

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

- 1822 December 24: Matthew Arnold born at Laleham-on-Thames, eldest son of Thomas Arnold and Mary Penrose Arnold.
- 1824 Placed in leg braces for two years to correct a slight deformity of one leg.
- 1828 Thomas Arnold is appointed Headmaster of Rugby School.
- 1831 Sent to the school at Laleham, where he remains for two unhappy years.
- 1834 Fox How, in the Lake District, completed in July. Arnold vacations there for the rest of his life. William Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, live nearby
- 1836 Enters Winchester College.
- 1837 Enters Rugby, where he becomes acquainted with the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, with Thomas Hughes, later the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* a novel set at Rugby.
- 1840 Rugby Poetry Prize for 'Alaric at Rome'. Wins scholarship Balliol Coll., Oxford.
- 1841 Thomas Arnold appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. Matthew Arnold enters Balliol College, where his closest friends are Clough, Arthur Stanley, and Theodore Walrond. Deeply moved by the sermons of John Henry Newman. Something of a dandy; only a moderately diligent student (though one who came to read widely in five languages).
- 1842 Thomas Arnold dies suddenly of heart disease at 47. A transforming event for MA and one that gave him a certain fatalistic view of his own likely life span.
- 1843 Wins the Newdigate Poetry Prize for 'Cromwell'.
- 1844 Takes a second-class degree at Oxford, but the next year is elected Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford which redeems his reputation among his family & friends
- 1846 Tours France; meets with George Sand whom he admires
- 1847 Becomes private secretary to Lord Landsdowne (a Whig elder statesman) which allows him time to write.
- Vacations in Switzerland, the setting of his poems on the elusive "Marguerite"
- 1849 *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems* published anonymously
- 1850 Meets and courts Frances Lucy Wightman to whom he is devoted for the rest of his life
- 1851 Appointed an Inspector of Schools in April, enabling him to marry. Essentially a civil service position, requiring travel through England and Wales (weekends at home), visiting and reporting on elementary and secondary schools; a position that wearied him; curtailed his creative life, but he worked at conscientiously at it. Later he wrote extremely important reports on British as compared to continental education.
- 1852 *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*. Birth of his first child, Thomas.
- 1853 Poems, a new edition from which *Empedocles* is excluded. Provides his explanation for this decision in a "Preface" which is a manifesto for a modern poetry that looks back to ancient Greece rather than recent Romanticism for its aesthetic inspiration and formal models (especially tragic drama)
- 1855 Now father of three sons.
- 1857 Elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford (re-elected 1862). His inaugural lecture, "On the Modern Element in Literature" begins a series which became the foundation of his profoundly influential career as a literary and social critic
- 1858 *Merope: A Tragedy*. Arnold's effort, following the principles set out in his "Preface" to *Poems* of 1853 to construct a modern poetic tragedy using the form of classical Greek tragedy. Long regarded as a failure, it is unevenly brilliant, in its effort to synthesize classical form and modern themes
- 1859 Visits France, Holland and Switzerland as Foreign Assistant Commissioner to the Newcastle Commission on Elementary Education.
- 1861 Publishes *On Translating Homer*, the Oxford lectures for 1860. Arthur Clough dies in Florence; Arnold's fifth child, Eleanor Mary Caroline, is born.
- 1864 Delivers the lecture "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," a fundamental re-orientation of the purpose and method of literary criticism as a distinctive discourse. Publishes *A French Eton*.
- 1865 Publishes *Essays in Criticism*, a classic text in the development of the tradition of criticism in both British and American literary culture. Visits schools in France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland as Foreign Assistant Commissioner to the Taunton Commission, an influential instrument of reform in British education and the emerging democratic institutions of the Victorian age

- 1867 Publishes *New Poems*, which, at Browning's urging, reinstates *Empedocles on Etna*. The volume is virtually Arnold's swan song as a poet. He also published another set of Oxford lectures, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, an important affirmation of the underlying Celtic quality of modern British poetry and a key inspiration for what, in twenty years would come to be known the Irish Renaissance.
- 1868 Arnold loses two sons, his youngest, Basil, at sixteen months; his eldest, Thomas, at sixteen. Heartbroken, the family seeks to renew its life by moving to a more rural location at Harrow.
- 1869 Publishes *Culture and Anarchy*, his classic account of the failures--and possibilities-- of modern social and intellectual life. Also publishes the first collected edition of his poems.
- 1870 *St Paul and Protestantism*, Arnold's effort to aerate scriptural texts with literary understanding.
- 1872 A third son, Trevenen William, dies at eighteen.
- 1873 Publishes *Literature and Dogma*, a classic work of religious criticism. Moves to Pains Hill Cottage, Cobham, Surrey
- 1875 *God and the Bible*, a review of objections to *Literature and Dogma*
- 1879 *Mixed Essays*. Also publishes a selection of Wordsworth's poetry
- 1882 *Irish Essays*. Begins lecture tour in America (October to March)
- 1884 Appointed Chief Inspector of Schools.
- 1886 Visits France, Switzerland and Germany for the Education department; retires from inspectorship of schools; makes a second lecture tour of America
- 1888 Dies, suddenly, April 15 of heart failure in Liverpool, where he had gone to meet his daughter on her arrival from America.
Essays in Criticism, Second Series, published posthumously.

If we look for the reason of Arnold's continuing importance, we are not likely to find it in his talents alone, great as these are, but rather in the power of the tradition which he consciously undertook to continue and transmit. For our time, in England and America, Arnold is the great continuator and transmitter of the tradition of humanism. . . . The definitions of humanism are many, but let us here take it to be the attitude of those men who think it an advantage to live in society, and, at that, in a complex and highly developed society, and who believe that man fulfills his nature and reaches his proper stature in this circumstance. The personal virtues which humanism cherishes are intelligence, amenity, and tolerance; the particular courage it asks for is that which is exercised in the support of these virtues Of the humanism that Arnold established for himself and tried to hand on to others, we must observe that it was active and not passive, that it was never a mere attitude Arnold's humanism was never abstract, nor content with fighting a rearguard action. It carried its ark into battle and tested itself in the squabbles of the marketplace even while it said that squabbles and marketplaces did not encourage wisdom. It did what any idea must do: it looked to justification by results and took its chances. That is why Arnold must have for us something of the character of what we nowadays have taken to calling a "culture hero": that is, a man who gives himself in full submission and sacrifice to his historical moment in order to comprehend and control the elements which that moment brings.

Lionel Trilling, "Introduction" (*Portable Matthew Arnold*)