

Cambridge Poets Through the Ages

Overview:

In the eight hundred years since the founding of the University of Cambridge, an extraordinary number of literary thinkers have passed through and made their mark on the city, whether as students, lecturers, visitors or residents. This course will focus on a selection of poets who lived, studied or worked in Cambridge, and will consider some of the ways in which the city and the university of their time influenced their work, as well as how their work influenced the vibrant intellectual community we have inherited. We will range between some of the most celebrated names in English literature, such as Milton and Wordsworth, and a gathering of lesser-known and neglected writers whose work will prove variously brilliant, strange and revealing.

Each class will begin with a brief introduction to the topics and authors at hand, offering biographical, geographical, political or religious context. This will be followed by group analysis of poems, in the format of a classic Cambridge 'Practical Criticism' class, and further discussion of the kind usually conducted in a seminar.

Poems and passages to be considered will be supplied during or before the sessions, and for some of the later sessions the student group will be invited to vote on choices of texts for special attention. Students may wish to look at the works of some of the poets mentioned in advance, but there will be no expectation that anyone has already read widely in any of these areas of literary history.

Outline:

1. George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, John Milton: Religion, Politics and War in the Seventeenth Century
2. Thomas Gray, Christopher Smart, Henry Kirke White: The 'Long Eighteenth Century', from Augustan to Romantic
3. William Wordsworth and Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Cambridge and Romanticism
4. Rupert Brooke, William Empson and Others: Poetry in Cambridge in the Early Twentieth Century (and the Rise of the Study of English)
5. A Choice of Post-War Poets: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, Kamau Brathwaite, Nicholas Moore, Veronica Forrest-Thompson

Dr Alex Wong is a poet, scholar and critic with close ties to Cambridge. He has published two books of poetry, *Poems Without Irony* and *Shadow and Refrain*. He is also the author of an academic book on *The Poetry of Kissing in Early Modern Europe* and has edited and introduced selections from the works of A.C. Swinburne, Walter Pater and Alice Meynell (forthcoming). Alex read English at Cambridge from 2007-10 and went on to complete a doctorate, also in Cambridge, before becoming a Fellow at St John's College (2015-2023). In Cambridge he has taught a wide range of topics over a dozen years, as well as acting as Director of Studies. He is currently a Royal Literary Fund Fellow working at King's College London, but he continues to enjoy supervising undergraduates for the English Tripos in Cambridge. He has a particular devotion to 'Practical Criticism'.