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HISTORIES

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Peter Whitfield

# The History of English Poetry

Read by **Derek Jacobi**



With more than 200  
extracts of  
poetry

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<b>1</b>	<b>FOUNDATIONS</b>	6:05
<b>2</b>	<i>Beowulf</i> (8th–11th century)	4:51
<b>3</b>	Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400)	5:08
<b>4</b>	Geoffrey Chaucer (cont.)	5:00
<b>5</b>	John Skelton (c. 1460–1529)	6:57
<b>6</b>	Sir Thomas Sackville (1536–1608); Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542)	5:48
<b>7</b>	Sir Thomas Wyatt (cont.); Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547)	7:03

### **The Elizabethan Achievement**

<b>8</b>	Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618); Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586)	7:03
<b>9</b>	Edmund Spenser (1552–1599)	7:26
<b>10</b>	George Chapman (c. 1559–1634); Arthur Golding (c. 1536 – c. 1605); Richard Stanyhurst (1547–1618)	5:28
<b>11</b>	Samuel Daniel (1563–1619); Michael Drayton (1563–1631)	6:03
<b>12</b>	Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593)	5:43
<b>13</b>	William Shakespeare (1564–1616)	5:36
<b>14</b>	William Shakespeare (cont.)	6:17
<b>15</b>	William Shakespeare (cont.)	4:28
<b>16</b>	William Shakespeare (cont.)	4:34

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## **The 17th Century: From Donne to Milton**

17	John Donne (1572–1631)	7:52
18	Thomas Carew (1595–1640); Richard Lovelace (1618–1657); John Cleveland (1613–1658); Edmund Waller (1606–1687)	7:58
19	Robert Herrick (1591–1674)	4:15
20	George Herbert (1593–1633); Henry Vaughan (1621–1695); Thomas Traherne (1637–1674); Richard Crashaw (1613–1649)	6:53
21	Andrew Marvell (1621–1678)	2:33
22	John Milton (1608–1674)	6:28
23	John Milton (cont.)	4:19
24	John Marston (1576–1634)	4:09

## **The 18th Century: From Dryden to Blake**

25	Samuel Butler (1613–1680); John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester (1647–1680)	5:50
26	John Dryden (1631–1700)	4:25
27	John Dryden (cont.)	4:53
28	Alexander Pope (1688–1744)	6:48
29	Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762); James Thomson (1700–1748)	6:40

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## **The 18th Century: From Dryden to Blake (cont.)**

30	Edward Young (1681–1765); Thomas Gray (1716–1771)	5:29
31	Thomas Percy (1729–1811); James Macpherson (1736–1796)	6:08
32	Samuel Johnson (1709–1784); Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774)	4:01
33	William Cowper (1731–1800); George Crabbe (1754–1832)	5:56
34	Robert Burns (1759–1796)	3:53
35	William Blake (1757–1827)	5:43
36	William Blake (cont.)	5:38

## **The Romantic Poets**

37	William Wordsworth (1770–1850)	6:52
38	William Wordsworth (cont.)	4:59
39	Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)	4:11
40	Samuel Taylor Coleridge (cont.); Walter Scott (1771–1832)	5:01
41	Lord Byron (1788–1824)	5:28
42	Lord Byron (cont.)	6:15
43	Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)	5:48
44	Percy Bysshe Shelley (cont.)	4:23
45	John Keats (1795–1821)	4:26
46	John Keats (cont.)	5:04
47	John Clare (1793–1864)	6:40

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## **The Poetry of the Victorian Age**

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|-----------|-----------------------------|------|
| <b>48</b> | Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) | 5:15 |
| <b>49</b> | Alfred Tennyson (cont.)     | 6:17 |

## **The Poetry of the Victorian Age (cont.)**

- |           |  |      |
|-----------|--|------|
| <b>50</b> | Robert Browning (1812–1889)                                  | 7:56 |
| <b>51</b> | Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)                       | 4:35 |
| <b>52</b> | Matthew Arnold (1822–1888)                                   | 5:52 |
| <b>53</b> | Edward Fitzgerald (1809–1883); George Meredith (1828–1909)   | 4:43 |
| <b>54</b> | Emily Brontë (1818–1848); Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) | 5:02 |
| <b>55</b> | William Morris (1834–1896)                                   | 3:07 |
| <b>56</b> | Christina Rossetti (1830–1894)                               | 5:07 |
| <b>57</b> | Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909)                       | 4:58 |
| <b>58</b> | Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)                            | 4:46 |
| <b>59</b> | Gerard Manley Hopkins (cont.)                                | 5:49 |
| <b>61</b> | Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)                                     | 4:18 |
| <b>62</b> | A.E. Housman (1859–1936); Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936)        | 4:44 |
| <b>63</b> | Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)                                      | 4:57 |

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## American Poetry

64	Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612–1672); Edward Taylor (c. 1642–1729)	6:59
65	Philip Freneau (1752–1832); William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878)	5:49
66	Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)	4:36
67	Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)	3:38
68	Walt Whitman (1819–1892)	5:56
69	Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)	6:54
70	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882); John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892)	6:50
71	Sidney Lanier (1842–1881); Edward Arlington Robinson (1869–1935)	8:26
72	Robert Frost (1874–1963)	5:24

## Modernism

73	Introduction	3:18
74	William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)	5:21
75	James Elroy Flecker (1884–1915; Edward Thomas (1878–1917)	5:27
76	Wilfred Owen (1893–1918); Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918); Ezra Pound (1885–1972)	7:56

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## Modernism (cont.)

77	T.S. Eliot (1888–1965)	8:22
78	W.H. Auden (1907–1972); Louis MacNeice (1907–1963)	4:17
79	Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961); Carl Sandburg (1878–1967)	5:09
80	Edgar Lee Masters (1868–1950); Vachel Lindsay (1879–1931); Langston Hughes (1902–1967)	5:49
81	e.e. cummings (1894–1962); Robinson Jeffers (1887–1962); William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)	5:44
82	Wallace Stevens (1879–1955); Hart Crane (1899–1932)	5:59
83	Edna St Vincent Millay (1892–1950)	3:57
84	Dylan Thomas (1914–1953); John Betjeman (1906–1984)	5:13
85	Philip Larkin (1922–1985); Ted Hughes (1930–1998)	5:27
86	Sylvia Plath (1932–1963); Ginsberg (1926–1997)	3:53
87	Robert Lowell (1917–1977)	6:04
88	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	4:30
89	The Essence of the Poetic Act	4:33

**Total time: 8:06:17**

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Peter Whitfield

# The History of English Poetry

What is poetry? A simple but apparently impossible question to answer. A poem is immediately recognisable, be it a ballad from the late middle ages, an Elizabethan sonnet, an epic by Milton or Tennyson, or the free-verse lyric of today. But what is it that links these works? What were writers as different as Donne, Pope, Shelley, Whitman and Eliot doing that makes it possible for us to see their work as belonging to the great artistic structure we call poetry? Does something happen in a poem that does not happen in a novel, an essay or a play, and if so what is it?

In this survey of the course of English poetry over more than six centuries we have tried to answer these questions by examining what poetry has been. Here, the great ages of poetry – Elizabethan, Augustan, Romantic, Victorian and Modernist – are evoked in turn, while the novelty and impact of American poetry is also considered.

What emerges is a series of love affairs with language. Poetry is distinguished by language itself in the foreground – language is made to live and flow in what can only be called the music of ideas. The line of verse and the stanza, isolated on the page, draw the eye and the mind to each word and phrase, which should be individually striking, but which must harmonise into a satisfying whole. Prose is subtler – more flexible, more diffuse and more forgiving. Two or three imperfect words can diminish or even ruin a poem; a thousand will not ruin a novel. In prose we are looking through the language at the ideas; in poetry we are looking at, and perhaps even living within, the language itself. That is the difference. The music of ideas is not wholly rational, and as we encounter it in poetry it gives a depth of pleasure that prose rarely can. It embodies an imaginative response to the world, an alchemy of words in which experience is



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recreated in new forms; this is, after all, exactly what we mean by the very word 'poetic'.

What have poets used this music for – what have they had to say? In many cases, of course, the answer is: little that was original. They have often been content to repeat and polish themes and styles which they have learned from others: the tradition of poetry is built up as one voice releases other voices. But this is a characteristic of any art and it does not mean that this kind of work is worthless. The sonnet-writers of Elizabethan England, or the satirical poets of the Augustan age, wanted to show their mastery of certain models, often classical or foreign models. Originality and individuality were not part of their conception of poetry. A lyric such as Cawley's –

*Ask me no more where Jove bestows,  
When June is past, the fading rose...*

– might have been written by any one of a score of poets at any time between 1600 and 1700, but its charm and balance are as enduring as the melody of a song.

There have always been poets who did value individuality above all things, who wanted to explore new realms of thought and feeling. Donne, Herbert and the other metaphysical poets rejected stock poeticisms in their attempts to bring real experience, emotional and spiritual, into their poems.

The story of English poetry could be seen in terms of a tension between formal mastery and individual expression, a tension in which the Romantic Movement was crucial in focusing attention on the personal vision of the poet. Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Whitman were exploring their own selfhood and their response to the world; they were no longer interested in perfecting existing models, or in being part of any school. Others, such as Hopkins and Emily Dickinson, were so radical in their approach that they remained unpublished in their lifetimes. In the modern era we have come to be interested in poets *only* when they differ from others, *only* at the point where they acquire a unique voice. Perhaps it is no accident that this has happened at a time

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when the conventional poetic forms have dissolved and all but vanished: we now find ourselves in a rich but bewildering modern landscape of poetic freedom, for which we have few maps.

Poetry was for centuries a mainstream art, and writers such as Spenser, Milton, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning created a world of beauty, of images and forms, as enduring as the painting of the Renaissance or the music of the classical age. Their work became part of the English consciousness. Poetry may no longer enjoy this position of centrality in our culture, but the music of ideas that these poets developed is still among the most precious legacies that we have received from the past. This history explores that legacy and shows how vital and challenging modern poetry can still be. Lucidly presented and richly illustrated with passages from scores of great poets, it offers an expert guide to the whole world of English and American poetry that is distinctive, thought-provoking, and above all, enjoyable.

**Notes by Peter Whitfield**



**Derek Jacobi** is one of Britain's leading actors, having made his mark on stage, film and television – and notably on audiobook. He is particularly known for the roles of I Claudius and Brother Caedfael, both of which he has recorded for audiobook. His extensive theatrical credits, from London's West End to Broadway, include numerous roles encompassing the whole range of theatre. He also reads *The History of Theatre*, *The History of English Literature* and *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* for Naxos AudioBooks.



**Peter Whitfield** is an historian and a poet. His books include *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*, *Landmarks in Western Science* and *New Found Lands – Maps in the History of Exploration*. He is a keen cyclist and has written books on his sport. He has also written and read *Darwin – In a Nutshell* and *The Renaissance – In a Nutshell* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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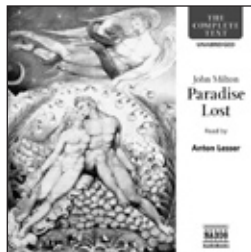
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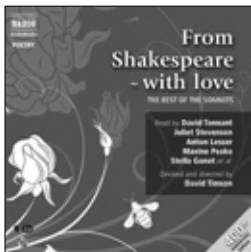
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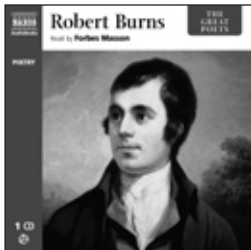
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Peter Whitfield  
**The History of English Poetry**

Read by **Derek Jacobi**

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Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme...'*  
– Shakespeare

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**Derek Jacobi** is one of Britain's leading actors. He has also read *The History of Theatre*, *The History of English Literature* and *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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