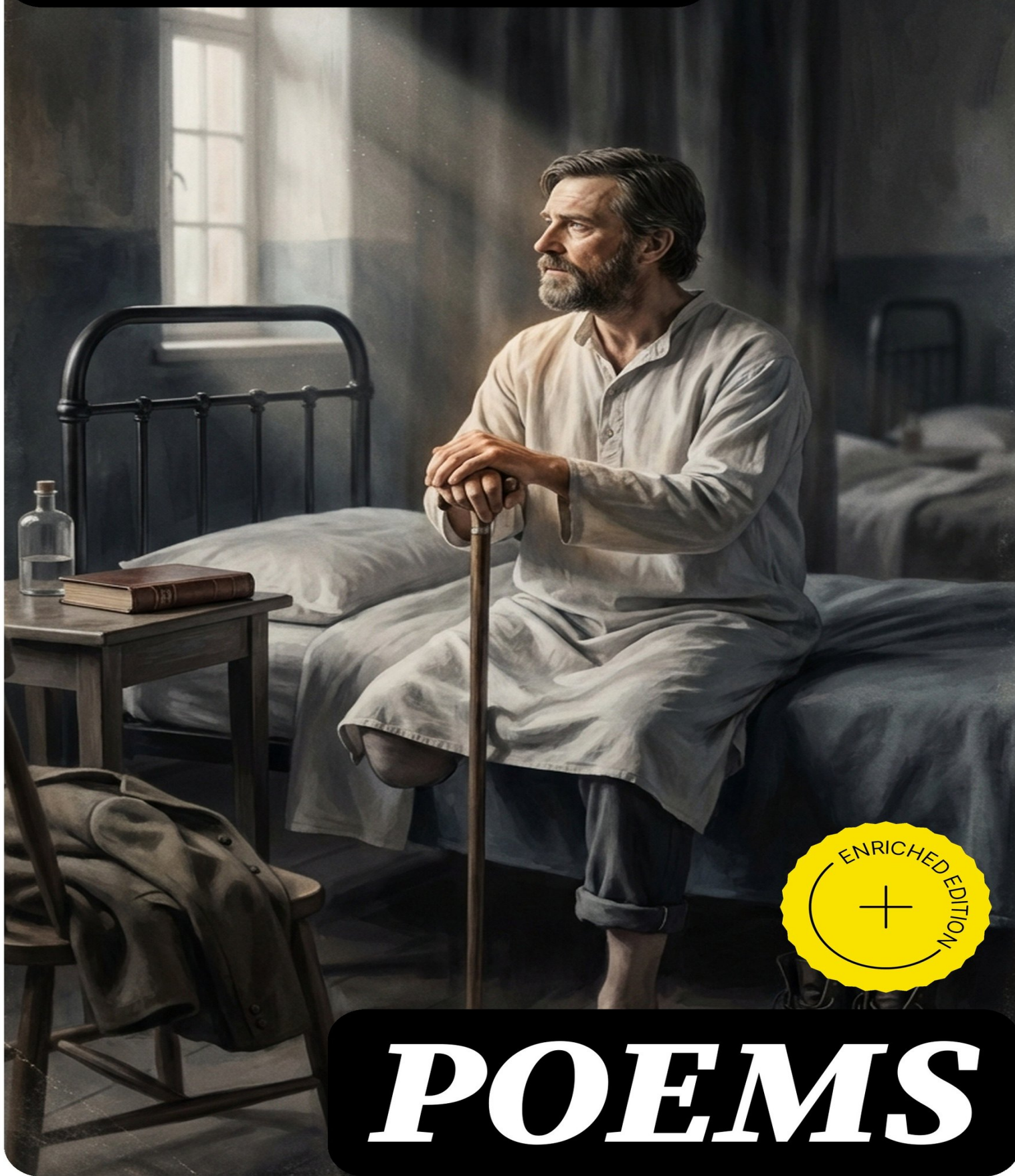


***WILLIAM  
ERNEST HENLEY***



***POEMS***

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ERNEST HENLEY**



**POEMS**

**William Ernest Henley**

# **Poems**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Ursula Caldwell*

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# Introduction

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This single-author collection, titled *Poems*, presents William Ernest Henley's verse in a broad, representative compass. It gathers complete sequences alongside characteristic shorter pieces, so that readers can encounter the range of his craft in one place. Major groupings such as *In Hospital*, *London Voluntaries*, and *Rhymes and Rhythms* appear with their internal order preserved, while notable lyrics, ballades, and occasional addresses are interleaved to show continuities of voice and theme. The purpose is not archival exhaustiveness but intelligible amplitude: to exhibit Henley's principal modes and subjects, and to offer a coherent path through poems that first appeared across different books and years.

All the texts here are poems, but they take varied shapes. There are narrative-lyric sequences, city suites marked by musical tempo, French fixed forms such as the ballade and double ballade, elegies signaled by *I. M.*, epistolary dedications to friends and collaborators, and formal book-ends in prologues, epilogues, and an envoy. Readers will find addresses *To F. W.*, *To W. R.*, and *To James McNeill Whistler*; memorials including *I. M. Margaritæ Sorori* and *I. M. R. L. S.*; and experiments like *Carmen Patibulare*. This formal variety is integral to Henley's method: each pattern frames a distinct register of feeling, observation, and argument.

At the core stands *In Hospital*, the sustained sequence derived from Henley's experience of prolonged treatment and convalescence. Its sections—*Before, Operation, After, Vigil, Clinical, Casualty, and Discharged*, among others—trace the atmosphere and routines of the ward without sentimentality. Portraits of persons recur: *Staff-Nurse: Old Style, Staff-Nurse: New Style, Lady-Probationer, House-Surgeon, The Chief, and Children: Private Ward*. Episodes of waiting, music, apparition, and nocturn temper the clinical with the contemplative. An *Envoi to Charles Baxter* concludes the cycle. Together these poems record bodily extremity, institutional drama, and hard-won endurance, establishing a modern poetic idiom for pain, attention, and recovery.

Beyond the ward, Henley's appetite for form and attitude quickens in the ballades and related miscellanies. *Ballade of a Toyokuni Colour-Print* places ekphrasis in a strict stanzaic scheme; *Ballade of Dead Actors, Ballade of Truisms*, and pieces with double refrains dramatize recurrence and turn. *Double Ballade of Life and Fate* and *Double Ballade of the Nothingness of Things* expand the pattern into meditative amplitude. *Bric-à-Brac* collects quick, tensile studies, while *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* refracts romance and fancy through an urbane lens. *The Song of the Sword* strikes a note of energy and conflict, a rhetoric of will wrought into ringing, disciplined measures.

Henley's city is both subject and instrument. At *Queensferry, In Fisherrow, From a Window in Princes Street, In the Dials*, and pieces such as *Back-View, Croluis, and Attadale West Highlands* register spaces with tactile

precision and a painter's economy. The five London Voluntaries—Grave, Andante con moto, Scherzando, Largo e mesto, and Allegro maëstoso—translate metropolitan rhythms into musical thinking, orchestrating street, weather, and crowd into movement. Orientale and The Gods Are Dead extend his gaze outward and backward, yet the prevailing stance is contemporary and local: a poetry of pavements and vistas, keyed to light, traffic, and the human presence they contain.

Echoes and Rhymes and Rhythms reveal Henley's public friendships and private loyalties. Across numbered poems and inscriptions, he remembers R. T. Hamilton Bruce, Margaret Emma Henley (1888–1894), and others marked by I. M.; he honors contemporaries by initials; he writes to James McNeill Whistler and J. A. C.; he salutes R. L. S. (1850–1894). *Matri Dilectissimæ* and pieces To W. A., To A. D., To K. de M., and To R. A. M. S. exemplify the epistolary thread. The sequence architecture—Prologue to Epilogue, with interleaved dedications—binds testimony, esteem, and grief into a sustained chorus of remembrance and address.

Throughout, Henley's signatures are unmistakable: tensile rhythms, chiselled diction, a stoic candor about bodily limits, an urban sensibility quick to register weather, work, and crowd, and a disciplined delight in pattern—refrain, stanza, cadence. The unities here are thematic as well as formal: resilience amid infirmity, fellowship amid anonymity, and appetite for life in the shadow of loss. Read together, these poems chart a passage from late-Victorian decorum toward a leaner, more contemporary voice. Their ongoing significance lies in their clarity of stance and sound.

This volume proposes Henley not as one piece, but as a whole, re-sounding oeuvre.

# Historical Context

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William Ernest Henley's *Poems* assembles verse written across the 1870s–early 1900s, under the pressure of late-Victorian transformation. Central is *In Hospital*, born of Henley's long treatment for tubercular disease of the bone: after a left-leg amputation in 1868, he entered the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (1873–75), where Joseph Lister's antiseptic surgery, introduced in 1867, sought to save his remaining limb. The clinical routines, carbolic spray, and new anesthesia inheritances from Simpson's chloroform (1847) formed an environment both modern and stark. Henley's ward-sketches brought unprecedented documentary candor to English poetry, challenging genteel decorum with slang, institutional hierarchies, and the sensory theater of operations.

Beyond the ward, Henley wrote as London exploded into a modern metropolis. The Thames Embankment (completed 1870), the Underground's expansion, gaslight giving way to electric illumination in the 1880s, and the clamor of docks and music halls furnished the soundscape of London *Voluntaries* (1892). Its organ-tempo headings—Grave, Scherzando, Largo—echo concert-hall culture while transcribing street rhythms, fogs, and river traffic. Such urban pieces register class juxtapositions in districts like the Dials and the new imperial capital's ceaseless motion. They allied Henley with contemporaries who sought an orchestral

poetry of the city, while keeping his gaze fixed on labor, hardship, and spectacle.

Henley's formal experiments reflect cross-Channel exchanges that reshaped late-Victorian verse. With peers like Austin Dobson and Andrew Lang, he revived French fixed forms—the ballade, double ballade, and rondel—under the influence of Théodore de Banville and François Villon. The ballades in *Poems* balance play and fatalism, often staging aphoristic wisdom against the nothingness of things. At the same time, the Aesthetic Movement's creed, promoted by figures such as James McNeill Whistler, encouraged art's autonomy and precision. Henley's dedications to Whistler and his *Toyokuni Colour-Print* acknowledge Japonisme's vogue, merging ukiyo-e clarity with English toughness, and demonstrating cosmopolitan technique without relinquishing grit.

Scotland forms another axis of the collection's geography and friendships. Pieces set at Queensferry, Fisherrow, Attadale, and Princes Street breathe the Firth of Forth's harbors and Edinburgh's volcanic skyline. Henley's tie to Robert Louis Stevenson—celebrated in the elegy *I. M. R. L. S.* (1894)—was both personal and professional: they collaborated on plays, and Stevenson famously drew on Henley's vigor in creating *Long John Silver*. Editing the *Scots Observer* in Edinburgh from 1889 before moving it to London as the *National Observer*, Henley championed adventurous craft and moral grit. The Scottish scenes fuse maritime industry, Calvinist shadow, and stoical camaraderie.

Victorian imperial horizons and Orientalist fashions also inflect Poems. The revival of *The Arabian Nights* in Britain—culminating in Richard Burton’s unexpurgated translation (1885–88)—nourished Henley’s *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments and Orientale*, where exotic pageantry becomes a lens on desire, danger, and storytelling itself. Simultaneously, travel and port cultures knit Britain to distant markets; coastal vistas and shipyards echo in *At Queensferry* and other sea-line lyrics. Even in Highland pieces, modernity presses in: tourism, railways, and depopulated estates recast Gaelic terrains as both romantic prospect and economic frontier. Henley’s responses repeatedly weigh wonder against the costs of conquest, commerce, and displacement.

Death, pain, and endurance, omnipresent in nineteenth-century life, become ethical tests throughout the book. Victorian mourning culture, with its rituals and black crepe, frames Henley’s many I. M. inscriptions, including memorials for his daughter Margaret Emma (1888–1894) and for Stevenson. Advances in surgery did not eliminate suffering; morphia and laudanum—antierotics—were widespread palliatives, and the poet measures their relief against spiritual stamina. In an era when suicide remained a legal and moral transgression, he treats despair unsentimentally yet refuses surrender. The defiant stoicism of the lyric later titled *Invictus*, composed in the 1870s, crystallized this outlook and shaped readers’ admiration.

Hospital poems also chart Victorian institutions’ evolving workforce and class structure. Following Florence Nightingale’s reforms and the 1860 training school at St

Thomas's, nursing professionalized; Henley contrasts Staff-Nurse: Old Style, Lady-Probationer, and Staff-Nurse: New Style, capturing gendered authority, discipline, and aspiration. He turns to the Scrubber, the house-surgeon, and visitors, revealing how voluntary hospitals balanced philanthropy with strict economies, and how private wards segregated comfort by income. These portraits extend the period's debates on public health, Poor Law relief, and urban charity. By giving cleaners and clinicians equal poetic attention, Henley dignified often invisible labor and clarified the hospital's social machinery.

Henley's poems circulated first in leading magazines and slim volumes before later consolidation as *Poems*, and their fortunes were tied to his editorial career. As editor of the *Magazine of Art* (1881–86) and the *Scots Observer/National Observer* (1889–94), he promoted craft, recruited emerging figures—including Rudyard Kipling—and sharpened debates over realism and decadence. Early readers admired his muscular music and cityscapes but balked at ward vernacular and violent energy in *The Song of the Sword*. Over time, critics recognized a bridge to twentieth-century idioms: stress-based, speech-driven rhythms; urban subjects; and a candid, secular stoicism that shaped British poetic modernity.

# **Synopsis (Selection)**

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## **In Hospital (I-XXVIII) and Envoy (To Charles Baxter)**

A tightly linked hospital suite charts a patient's passage from admission through operation, night-watches, staff portraits, and discharge, observing institutional life with unflinching detail and quick sympathy.

The tone is brisk, ironical, and resilient, turning clinical scenes into studies of courage and companionship, with the envoy folding private friendship into the public, urban milieu.

## **The Song of the Sword**

A rhapsodic monologue of force exalts energy, struggle, and the creative heat of conflict.

Its pounding music and vivid personification showcase Henley's muscular rhetoric and fascination with will and destiny.

## **Arabian Nights' Entertainments**

This lyric reimagines the glamour of tale-telling and the shimmer of the exotic within a modern sensibility.

Lush imagery and a playful sense of wonder balance nostalgia with an awareness of artifice.

## **Bric-à-Brac**

A cabinet of miniatures turns trifles and collectibles into occasions for wit and self-display.

The poems relish texture and taste while hinting at the fragility and contingency of culture.

**Ballades and Double Ballades (Toyokuni Colour-Print; Youth and Age; Midsummer Days and Nights; Dead Actors; Made in the Hot Weather; Truisms; Life and Fate; Nothingness of Things)**

These formally intricate ballades riff on art, weather, the theatre, youth and age, and life's odds, exploiting refrains and tight rhymes for urbane, epigrammatic effects.

Beneath the play lies a stoic fatalism and delight in form, distilling Henley's blend of bravado, irony, and acceptance.

**Scottish and City Vignettes (At Queensferry; Orientale; In Fisherrow; Back-View; Croluis; Attadale West Highlands; From a Window in Princes Street; In the Dials)**

Place-sketches span harbours, highlands, and streets, mapping shifts of light, weather, and work with crisp, observational clarity.

The mood alternates between austere admiration and tender irony, fusing landscape portraiture with the pulse of modern life.

**Meditations, Addresses, and Elegies (The Gods Are Dead; To F. W.; When You Are Old; Beside the Idle Summer Sea; I. M. R. G. C. B. 1878; We Shall Surely Die; What Is to Come)**

These occasional pieces counsel friends, face mortality, and find composure by the sea and in memory.

The voice is candid and bracing, using plain music and aphoristic turns to frame grief, friendship, and the future with stoic poise.

### **Echoes (I-XLVII, various dedications and memorials)**

A long, numbered sequence of tributes and remembrances answers to losses and loyalties across a circle of family, artists, and friends.

Varied meters and addressees create a mosaic of gratitude and endurance, returning to motifs of duty, art, love, and the stubborn will to live.

### **London Voluntaries (I-V: Grave; Andante con moto; Scherzando; Largo e mesto; Allegro maëstoso)**

Five movement-like poems orchestrate London's river, crowds, and commerce into a symphonic panorama marked by musical tempo cues.

Dense soundscapes and kinetic rhythms capture the city's grandeur and strain while meditating on anonymity, labor, and modernity.

### **Rhymes and Rhythms (Prologue; I-XXV; Epilogue)**

A late sequence of compact lyrics and dedications distills Henley's creed of self-mastery, fellowship, and civic energy.

Its formal tautness and memorial pieces balance defiance with tenderness, registering an artist's network and the costs of endurance.

# **POEMS**

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