895, it struck a chord with the generation of young men who fought in World War I. It was said that every ‘Tommy’ had a copy in his knapsack. It has never been out of print.

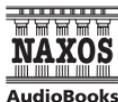


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