

A Rather Dodgy Scheme:
William Allingham's Pension, 1865

IN DECEMBER 1865, THOMAS CARLYLE'S FRIEND THE IRISH POET William Allingham (1824–89) had become deeply frustrated with his circumstances. He had long-wished to earn his living by writing, particularly on Ireland, but he continued to be burdened with a low-level position in the customs service. After a long stint in Ballyshannon, Ireland, he was transferred in 1863 to London, where he suffered a nervous breakdown. He then transferred to Lymington, a southern coastal town near the home of his friend Alfred Tennyson, who now lived at Farringford on the Isle of Wight. The Civil List pension of £60 awarded in June 1864 by fellow Irishman and Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston (1784–1865), was not enough for Allingham to support himself and his wife Helen Paterson (1848–1926). Seeking assistance, he decided to write to his three most celebrated and influential literary friends: Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Carlyle.

On 9 December 1865, Tennyson attended a dinner at 29 Welbeck Street, the home of his friend the Pre-Raphaelite sculptor Thomas Woolner (1825–92). In attendance among others were the Chancellor of the Exchequer, William E. Gladstone (1809–98) and the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt (1827–1910). Tennyson had received the letter from Allingham requesting his aid. In it, Allingham had enclosed a letter from Carlyle. At the dinner Tennyson asked Gladstone to intervene with the new Prime Minister, Lord John Russell (1792–1878),¹ in order to mitigate what he called in his letter-diary "Allingham's little pension."² Gladstone agreed, and according to Tennyson's son Hallam (1852–1928), after returning from the dinner, Tennyson wrote to Gladstone³ and enclosed the letter he had received from Allingham, not the

¹ Palmerston d. 18 October.

² Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1896–99) 2: 30.

³ Tennyson was staying with his friend the critic and poet Francis Turner Palgrave (1824–97), who lived near Woolner at 5 York Gate. For Tennyson, Allingham, and Browning's letters, see below.

letter Allingham had enclosed from Carlyle. Tennyson's letter is now held at the British Library in the Gladstone Papers (Add MS 44408).

Although Allingham's letter to Tennyson is not in the British Library, there is a similar performance.⁴ On 16 December 1865, Allingham wrote to Browning with a similar request. Browning in turn wrote to Gladstone and enclosed the letter he received from Allingham; these two letters can both be found in the Gladstone Papers. Browning's letter can best be described as a faithful, if brief, attempt to secure Gladstone's help. Allingham's letter is a lengthier rhetorical justification that seeks to make his case in the strongest terms possible. At one point in his letter Allingham calculates his total salary at £150 and asks Browning if he agrees that he would be "better worth this sum to the country with my freedom than as a Coast Officer of Customs?" In continuing his argument, he mentions Carlyle and Tennyson: "If you, and Tennyson, & Carlyle (who has often urged me in this direction), and some of the best men in Ireland think so, here are some grounds & guarantees." The assumption is that all three luminaries share in their wish for Allingham to have an addition to his pension.

In the earlier letter from Tennyson to Gladstone, the Laureate reiterates Allingham's argument and the conversation at Woolner's dinner. Although he did not enclose it, he does quote from the Carlyle letter enclosed by Allingham:

As I said to you at the time the man has a true spirit of song in him—I have no doubt of it—& my opinion, I am happy to say, is confirmed by Carlyle in his letter to A. which I only do not forward because, from A's letter, it does not appear that I am at liberty so to do.

Carlyle also mentions some work of Allingham's (—I have not seen it myself—it is possibly some preface to his projected work on Ireland—) in these flattering terms.

—your pleasant & excellent Historical Introduction which might, if its modesty would permit, boast itself

⁴ Curiously, there is a lacuna in Allingham's diary from November 1865 to 9 January 1866; see H. Allingham and D. Radford, *William Allingham: A Diary* (1907; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 129–30.

to be the very best ever written perhaps anywhere for such a purpose. I have read it with real entertainment & instruction on my own behoof, & with real satisfaction on yours—so clear, so brief, definite, graphic; & a fine genially human tone in it

I think you will agree with me, that this testimonial from one who is a great name in Britain & who has won his own laurels chiefly in the field of History, does go some way in establishing a case for Allingham.

(Add MS 44408, f. 234)

The letter Tennyson quotes was written by Carlyle on 3 March 1862 in reference to a historical introduction written by Allingham for the *Ballyshannon Almanac, North-Western Directory, and General Advertiser for 1862* (Dublin, 1862). Carlyle concludes his praise of the work with an injunction: “Persist in that course, if you are hero enough; and you will decidedly come to something.” As the letters to Allingham available in the *CLO* indicate, the path that Carlyle repeatedly encouraged Allingham to take was the study of history, not a pension increase.

Of the three requests for help, Allingham wrote to Carlyle last, on 17 December 1865 (NLS 1768.123). In this letter he repeats the substance of what he had written to Tennyson and Browning. He tells Carlyle that he is of more value to the nation as a writer than as a customs official. Rather than forwarding Allingham’s letter to Gladstone to request a pension increase, Carlyle responded to Allingham on Christmas Day. The letter begins well enough for Allingham: “I will stand to whatever I said *abt* the Ballyshannon Almanac; I *thot*, and think, the *Introductn* there shewed a pretty talent, and remarkable diligence in investigating,—to *whh* add patience, sagacity, sobriety in ditto, and you have the basis of all talent for History.” Once again Carlyle encourages Allingham to pursue the study of history, not a pension:

What chance you may have to get this increase of Pension &c &c (in short this total abolition of “tether”!) I do not know at all: but I must candidly tell you I have great doubts whether it *wd* do you anything but mischief,—whether you are not even now better situated for working out some History of Ireland than you *cd* anywhere else be, for the next ten or twenty years! I know nothing

you can get by “searching libraries,” one reads Books nowhere except in silent seclusion at home. . . . In short, my dear Allm, if the Officials altogether refuse you, I shall be sorry for yr disappointed humour; but I shall think the chance of an Irish History (whh you cd indeed do better than anybody, if the Devil didn’t hinder) is improved for us thereby! (*CL* 43: 87–88)

Allingham’s attempt to have his pension increased in 1865 failed, but in 1868 Gladstone himself became Prime Minister under the cloud of his now famous injunction, “My mission is to pacify Ireland.” Perhaps in relation to this wish, Gladstone in 1870 increased Allingham’s pension to £100, which still left him well short of the £150 he needed to quit his government post. Escape from customs “tether” did not come for Allingham until 1870, when James A. Froude hired him as the sub-editor of *Fraser’s Magazine*. As for his use of Carlyle in 1865, similar to what one might say of Gladstone’s professed mission in Ireland, Allingham’s was a dodgy scheme at best.

Brent E. Kinser



Alfred Tennyson to W. E. Gladstone, 9 December 1865. ALS 3 pp. MS: British Library, Gladstone Papers Add MS 44408, f. 234. Published in Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., eds., *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, vol. 2, 1851–1870 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 424–25.

My Dear Mr Gladstone

As you were kind enough to say that you would forward to Lord Russell Mr. Allingham’s application for an increase of pension together with my petition that it might be taken into consideration, I send you A’s letter to myself, wherein he sets forth at full what are his claims are & why he wishes them to be attended to.

As I said to you at the time the man has a true spirit of song in him—I have no doubt of it—& my opinion, I am happy to say, is confirmed by Carlyle in his letter to A. which I only do not forward because, from A’s letter, it does not appear that I am at liberty so to do.

Carlyle also mentions some work of Allingham's (—I have not seen it myself—it is possibly some preface to his projected work on Ireland—) in these flattering terms.

—your pleasant & excellent Historical Introduction which might, if its modesty would permit, boast itself to be the very best ever written perhaps anywhere for such a purpose. I have read it with real entertainment & instruction on my own behoof, & with real satisfaction on yours—so clear, so brief, definite, graphic; & a fine genially human tone in it

I think you will agree with me, that this testimonial from one who is a great name in Britain & who has won his own laurels chiefly in the field of History, does go some way in establishing a case for Allingham.

And for myself I really believe that if he were set free as he says by his pension being raised to the amount required—he might do good to Ireland & thro' Ireland to England by accomplishing a work which under his present circumstances seems all but impossible.

I may add that I have known him for years, that he is very industrious, & [in] his life sober & moral—his age somewhere between 40 & 50.

Believe me, my dear Mr Gladstone

Ever sincerely Your A Tennyson



William Allingham to Robert Browning, 14 December 1865.
MS: British Library, Gladstone Papers Add MS 44408 f. 217.

Dec 14 / 65

My Dear Browning

My hope of some day doing a stroke of useful work in the elucidation of Irish History has been revived lately by some conversations with friends. During long residence in Ireland I have made many preparations, but need the command of my time, & access to libraries, records, places, & persons. In short I would fain make a deliberate study of Ireland—historical, topographical, & social; hoping to do, if not a History, some useful work to that end. Now for my

position. I have been 19 years in the Customs service, & am now Coast Officer at Lymington with about £85 a year. My low rank, by the way, is not from any fault (the Board of Customs will give me a good character) but from injudicious bechanging from Ireland to London, & (my health giving way there) from London to this place, at great loss. Three years ago I received a Civil List pension of £60. on the score of literary merit, on a memorial signed by many well known men of letters in England & Ireland, & which attended to my being likely to do something in Irish historical literature, if placed at liberty to attempt it. Since then, I have published "Lawrence Bloomfield" (which you know), giving a view of Irish affairs in poetic form. But what I long for is liberty to undertake the study of my native island with all attainable appliances, as I could do if I had my present income (of, in all, about £150 a year) continued to me, being released at the same time—after 19 or 20 years' service—from further official work. All things considered, might I not hope to prove myself better worth this sum to the country with my freedom than as a Coast Officer of Customs?

If you, and Tennyson, & Carlyle (who has often urged me in this direction), and some of the best men in Ireland think so, here are some grounds & guarantees. The thing, indeed, seems now practicable without any cost to the Treasury, if as I believe, (& it has already been mooted) in case of my withdrawal, the Customs duty here would be transferred to the Coast Guard, as has been done at many other little seaports.

I am of old Irish-Protestant family, have many Roman Catholic cousins, & many friends of all parties, & am perhaps an impartial man, tho' an Irishman & lover of Ireland. My desire is 1st, that she should become a loyal member of the Kingdom, 2d that she keep her own good characteristics, & advance by a road suitable to her own character.

Do you think there is any chance of the Treasury setting me free, & continuing my present allowance, from Customs & literary pension together, of about £150? That is, succinctly, the question

But observe, I would not accept any so longed-for liberty on condition of producing what I should hope to produce—essays, lectures, books, on Ireland:—the first essential for me would

be to feel myself really free. My desire & aim are to employ myself in this work in which possibly I might even manage to do the State some service.

Forgive all this, & believe me

ever truly yours

W. Allingham.



Robert Browning to W. E. Gladstone, 16 December 1865.
MS: British Library, Gladstone Papers Add MS 44408, f. 216;
see Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson, eds., *The Brownings' Correspondence: A Checklist* (New York and Winfield, KS: Browning Institute and Wedgstone Press, 1978) 124.

19 Warwick Crescent
Upper Westbourne Terrace, W.
Dec. 16. '65

Dear Sir,

May I beg of your kindness to read the enclosed letter, and suppose me to add just a word?—one I might have difficulty in saying to the Chancellor of the Exchequer,—for I am not sure of the acceptable grounds for granting a literary pension,—but a word that takes courage at the personal sympathy with, and distinction in Literature, which we all know and are proud of. I have found Mr Allingham admirably conscientious, full of modesty, energetic yet self-controlling, and only ambitious in the noble way. His poetical productions are in evidence enough, and nobody respects them more than I. From the first he has tried as much to do good as write well; and should means be allowed him, he certainly will continue both endeavours—with a result appreciable by the country, I believe—and how gratifying, therefore, to yourself!

I am, Sir,

Yours obediently and faithfully,

Robert Browning