

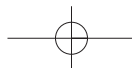


# *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

An Anthology of  
Betjeman's Religious Verse



Edited and introduced by  
**Kevin J. Gardner**



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## *Preface*



Sir John Betjeman was one of the most remarkable men of the twentieth century. Poet laureate, architectural critic and defender of England's heritage, a man of boundless energy and talent, Betjeman was a generous and committed friend to countless people and to the nation, and his life has now been remembered in Bevis Hillier's magisterial biographical triptych.<sup>1</sup> Even 20 years after his death, many people still have a vivid memory of Betjeman: perhaps as the poet of suburbia, or as the beloved teddy bear to a nation, or as the devotee of causes that at one time must have seemed amusingly quaint or even eccentric. City churches, Victorian railway stations, gas lamps and the Metroland were among the threatened hallmarks of English culture whose preservation he pioneered. John Betjeman was, moreover, a complex of contradictions: a retiring poet who enjoyed being a public figure; a lover of steam engines and all things archaic who adroitly used radio and television to advance his causes; a lifelong Anglican and preserver of churches who struggled mightily to believe the faith.

It is the aspect of Betjeman and his religion that is the occasion of this book. As the great poet of the Church of England in the twentieth century, Betjeman used his astonishing talent for poetry to show us how to think about Anglicanism, about the Church of England and about Christianity in general. Betjeman in fact wrote dozens of poems directly on ecclesial and religious

<sup>1</sup> Bevis Hillier, *Young Betjeman* (London: John Murray, 1988); *John Betjeman: New Fame, New Love* (London: John Murray, 2002); *John Betjeman: The Bonus of Laughter* (London: John Murray, 2004).

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themes, many of them not normally anthologized. His poems describe the perils of faith and the struggle to believe; they celebrate the social and cultural significance of the Church of England; they reveal the intersection of architecture and faith, of aesthetics and the spirit; and they also demonstrate the social and spiritual failure of the church, particularly the vanity and hypocrisy of its clergy and parishioners. Whether his poems celebrate or satirize, it is clear that Betjeman loved his church and celebrated its role in providing a cultural identity for the English people.

It is the remarkable fact of Betjeman's studied faith in an age of scepticism, his tenderness in a time of jaundiced cynicism, that makes him interesting and worthy of attention. Betjeman could be a brilliant ironist, but he could also be sentimental about the Church of England, and even though he was never an unabashed apologist for his church, his rejection of scepticism has been perceived by some critics as an intellectual weakness. Perhaps this is because he rejected other trends of modernism as well; his sense of poetic tradition is evident in the apparent simplicity of his poems and in his appeals to the experiences and tastes of the common Englishman. That his poems seem to capture so accurately and emotionally what it means to be English and to live in England may best account for the enduring popularity of his verse. As Philip Larkin wrote:

Betjeman's poems would be something I should want to take with me if I were a soldier leaving England: I can't think of any other poet who has preserved so much of what I should want to remember, nor one who, to use his own words, would so easily suggest 'It is those we are fighting for, foremost of all.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Poems 1955-1982* (New York: Farrer Strauss Giroux, 1983), p. 214.

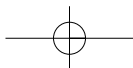
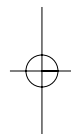
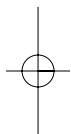
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Betjeman is one of the most accessible of all modern poets; his poetry is 'easy' to read, but rejects easy, simplistic notions, instead embracing tremendous profundities about matters of the spirit. It is Betjeman's nature as a poet of faith that is the theme for this volume of his poetry.



For this edition of Betjeman's poetry I have many people to thank. I am immensely grateful to the estate of the late Sir John Betjeman and to his publishers at John Murray for the opportunity to edit and publish this collection of his poetry. I owe my editor at Continuum, Robin Baird-Smith, a debt of gratitude for his tireless championing of this project and his patient guidance of it past many hurdles. Also assisting in this project at Continuum were Ben Hayes, Andrew Walby, Anya Wilson, Margaret Wallis and Jane Boughton. For the editorial aid of Sabahat Jahan, Justin Raab and Jayne Lawrence, my research assistants at Baylor University, I am deeply appreciative as well. It was while teaching a class on Betjeman at my parish that I developed the idea for this book, so I must thank a group of my fellow parishioners at St Paul's Episcopal Church for sharing my enthusiasm for Betjeman and for encouraging me to edit and publish this volume. Finally, it is my great good fortune to have the enduring love and encouragement of my wife, Hilary, and son, Graham. To them I am profoundly grateful, and to them I dedicate this book.

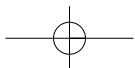
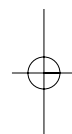
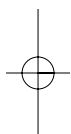
Kevin J. Gardner  
Waco, Texas, November 2004





There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

(Tennyson, *In Memoriam*)



## *Introduction*



In a letter written on Christmas Day, 1947, John Betjeman confessed Christianity's influence on his poetry:

Also my view of the world is that man is born to fulfil the purposes of his Creator, i.e. to Praise his Creator, to stand in awe of Him and to dread Him. In this way I differ from most modern poets, who are agnostics and have an idea that Man is the centre of the Universe or is a helpless bubble blown about by uncontrolled forces.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, John Betjeman was one of the more significant literary figures of our time openly to declare his Christian faith and to use his formidable poetic gifts to address issues of personal faith and institutional religion at length. The range of what Betjeman had to say about the Church is quite broad indeed. He wrote of the beauty of the Church, of the joy of its liturgy and worship, of the Church's role in providing cultural identity for the English people. However, he was never a simple apologist for the Church or for Christianity. He wrote scathingly and satirically of ecclesiastical and spiritual corruption, smugness and complacency. He posed questions about faith and the struggle to believe. He described the anxiety of death without the certainty of Christian consolation. And yet, despite such doubts and frustrations, he wrote unapologetically about his faith. He

<sup>1</sup> Letter to John Sparrow, in John Betjeman, *Letters (Vol. 1: 1926–51)*, ed. Candida Lycett Green (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 405.

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celebrated the mystery of the Eucharist, discovering evidence of the Incarnation all around him in the world.

Perhaps the most distinct recurring image in Betjeman's poetry is that of church bells. The sensual effect of hearing their magnificent pealing is described in 'Church of England Thoughts'. Bells summon the believer to worship, to a communal tradition, to a metaphysical experience of nature and eternity. Alas, they also mocked the poet whose spirit was at times emptied of faith. The church bell was Betjeman's muse; he gave credence to such a notion by titling his verse autobiography, an account of his poetic and spiritual awakening, *Summoned by Bells*.<sup>1</sup> The ringing of church bells gives voice to various ideas of eternity. Throughout his poems Betjeman suggested that a timeless and traditional Anglican worship, embodied in its liturgy, music, bells, stained glass and architecture, is the best means of approximating the eternity of the divine; the best we can do to honour God is to create a living tradition of worship. Yet he also suggested the folly of human endeavour and the futility of our desire to share in God's timelessness: all human action and effort are confounded by our foolish need to control God and time. While some of his poems hint at the wonder of eternity, others deal with the issue of eternity more problematically – namely by exploring the struggle to sustain faith and the uncertainty of eternity beyond the inevitability of death.

Eucharistic and incarnational imagery also predominate in his work. For Betjeman, there may be no stronger statement of his faith in God's real presence and incarnational nature than in the mysterious symbolism of the Eucharist. The Incarnation and the Eucharist together are Betjeman's symbols of the mystery of Christianity. In the midst of normal human triviality appeared God incarnate, at the Nativity, and yet more mysterious is God's immanence today in the metaphysical reality of the eucharistic elements. In his verse, Betjeman revealed his belief

<sup>1</sup> John Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells* (London: John Murray, 1960).

that God remains incarnate in the world all around us: in the Church, in the natural world, in the heart of the believer and even in the life of the doubter. Despite his faith in God's presence in the Eucharist, Betjeman did not attempt to limit encounters with God to experiences that require a priest and the trappings of Anglican worship. God is to be experienced in all things, and may even be discovered in the strangest and unlikeliest of places.

With so much of his verse devoted to his faith and to the spiritual and social roles of the Church of England, it is no surprise that Betjeman's own life was framed by devout observance of Anglican worship. However, faith was not always an easy matter for him. As Auberon Waugh (son of the novelist Evelyn Waugh) wrote, 'I am almost certain he decided to affect a cosy certainty in religion which he was never within miles of feeling.'<sup>1</sup> He was often plagued by nagging spiritual doubts: a fear that he was unfit for heaven, a terror of dying and an anxiety that Christianity's promises might all be empty. Still, he tried to maintain his faith. In 1947 he exchanged a series of letters about faith with Evelyn Waugh, who had recently converted to Roman Catholicism. Betjeman confessed to his old friend that he was 'assailed by doubt', yet he insisted, 'I do know for certain that there is nothing else I want to believe but that Our Lord was the son of God and all He said is true.'<sup>2</sup> Betjeman tried to overcome his spiritual fears by participating in the traditions of Christian worship. As he once wrote in *The Spectator*, 'the only practical way to face the dreaded lonely journey into Eternity seems to me the Christian one. I therefore try to believe that Christ was God, made Man and gives Eternal Life, and that I may be confirmed in this belief by clinging to the sacraments and by prayer.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Auberon Waugh, 'Is Trifle Sufficient?', *The Spectator*, 26 May 1984, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> In Lycett Green (ed.), *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 405.

<sup>3</sup> John Betjeman, 'John Betjeman Replies,' *The Spectator*, 8 October 1954, p. 443.

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Despite his frequent attendance at church and his partaking of the sacrament of the Eucharist, it has often been said – perhaps most famously in a Channel 4 biography, ‘The Real John Betjeman’ (2000) – that Betjeman could not believe in any aspect of the Church other than the symbolic cohesion it provided the English. Betjeman’s own writings reveal that this interpretation of his faith is an overstatement; to Evelyn Waugh he admitted that ‘upbringing, habit, environment, connections – all sorts of worldly things – make me love the C of E.’ But he went on to insist that those things would not matter at all, ‘if I *knew*, in the Pauline sense, that Our Lord was not present at an Anglican Mass’.<sup>1</sup> All his life he had desired to rid himself of uncertainty, but the difficulty in believing persisted. In *Summoned by Bells*, for instance, he recalled sitting in chapel during school at Marlborough and experiencing a deep frustration at the gulf that separates the human and the divine:

Oh, who is God? O tell me, who is God?  
Perhaps He hides behind the reredos . . .  
Give me a God whom I can touch and see.<sup>2</sup>

The lament Betjeman describes here – a sensation of God’s absence – is one that he would voice again and again. Though he loved the Church and its rituals, he often struggled mightily to embrace the central Christian tenets of God’s forgiveness and eternal life.

Betjeman’s tortuous journey through the Church is worth recounting. This journey is marked by distinct and recurring motifs, the first of which was a regular observance of the sacraments and a devotion to the life of the Church. He was baptized on 25 November 1906 at St Anne Brookfield, a Victorian church near the family home in Parliament Hill Mansions in the north

<sup>1</sup> In Lycett Green (ed.), *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 403.

<sup>2</sup> Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells*, p. 67.

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London suburb of Highgate West Hill. (Betjeman would later recall his Highgate parish church: ‘the bells of sad St. Anne’s’ and the ‘awe and mystery ... in the purple dark of thin St. Anne’s’.) Following an adolescent affectation of atheism at Marlborough, where he refused the sacrament of confirmation, he was at last confirmed at Oxford’s Pusey House when he was an undergraduate at Magdalen. In 1933 he eloped with Penelope Chetwode, the ceremony kept secret in order to postpone the wrath of Penelope’s aristocratic father and to prevent her losing her annual allowance. Though the union was sealed in a London register office, at John’s insistence the marriage was solemnized afterwards in a nearby church, St Anselm’s, Davies Street. Other than a brief period of worshipping with the Quakers in the 1930s, Betjeman made every effort to receive the sacrament of Communion as frequently as possible. And in 1984 he was buried in the churchyard of St Enodoc, near his home in Trebetherick, Cornwall.

In addition to observing the sacraments, Betjeman’s religious life was also characterized by an abiding commitment to the life of the Church of England. During his and Penelope’s years in Berkshire, and then in London when his work in journalism and broadcasting necessitated that he take a flat in the City, Betjeman was constantly active in a series of parishes. At Uffington St Mary, a church which many architectural critics – including Betjeman – have suggested is the most nearly perfect medieval church in England, he served as people’s warden. Here he learned the art of bell-ringing, which would become such an important symbol in his poetry. Also at Uffington John and Penelope organized a parochial youth fellowship, and their efforts, though largely of a secular entertainment nature, were much appreciated by the villagers. At All Saints, Farnborough, where Betjeman is memorialized in a window by John Piper, he saw himself and Penelope as the chief supporters of the parish. In a letter to Evelyn Waugh in 1947 he wrote:

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If we were to desert it, there would be no one to whip up people to attend the services, to run the church organisations, to keep the dilatory and woolly-minded incumbent (who lives in another village) to the celebration of Communion services any Sunday. It is just because it is so disheartening and so difficult and so easy to betray, that we must keep this Christian witness going. In villages people still follow a lead and we are the only people here who will give a lead. I know that to desert this wounded and neglected church would be to betray Our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, John was left to lead the parish by himself, as Penelope – partly through the influence of Waugh – renounced Anglicanism in favour of Roman Catholicism. When the family moved to Wantage in 1951, Betjeman was again involved in the parish church. At SS Peter and Paul he served as churchwarden, lent the growing fame of his name to such mundane events as church bazaars and wrote the parish history. When he took up part-time residence in London in 1954, he attended services at St Bartholomew the Great in West Smithfield and served on its parochial church council. There he met the chaplain of St Bartholomew's Hospital, through whose influence he took up a ministry of hospital visitation to terminally ill patients.

Betjeman's ministry to the dying is related to the second motif in his spiritual journey: an anxiety about death. In early childhood, he was much troubled by fears of damnation that would in adulthood be supplanted not so much by a mature confidence in God's grace but by fears of extinction. In 1945 he could be found preferring his childish visions of hell to an eternal nothingness promised by existential philosophers:

Oh better far those echoing hells  
Half-threaten'd in the pealing bells

<sup>1</sup> Lycett Green (ed.), *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 411–12.

Than that this 'I' should cease to be—  
Come quickly, Lord, come quick to me.<sup>1</sup>

He first heard of hell from his 'hateful nurse', Maud; tormented by Calvinistic demons, she was convinced she would be consumed by eternal flames. Her fears taught him to dread God's wrath and to doubt himself – anxieties he was never to outgrow. Despite the psychological torture of this early experience, the young Betjeman embraced the Church, even writing his earliest verses in imitation of the Anglican hymnal, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

Indeed, Betjeman continued to be fascinated by the Church and all that went with it. A third motif in his journey appears in his love of the aesthetics of English churches. This began to take hold of him during his prep-school days at the Dragon School, Oxford, where he developed a scholarly knowledge of English ecclesiastical architecture. At weekends, he would cycle round Oxford, carefully exploring its churches and absorbing as much of its history and aesthetics as he could apprehend:

Who knew what undiscovered glories hung  
Waiting in locked-up churches—vaulting shafts,  
Pillar-piscinas, floriated caps,  
Squints, squinches, low side windows, quoins and  
groins —  
Till I had roused the Vicar, found the key,  
And made a quick inspection of the church?<sup>2</sup>

Cursory inspections gave way to detailed examinations as an adult, when Betjeman became well-known for his writings on church architecture, a lifetime pursuit crowned by his *Collins' Guide to English Parish Churches* and the BBC documentary 'A

<sup>1</sup> 'Before the Anaesthetic', *New Bats in Old Belfries* (London: John Murray, 1945).

<sup>2</sup> Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells*, p. 48.

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Passion for Churches'. Of the two hundred or more civic and ecclesiastical organizations that he served or supported during his lifetime, the diocesan advisory committees of London and Oxford were among his strongest commitments. He served on the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Committee for 32 years as an adviser on matters of ecclesiastical architecture, and he was also active on both the Council for the Care of Churches and the Historic Churches Preservation Trust.

Eventually Betjeman grew to love the ritual of the Church as much as its architecture – a love that was to evolve into the fourth and final motif of his spiritual journey. All things liturgical – aumbry and thurible, cassock and alb, canticle and versicle – appealed deeply to Betjeman's growing fascination with the mystery of the Church of England. One of his favourite boyhood activities was attending services of Evening Prayer on his Sundays in London. In *Summoned by Bells* he fondly describes intentionally seeking out obscure and quiet churches in the City, listening for a single bell, looking for an empty nave – 'St Botolph this, St Mary that'. What drew him to these services was not really faith, however, but 'a longing for the past, / With a slight sense of something unfulfilled'. It would be years before this longing and seeking turned into something more closely resembling mature faith. For the time being, Anglican tradition meant little more to him than English tradition; these City churches embodied England's fading past, to which the budding poet was instinctively drawn.

Betjeman continued his explorations of churches during family seaside holidays in Cornwall. The rector of St Ervan's Church drew his attention from the humble and cosy Evensong to grander notions of Celtic mysticism, which encouraged him to search for the divine in nature. Although 'no mystical experience was vouchsafed' for Betjeman in Cornish holy sites, he continued to seek and to feel, and he often drew upon Celtic mysticism in his poetry. He once averred that his encounter with the priest in St Ervan's was life-changing. If so, it must be that

it opened his heart to prepare it for something new and different – something that would make a much greater impact on him than either Celtic mysticism or the familiar language and liturgy of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

That something different was Anglo-Catholicism, which he first encountered while a university student at Oxford. High Mass at Pusey House was not merely an aesthetic experience for Betjeman. As he recounts in *Summoned by Bells*, it was also theological. It was not Christian truth that he discovered, however, but the quest for that truth, a quest he would sustain all his life. For Betjeman, Christianity was never merely the trappings of Anglo-Catholicism, yet those elements served as the lintel of his faith:

The steps to truth were made by sculptured stone,  
Stained glass and vestments, holy-water stoups,  
Incense and crossings of myself—<sup>1</sup>

Although Anglo-Catholicism did provide a theological awakening for Betjeman, it is likely that he remained a little too much attached to the aesthetic experience, for he neglected to apply himself to his studies. When his tutor, the Magdalen don C. S. Lewis, failed him in Divinity, Betjeman left Oxford without a degree.

Failed in Divinity! Oh count the hours  
Spent on my knees in Cowley, Pusey House,  
St Barnabas', St Mary Mag's, St Paul's,  
Revering chasubles and copes and albs!<sup>2</sup>

High Church Anglicanism was to guide Betjeman in the struggles of his faith throughout his adult life. When doubts arose, the timeless permanence of Anglo-Catholicism was a

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

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reliable support on which to lean. It was a bastion of Anglo-Catholicism that was Betjeman's last church affiliation. In his final years he was a regular member of the congregation at Grosvenor Chapel on South Audley Street in Mayfair; when he grew too frail to attend services, he received Communion from the Revd Gerard Irvine at home in Chelsea, an ironing-board serving as a makeshift altar.

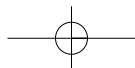
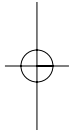
John Betjeman may thus be characterized as a practising Christian who wrestled with matters of faith. His Christian faith was neither smug nor self-assured; in fact, it was riddled with uncertainty and questions. Because of this, he was able to use his gift for poetry to describe not only the arc of his own religious belief but to illumine the nature of faith and doubt for all people. It is perhaps his capacity for doubt that makes Betjeman the great poet of the Church of England in the twentieth century, for faith is deepened by questioning. It is my hope that readers will find in these poems inspiration from an immensely talented poet who wanted to believe – and often did.

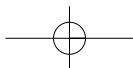
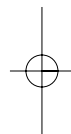
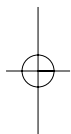




1

*Spiritual Doubts and Fears*





## 1 *Spiritual Doubts and Fears*



A recurrent pattern in John Betjeman's poetry is his reflection on guilt, judgement, damnation and death. There are many variations on this motif, but a central element is always there: that neither he himself nor God nor the Church can save him from his emotional and spiritual torment, whether the torment is a fear of hell's flames or the anxiety of extinction into nothingness. As Betjeman reflected through poetry on his life, he found these doubts and fears both in his adult experiences and in his early childhood memories.

'N.W.5 & N.6' (the title alludes to the postal codes of the north London suburbs of Betjeman's very early childhood) reveals that Betjeman's spiritual fears were instilled in him by his nanny. Her tales of the gaping maw of hell, licking its chops in anticipation of her own certain and imminent arrival, were sufficient to plant an ineradicable anxiety in his mind, although she never suggested that he too was destined for this fate. His childhood misunderstanding made 'World without end' (a phrase from the *Gloria patri* that follows the psalm and canticles in the Anglican services of Morning and Evening Prayer) not a promise of eternal bliss for those of Christian hope but a threat of certain eternal damnation for children everywhere.

Two of Betjeman's poems explore the effects of the Calvinistic theology that produced the mindset of the nanny whose tales had so terrified him as a child. In 'Calvinistic Evensong' Betjeman imagines eavesdropping on Evensong in an Anglican parish stricken and withered by Calvinism with a congregation decayed into six elderly women and a sinister curate. Imagery

#### 4 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

of death pervades the poem: the minister preaches on death; the parish itself, shrivelling in numbers, begins to reek of decay; and the trees in the churchyard are hungry for their next feeding of parishioners' bodies. The fruit of Calvinism, Betjeman suggests, is a miserable life spent fearing death, followed by the miserable fulfilment of that anxiety. If the poem contains a dark sense of graveyard humour, it is because Betjeman could find a temporary solace from this same anxiety by laughing grimly at it. 'Matlock Bath' shows the poet walking in the eponymous Derbyshire town and listening to the hymn-singing of a Nonconformist congregation, echoes of whose hymns fill the lines of the poem. Ultimately the Calvinistic hymns he hears burden him with anxiety of falling into damnation. He tries to mask this spiritual fear of falling behind the physical fear of slipping into the River Derwent below him, but his real dread – misinterpreting the message as he did with 'World without end' – is that the Rock of Ages will swallow him into an eternal doom. This misinterpretation arises at least in part because he chooses to view the rock and the water with fear and because he equates these symbols with other childhood anxieties. The numerous images of water seem to admit the possibility of baptismal regeneration, but his fear of the water and of submersion into God implies his inability to embrace this form of spiritual union.

'Original Sin on the Sussex Coast', like 'N.W.5 & N.6', is constructed around Proustian memories as the adult Betjeman is led by sensory impressions into the recollection of a painful childhood experience of bullying. Being beaten up by other children is for Betjeman no mere rite of passage but evidence of a central tenet of Christian doctrine. Not only does the title supply this interpretation, however. Mum can launder her bullying son's clothes with Persil, but she can't scrub clean his soul from original sin. The contrast between the boys' actions and appearances reveals the darkness we all hide in our souls, symbolized by the falling light Betjeman describes in the poem:

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outwardly we are like the boys with their innocent satchels of homework heading happily home for a snack of Post-Toasties, but the encroaching darkness of the sunset on the Sussex Downs hides our lurking sins.

In 'Norfolk', Betjeman laments the inevitable loss of childhood innocence while suggesting that this loss has a theological explanation. With echoes of Blake, he juxtaposes images of innocence and experience onto a memory of a barge holiday with his father along the River Bure in Norfolk. The obscure allusion to Fowler of Louth implies an analogy between church restoration and our psychological efforts to restore ourselves to some version of childhood innocence. Betjeman's implication seems to be that since we will inevitably fail at restoring our own innocence (as Fowler surely failed in the eyes of Betjeman, the architectural critic and purist), only God can effect our restoration. However, most people are fooled by Fowler's work – and by themselves, blinding themselves to the failure of their own self-restorations. The poem concludes with something like a prayer: Betjeman petitions time to restore the rapturous ignorance of long ago, an apparent plea for prelapsarian innocence and grace.

The tenderness for his father in this memory is unusual. More common is the fear of parental judgement and wrath that Betjeman describes in 'Narcissus' and 'Archibald', two poems that focus on the overwhelming sense of personal shame and worthlessness that accompanies his sense of spiritual doom. 'Narcissus' presents us with the perspectives of both adulthood and childhood on the painful experience of his forced separation from a treasured friend. As a child, Betjeman suffered confusion over this separation and a desire to do anything to be restored to his friend. The adult Betjeman has come to understand that he had been engaging in inappropriate sexual exploration. Notably, his mother reinforces the fear that he is doomed to hell, while Archibald, his teddy-bear, remains his sole comfort. The poem 'Archibald' further explores the comfort of a childhood

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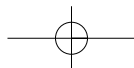
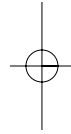
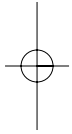
toy in a house of isolation and anger. As if embarrassed by his attachment to the bear, Betjeman begins the poem with light, rollicking rhythms that undermine the bear's apparent evangelical fervour and doomsday judgement. The poem quickly turns serious, however, as it begins to explore traumatic memories of childhood. The sight of the bear which he has kept all these years fills him with a sense of dread and despair that are adult enhancements of his childhood anxieties. The harsh and judgemental voices of his parents are transferred to the bear, which he now imagines telling him he is going to hell; still he cannot part with the toy. Despite the bear's mockery of his immortal soul, to contemplate its loss is to contemplate venturing into a void of darkness and emptiness.

This fear of a spiritual void points to the central theological dilemma in 'Before the Anaesthetic', one of Betjeman's greatest poems. Here, he describes the tremendous efforts he has taken to assure himself an eternity in heaven; however, despite every effort to believe and to worship, at this moment God is only an illusion. Throughout the poem we hear the ringing of the bells of St Giles's, but their empty peals fill the poet with horror at the absence of God. The great fear he then expresses is not hell but extinction; ironically, having given up hope in heavenly bliss, he finds himself wishing for the flames of hell as opposed to the alternative of nothingness. To Betjeman, at least hell is a kind of eternity – and perhaps an affirmation, however unfortunate, that all his efforts to worship and believe, however ineffectual, were not misguided and incorrect. To end up in hell would at least prove to him that he was right in trying to believe. Betjeman once expressed this sentiment in an interview with Alan Neame, asserting that 'I'd rather Hell than Nothing!'<sup>1</sup> Although his preference for hell over oblivion was surely hyperbolic, it illustrates Betjeman's desperation for any assurance of eternal life.

<sup>1</sup> Alan Neame, 'Poet of Anglicanism', *Commonweal* 71 (4 December 1959), p. 283.

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The failure of the Church to provide Betjeman with a sense of spiritual security is a central theme in several poems. 'Goodbye' and 'Fruit' both reveal the tiniest measure of acceptance in his mind of the likelihood of death bringing oblivion. It is no happy thought, but it is one he has no energy to oppose, and he finds a passive acquiescence in having merely struggled to live and accomplish a few small achievements. 'On Leaving Wantage 1972' begins with an optimistic image of the struggle of the Church to unite humanity in the symbolic act of bell-ringing, but Betjeman concludes with an image of the implacable force of time sweeping all things away. 'Loneliness' likewise suggests that religion is only a tonic to fortify the believer against the fear of death. Subverting the usual associations of spring and rebirth with Easter, Betjeman describes the ringing of Easter bells amidst the bleakness of late winter's cold air, blackened branches and withered leaves. Even the very earliest signs of spring mock the illusion of rebirth, as Betjeman uses the metaphor of spring growth as a tumour to suggest an analogy that comprises the poem's theme: that the rituals we use to mask the ugly reality of death remind us that the rituals of religion mask man's isolation in creation. 'Aldershot Crematorium' also describes how institutional religion offers cold comfort for the grieving. The dead are not resurrected, though cremation provides a symbolic, heavenward gesture. The image of the dead wafting skyward into nothingness mocks the poet's notions of Christ's ascension and the promise of eternal life. In all these poems, the consolations of Christianity seem to be no more than empty words blowing in the wind.



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**N.W.5 & N.6**

Red cliffs arise. And up them service lifts  
Soar with the groceries to silver heights.  
Lissenden Mansions. And my memory sifts  
Lilies from lily-like electric lights  
And Irish-stew smells from the smell of prams  
And roar of seas from roar of London trams.

Out of it all my memory carves the quiet  
Of that dark privet hedge where pleasures breed,  
There first, intent upon its leafy diet,  
I watched the looping caterpillar feed  
And saw it hanging in a gummy froth  
Till, weeks on, from the chrysalis burst the moth.

I see black oak twigs outlined on the sky,  
Red squirrels on the Burdett-Coutts<sup>1</sup> estate.  
I ask my nurse the question 'Will I die?'  
As bells from sad St Anne's<sup>2</sup> ring out so late,  
'And if I do die, will I go to Heaven?'  
Highgate at eventide. Nineteen-eleven.

'You will. I won't.' From that cheap nursery-maid,  
Sadist and puritan as now I see,  
I first learned what it was to be afraid,  
Forcibly fed when sprawled across her knee  
Lock'd into cupboards, left alone all day,  
'World without end.' What fearsome words to pray.

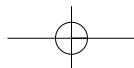
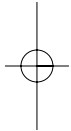
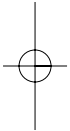
<sup>1</sup> Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts (1814–1906) was a nineteenth-century heiress whose many philanthropic schemes included providing a home for prostitutes and housing estates for the working class.

<sup>2</sup> Betjeman was baptized in the church of St Anne Brookfield on 25 November 1906.



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‘World without end.’ It was not what she’ld do  
That frightened me so much as did her fear  
And guilt at endlessness. I caught them too,  
Hating to think of sphere succeeding sphere  
Into eternity and God’s dread will.  
I caught her terror then. I have it still.



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### Calvinistic Evensong

The six bells stopped, and in the dark I heard  
Cold silence wait the Calvinistic word;  
For Calvin now the soft oil lamps are lit  
Hands on their hymnals six old women sit.  
Black gowned and sinister, he now appears  
Curate-in-charge of aged parish fears.  
Let, unaccompanied, that psalm begin  
Which deals most harshly with the fruits of sin!  
Boy! pump the organ! let the anthem flow  
With promise for the chosen saints below!  
Pregnant with warning the globed elm trees wait  
Fresh coffin-wood beside the churchyard gate.  
And that mauve hat three cherries decorate  
Next week shall topple from its trembling perch  
While wet fields reek like some long empty church.



## Matlock Bath

From Matlock Bath's half-timbered station  
I see the black dissenting spire—  
Thin witness of a congregation,  
Stone emblem of a Handel choir;  
*In blest Bethesda's limpid pool*  
Comes treacling out of Sunday School.

*By cool Siloam's shady rill—*  
The sounds are sweet as strawberry jam:  
I raise mine eyes unto the hill,  
The beetling HEIGHTS OF ABRAHAM;  
The branchy trees are white with rime  
In Matlock Bath this winter-time,

And from the whiteness, grey uprearing,  
Huge cliffs hang sunless ere they fall,  
A tossed and stony ocean nearing  
The moment to o'erwhelm us all:  
*Eternal Father, strong to save,*  
How long wilt thou suspend the wave?

How long before the pleasant acres  
Of intersecting LOVERS' WALKS  
Are rolled across by limestone breakers,  
Whole woodlands snapp'd like cabbage stalks?  
*O God, our help in ages past,*  
How long will SPEEDWELL CAVERN last?

12 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

In this dark dale I hear the thunder  
Of houses folding with the shocks,  
The GRAND PAVILION buckling under  
The weight of the ROMANTIC ROCKS,  
The hardest Blue John<sup>1</sup> ash-trays seem  
To melt away in thermal steam.

Deep in their Nonconformist setting  
The shivering children wait their doom—  
The father's whip, the mother's petting  
In many a coffee-coloured room;  
And attic bedrooms shriek with fright,  
For dread of *Pilgrims of the Night*.

Perhaps it's this that makes me shiver  
As I ascend the slippery path  
High, high above the sliding river  
And terraces of Matlock Bath:  
A sense of doom, a dread to see  
The *Rock of Ages cleft for me*.



<sup>1</sup> Blue John is a fluorspar found only in Castleton, Derbyshire, and is said to be the rarest mineral formation in Britain. Blue John craftsmen have produced lovely ornamental and decorative arts since the late nineteenth century.

## Original Sin on the Sussex Coast

Now on this out of season afternoon  
Day schools which cater for the sort of boy  
Whose parents go by Pullman once a month  
To do a show in town, pour out their young  
Into the sharply red October light.  
Here where The Drive and Buckhurst Road converge  
I watch the rival gangs and am myself  
A schoolboy once again in shivering shorts.  
I see the dust of sherbet on the chin  
Of Andrew Knox well-dress'd, well-born, well-fed,  
Even at nine a perfect gentleman,  
Willie Buchanan waiting at his side—  
Another Scot, eruptions on his skin.  
I hear Jack Drayton whistling from the fence  
Which hides the copper domes of 'Cooch Behar'.<sup>1</sup>  
That was the signal. So there's no escape.  
A race for Willow Way and jump the hedge  
Behind the Granville Bowling Club? Too late.  
They'll catch me coming out in Seapink Lane.  
Across the Garden of Remembrance? No,  
That would be blasphemy and bring bad luck.  
Well then, I'm *for* it. Andrew's at me first,  
He pinions me in that especial grip  
His brother learned in Kobë from a Jap  
(No chance for me against the Japanese).  
Willie arrives and winds me with a punch  
Plum in the tummy, grips the other arm.  
'You're to be booted. Hold him steady, chaps!'  
A wait for taking aim. Oh trees and sky!

<sup>1</sup> Architectural features redolent of the palaces of the Indian maharajahs who ruled the principality of Bengal.

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Then crack against the column of my spine,  
Blackness and breathlessness and sick with pain  
I stumble on the asphalt. Off they go  
Away, away, thank God, and out of sight  
So that I lie quite still and climb to sense  
Too out of breath and strength to make a sound.

Now over Polegate vastly sets the sun;  
Dark rise the Downs from darker looking elms,  
And out of Southern Railway trains to tea  
Run happy boys down various Station Roads,  
Satchels of homework jogging on their backs,  
So trivial and so healthy in the shade  
Of these enormous Downs. And when they're home,  
When the Post-Toasties mixed with Golden Shred  
Make for the kiddies such a scrumptious feast,  
Does Mum, the Persil-user, still believe  
That there's no Devil and that youth is bliss?  
As certain as the sun behind the Downs  
And quite as plain to see, the Devil walks.



## Norfolk

How did the Devil come? When first attack?  
These Norfolk lanes recall lost innocence,  
The years fall off and find me walking back  
Dragging a stick along the wooden fence  
Down this same path, where, forty years ago,  
My father strolled behind me, calm and slow.

I used to fill my hand with sorrel seeds  
And shower him with them from the tops of stiles,  
I used to butt my head into his tweeds  
To make him hurry down those languorous miles  
Of ash and alder-shaded lanes, till here  
Our moorings and the masthead would appear.

There after supper lit by lantern light  
Warm in the cabin I could lie secure  
And hear against the polished sides at night  
The lap lap lapping of the weedy Bure,  
A whispering and watery Norfolk sound  
Telling of all the moonlit reeds around.

How did the Devil come? When first attack?  
The church is just the same, though now I know  
Fowler of Louth<sup>1</sup> restored it. Time, bring back  
The rapturous ignorance of long ago,  
The peace, before the dreadful daylight starts,  
Of unkept promises and broken hearts.

<sup>1</sup> James Fowler (1828–92) of Louth, Lincolnshire, was an architect whose excessive restorations Betjeman loathed.

16 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman***Narcissus**

Yes, it was Bedford Park the vision came from—  
de Morgan<sup>1</sup> lustre glowing round the hearth,  
And that sweet flower which self-love takes its name from  
Nodding among the lilies in the garth,  
And Arnold Dolmetsch<sup>2</sup> touching the spinet,  
And Mother, Chiswick's earliest suffragette.

I was a delicate boy—my parents' only—  
And highly strung. My father was in trade.  
And how I loved, when Mother left me lonely,  
To watch old Martha spice the marmalade,  
Or help with flower arrangements in the lobby  
Before I went to find my playmate Bobby.

We'd go for walks, we bosom boyfriends would  
(For Bobby's watching sisters drove us mad),  
And when we just did nothing we were good,  
But when we touched each other we were bad.  
I found this out when Mother said one day  
She thought we were unwholesome in our play.

So Bobby and I were parted. Bobby dear,  
I didn't want my tea. I heard your sisters  
Playing at hide-and-seek with you quite near  
As off the garden gate I picked the blisters.  
Oh tell me, Mother, what I mustn't do—  
Then, Bobby, I can play again with you.

<sup>1</sup> William de Morgan (1839–1917) was the greatest tile and pottery designer of the Arts and Crafts movement. He was a disciple of William Morris.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940), of Swiss–French extraction, moved to London and made a career in the study and promotion of early music and instruments and of historically sensitive performances.

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For I know hide-and-seek's most secret places  
More than your sisters do. And you and I  
Can scramble into them and leave no traces,  
Nothing above us but the twigs and sky,  
Nothing below us but the leaf-mould chilly  
Where we can warm and hug each other silly.

My Mother wouldn't tell me why she hated  
The things we did, and why they pained her so.  
She said a fate far worse than death awaited  
People who did the things we didn't know,  
And then she said I was her precious child,  
And once there was a man called Oscar Wilde.

'Open your story book and find a tale  
Of ladies fayre and deeds of derring-do,  
Or good Sir Gawaine and the Holy Grail,  
Mother will read her boy a page or two  
Before she goes, this Women's Suffrage Week,  
To hear that clever Mrs Pankhurst<sup>1</sup> speak.

Sleep with your hands above your head. That's right—  
And let no evil thoughts pollute the dark.'  
She rose, and lowered the incandescent light.  
I heard her footsteps die down Bedford Park.  
Mother where are you? Bobby, Bobby, where?  
I clung for safety to my teddy bear.



<sup>1</sup> Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928), with her daughter Christabel, founded the militant Women's Social and Political Union, which fought for women's suffrage.

18 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

**Archibald<sup>1</sup>**

The bear who sits above my bed  
A doleful bear he is to see;  
From out his drooping pear-shaped head  
His woollen eyes look into me.  
He has no mouth, but seems to say:  
'They'll burn you on the Judgment Day.'

Those woollen eyes, the things they've seen  
Those flannel ears, the things they've heard—  
Among horse-chestnut fans of green,  
The fluting of an April bird,  
And quarrelling downstairs until  
Doors slammed at Thirty One West Hill.

The dreaded evening keyhole scratch  
Announcing some return below,  
The nursery landing's lifted latch,  
The punishment to undergo—  
Still I could smooth those half-moon ears  
And wet that forehead with my tears.

Whatever rush to catch a train,  
Whatever joy there was to share  
Of sounding sea-board, rainbowed rain,  
Or seaweed-scented Cornish air,  
Sharing the laughs, you still were there,  
You ugly, unrepentant bear.

<sup>1</sup> The bear's full name was Archibald Ormsby-Gore. He features in a book which Betjeman wrote for his children, *Archie and the Strict Baptists*, illus. Phillida Gili (London: John Murray, 1977).

*Spiritual Doubts and Fears* 19

When nine, I hid you in a loft  
And dared not let you share my bed;  
My father would have thought me soft,  
Or so at least my mother said.  
She only then our secret knew,  
And thus my guilty passion grew.

The bear who sits above my bed  
More aged now he is to see,  
His woollen eyes have thinner thread,  
But still he seems to say to me,  
In double-doom notes, like a knell:  
'You're half a century nearer Hell.'

Self-pity shrouds me in a mist,  
And drowns me in my self-esteem.  
The freckled faces I have kissed  
Float by me in a guilty dream.  
The only constant, sitting there,  
Patient and hairless, is a bear.

And if an analyst one day  
Of school of Adler, Jung or Freud  
Should take this aged bear away,  
Then, oh my God, the dreadful void!  
Its draughty darkness could but be  
Eternity, Eternity.



20 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

### Before the Anaesthetic

Intolerably sad, profound  
St Giles's bells are ringing round,<sup>1</sup>  
They bring the slanting summer rain  
To tap the chestnut boughs again  
Whose shadowy cave of rainy leaves  
The gusty belfry-song receives.  
Intolerably sad and true,  
Victorian red and jewel blue,  
The mellow bells are ringing round  
And charge the evening light with sound,  
And I look motionless from bed  
On heavy trees and purple red  
And hear the midland bricks and tiles  
Throw back the bells of stone St Giles,  
Bells, ancient now as castle walls,  
Now hard and new as pitchpine stalls,  
Now full with help from ages past,  
Now dull with death and hell at last.  
Swing up! and give me hope of life,  
Swing down! and plunge the surgeon's knife.  
I, breathing for a moment, see  
Death wing himself away from me  
And think, as on this bed I lie,  
Is it extinction when I die?  
I move my limbs and use my sight;  
Not yet, thank God, not yet the Night.  
Oh better far those echoing hells  
Half-threaten'd in the pealing bells  
Than that this 'I' should cease to be—

<sup>1</sup> The bells of St Giles's, Oxford, have long been famous for their rich beauty and for the skill of their campanologists.

*Spiritual Doubts and Fears* 21

Come quickly, Lord, come quick to me.  
St Giles's bells are asking now  
'And hast thou known the Lord, hast thou?'  
St Giles's bells, they richly ring  
'And was that Lord our Christ the King?'  
St Giles's bells they hear me call  
*I never knew the Lord at all.*  
Oh not in me your Saviour dwells  
You ancient, rich St Giles's bells.  
Illuminated missals—spires—  
Wide screens and decorated quires—  
All these I loved, and on my knees  
I thanked myself for knowing these  
And watched the morning sunlight pass  
Through richly stained Victorian glass  
And in the colour-shafted air  
I, kneeling, thought the Lord was there.  
Now, lying in the gathering mist  
I know that Lord did not exist;  
Now, lest this 'I' should cease to be,  
Come, real Lord, come quick to me.  
With every gust the chestnut sighs,  
With every breath, a mortal dies;  
The man who smiled alone, alone,  
And went his journey on his own  
With 'Will you give my wife this letter,  
In case, of course, I don't get better?'  
Waits for his coffin lid to close  
On waxen head and yellow toes.  
Almighty Saviour, had I Faith  
There'd be no fight with kindly Death.  
Intolerably long and deep  
St Giles's bells swing on in sleep:  
'But still you go from here alone'  
Say all the bells about the Throne.

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## Goodbye

Some days before death  
When food's tasting sour on my tongue,  
Cigarettes long abandoned,  
Disgusting now even champagne;  
When I'm sweating a lot  
From the strain on a last bit of lung  
And lust has gone out  
Leaving only the things of the brain;  
More worthless than ever  
Will seem all the songs I have sung,  
More harmless the prods of the prigs,  
Remoter the pain,  
More futile the Lord Civil Servant  
As, rung upon rung,  
He ascends by committees to roofs  
Far below on the plain.  
But better down there in the battle  
Than here on the hill  
With Judgement or nothingness waiting me,  
Lonely and chill.



## **Fruit**

Now with the threat growing still greater within me,  
The Church dead that was hopelessly over-restored,  
The fruit picked from these yellowing Worcestershire orchards  
What is left to me, Lord?

To wait until next year's bloom at the end of the garden  
Foams to the Malvern Hills, like an inland sea,  
And to know that its fruit, dropping in autumn stillness,  
May have outlived me.



24 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

### On Leaving Wantage 1972

I like the way these old brick garden walls  
Unevenly run down to Letcombe Brook.  
I like the mist of green about the elms  
In earliest leaf-time. More intensely green  
The duck-weed undulates; a mud-grey trout  
Hovers and darts away at my approach.

From ruffled beds on far-off new estates,  
From houses over shops along the square,  
From red-brick villas somewhat further out,  
Ringers arrive, converging on the tower.

*Third Sunday after Easter.* Public ways  
Reek faintly yet of last night's fish and chips.  
The plumes of smoke from upright chimney-pots  
Denote the death of last week's Sunday press,  
While this week's waits on many a step and sill  
Unopened, folded, supplements and all.

Suddenly on the unsuspecting air  
The bells clash out. It seems a miracle  
That leaf and flower should never even stir  
In such great waves of medieval sound:  
They ripple over roofs to fields and farms  
So that 'the fellowship of Christ's religion'  
Is roused to breakfast, church or sleep again.

From this wide vale, where all our married lives  
We two have lived, we now are whirled away  
Momently clinging to the things we knew—  
Friends, footpaths, hedges, house and animals—  
Till, borne along like twigs and bits of straw,  
We sink below the sliding stream of time.

## Loneliness

The last year's leaves are on the beech:  
The twigs are black; the cold is dry;  
To deeps beyond the deepest reach  
The Easter bells enlarge the sky.  
Oh! ordered metal clatter-clang!  
Is yours the song the angels sang?  
You fill my heart with joy and grief—  
Belief! Belief! And unbelief . . .  
And, though you tell me I shall die,  
You say not how or when or why.

Indifferent the finches sing,  
Unheeding roll the lorries past:  
What misery will this year bring  
Now spring is in the air at last?  
For, sure as blackthorn bursts to snow,  
Cancer in some of us will grow,  
The tasteful crematorium door  
Shuts out for some the furnace roar;  
But church-bells open on the blast  
Our loneliness, so long and vast.



26 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

### Aldershot Crematorium

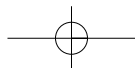
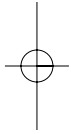
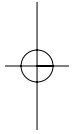
Between the swimming-pool and cricket-ground  
How straight the crematorium driveway lies!  
And little puffs of smoke without a sound  
Show what we loved dissolving in the skies,  
Dear hands and feet and laughter-lighted face  
And silk that hinted at the body's grace.

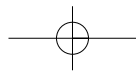
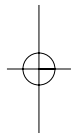
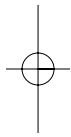
But no one seems to know quite what to say  
(Friends are so altered by the passing years):  
'Well, anyhow, it's not so cold today'—  
And thus we try to dissipate our fears.  
*'I am the Resurrection and the Life':*  
Strong, deep and painful, doubt inserts the knife.



2

*Death*





## 2 *Death*



A natural connection exists between the measure of Betjeman's spiritual doubts and his views on death. Poems such as 'Before the Anaesthetic' and 'Aldershot Crematorium', which treat death with fear and uncertainty, actually have less to say about death than about his anxiety concerning eternity. This chapter gathers together poems that treat death without substantial reference to matters of faith. 'For Nineteenth-Century Burials' typifies the way Betjeman was at various times able to consider death as a simple finality. This poem touches gently on death's inevitability and passes lovingly over archaic death rituals in Victorian culture. In all of the poems – some of which are more personal and introspective than others – death is considered in non-religious terms; where religion manifests itself in these poems it can be generally dismissed as having no serious emotional hold upon the poet. Other emotional effects of death preoccupy him here; these range from grief, to guilt, to placid acceptance, to emptiness and even to banality.

Betjeman portrays death in several poems as a mundane and ordinary event, part of mundane and ordinary lives. In 'Devonshire Street W.1' an elderly couple leaves a hospital with the dreadful news of a terminal diagnosis. The setting in an elegant Edwardian street contrasts the ugly reality of the husband's death sentence. The wife's consolation is at once human and tender as she slips her fingers into her husband's. The mundanity of death is emphasized as she tries to work out the easiest route home. 'Death in Leamington' sets the mundanity of death within the loneliness of life. An elderly

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woman has died alone in a decaying house; her nurse comes in with a tea tray, discovers she has died, and matter-of-factly tidies up the medicine bottles before turning down the heat and leaving the room in an appropriate chill and darkness. The only beauty is the evening star shining in the bedroom window, but that light is unfathomably remote, its intensity softened by the cheap plate-glass window. 'The Cottage Hospital' portrays the onset of death with equal insignificance, though from a strikingly different perspective. Here the poet contemplates his own death as he tries to relax outdoors on a late summer Sunday. While children play, a fly is trapped in a web and eaten by a spider. The innocuous events of the day fill the poet with an arresting sense of the banality of death. Insects buzz, children play and death slips in. The concluding stanza of the poem reveals Betjeman imagining his own death rather like the fly's: unnoticed, insignificant and void of meaning.

Betjeman has a knack for describing death in coldly objective, if not entirely callous, terms. While the first four poems in this group examine the creep of death, the next three show death's aftermath. With a sort of prying, journalistic nosiness Betjeman imagines what goes on around a life that has ceased to be. It is as if the dead still have some measure of being, a kind of emptiness or void around which the survivors must navigate carefully. The hole does not disappear right away, and it cannot be ignored. In 'House of Rest' an elderly woman contemplates the recent death of her husband, a vicar, and the long-ago death of her sons. She invites the poet, who appears to be visiting her in a nursing home, to share their living presence in photographs, memories and such seemingly mundane objects as her husband's tobacco jar. What becomes of the dead? The vicar is gone, but not gone: a paradox symbolized by the tobacco jar now filled with lavender. Betjeman describes, movingly, how at the Eucharist, the woman is reunited with her family. The veil dividing her from her loved ones is lifted, and they are drawn together. He uses the metaphor of the sun struggling to penetrate

the morning mist as a symbol of his own struggle with faith and doubt. 'Variations on a Theme by T. W. Rolleston' also explores this paradox. A mother has died. She is clearly gone, and most of the world is as oblivious to her absence as to her presence. Betjeman's exploration of the significance of her loss is curiously not from the perspective of her loved ones but from that of shopkeepers and bureaucrats. Cobblers and grocers who hardly knew her wonder why she no longer comes to their shops, while civil servants obligingly organize her various documents and close her file with a frightening finality. 'Variation on a Theme by Newbolt' similarly describes the inescapable presence of the dead; our attention is drawn to City boardrooms and clubs, the golf course, and other public spaces where this man passed the moiety of his life. The poem's speaker is a business associate preoccupied with the business of grief rather than by real sorrow. For the most part, he utters the sentiments appropriate to the occasion, but the final stanza lifts us from the banality of death as the speaker contemplates the pain of the lonely and isolated widow.

Not all of Betjeman's poems on death are so objective and remote. He was also capable of imagining death in much more personal terms, and when he does so his own sense of grief becomes clearly apparent. 'I. M. Walter Ramsden' eulogizes an Oxford don, but Betjeman emphasizes not so much Ramsden's achievements or his survivors' memories of him but the sensory associations arising subconsciously along with a contemplation of the deceased – ivy-twined panes, shadows from chimney pots, bees buzzing around window boxes – and the emotions that they evoke. Here death is natural if still mundane, but it is accompanied by a sense of loss and a hint of sorrow. In 'Inevitable' – inspired by his experiences visiting terminally ill patients in St Bartholomew's Hospital – Betjeman imagines losing a very dear friend to a long and agonizing terminal disease. The first stanza is characterized by emotional distancing in which the focus is on the disease, which Betjeman further

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distances by referring to it only as 'it'. The poem grows more personal as he watches his friend become more remote as he accepts the inevitable end, and then it concludes with a sense of wonder as he receives his friend's final goodbye as a benediction. In contrast is the poem 'Five o'Clock Shadow', in which Betjeman imagines himself a patient in the terminal ward of a hospital. The dominant impression is one of betrayal: the dying patients feel betrayed both by their own bodies and by the world of the living. While they endure physical and emotional agonies, a group of doctors heads out for a round of golf, nurses take their late-afternoon breaks and visiting family members anticipate a comfortable evening at home. The poem's title brilliantly captures the dual sense of the passing of one's time and the lengthening of shadows to illustrate the terror and isolation that only the dying can know. 'Old Friends' is an elegiac lament for a colloquy of lost acquaintances, and consequently this poem is infused with a much more intense and personal sense of loss. Though Betjeman's spirits have sunk at the memory of dead friends, his mood is lightened by an arrestingly beautiful Cornish sunset, the coastal tidepools and the distant chiming of the bells of St Minver's. The emergence of the stars and the stillness of Daymer Bay remind him of the wideness in God's mercy; however, he finds consolation not in the Christian hope of eternity but in the dawning awareness that he, the deceased, and the Celtic saints of the distant past are all united in an eternity of stars and sea.

Two poems in this section stand apart in their level of intensity and emotional forthrightness. Both examine Betjeman's reaction to the deaths of his parents. Because his recollection of his dead father starts with a painting, 'On the Portrait of a Deaf Man' suggests that Betjeman is attempting to objectify his grief. However, his repressed sorrow is supplanted by emotions and images that are more painful yet: the images of a decaying corpse, painful in themselves, are accompanied by the spiritual pain of disbelief in the promise of a reunion in eternity.

'Remorse' is a poem no less painful, but the pain is of a very different sort. Betjeman recalls his mother's slow decline and death, contrasting her nurse's cold professionalism with his feelings of regret at having been neglectful of her. Finding little consolation in his faith, or in the theological disputes that had occupied him at this time, Betjeman says that creed and dogma pale in importance with how we show our love. The deepest contrast between these two poems is found not in his state of belief or unbelief at the points of his parents' deaths but in what his reactions to their deaths reveal about the filial bond with each. Betjeman's inability to consider his father now in any condition but decay is merely a continuation of the antipathy and tension that characterized their relationship when his father was living. His desperate wish to hear his mother's laboured breathing one more time suggests a subconscious need to carry an unnecessary burden of remorse. In neither poem is a mature relationship with his parents revealed, and in neither poem has death brought a full sense of closure.

Such closure is manifest in 'The Last Laugh', the final poem in Betjeman's final collection of poems, *A Nip in the Air*.<sup>1</sup> 'The Last Laugh' is also one of his shortest, its brevity symbolizing the sudden onset of death. In this poem Betjeman feels he has come to terms with his life and at last seems at peace with how he has lived it. Now he has one more request to make of life before he departs it. 'Give me the bonus of laughter' is his plea for equanimity and joy in the face of death, for release from the burden of anxiety in the last days of his life. The title suggests then that the last laugh will be Betjeman's and not death's. We might read this poem as his triumph over his fear of dying.

<sup>1</sup> John Betjeman, *A Nip in the Air* (London: John Murray, 1974).

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### For Nineteenth-Century Burials

This cold weather  
Carries so many old people away.  
Quavering voices and blankets and breath  
Go silent together.  
The gentle fingers are touching to pray  
Which crumple and straighten for Death.  
These cold breezes  
Carry the bells away on the air,  
Stuttering tales of Gothic, and pass,  
Catching new grave flowers into their hair,  
Beating the chapel and red-coloured glass.



## Devonshire Street W.1<sup>1</sup>

The heavy mahogany door with its wrought-iron screen  
Shuts. And the sound is rich, sympathetic, discreet.  
The sun still shines on this eighteenth-century scene  
With Edwardian faience adornments—Devonshire Street.

No hope. And the X-ray photographs under his arm  
Confirm the message. His wife stands timidly by.  
The opposite brick-built house looks lofty and calm  
Its chimneys steady against a mackerel sky.

No hope. And the iron nob of this palisade  
So cold to the touch, is luckier now than he  
'Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners! Why was I made  
For the long and the painful deathbed coming to me?'

She puts her fingers in his as, loving and silly,  
At long-past Kensington dances she used to do  
'It's cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly  
And then we can catch a nineteen or a twenty-two.'



<sup>1</sup> The setting of King Edward VII's Hospital in Regents Park, London.

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### Death in Leamington

She died in the upstairs bedroom  
By the light of the ev'ning star  
That shone through the plate glass window  
From over Leamington Spa.

Beside her the lonely crochet  
Lay patiently and unstirred,  
But the fingers that would have work'd it  
Were dead as the spoken word.

And Nurse came in with the tea-things  
Breast high 'mid the stands and chairs—  
But Nurse was alone with her own little soul,  
And the things were alone with theirs.

She bolted the big round window,  
She let the blinds unroll,  
She set a match to the mantle,  
She covered the fire with coal.

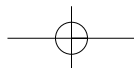
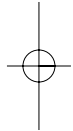
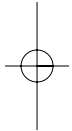
And 'Tea!' she said in a tiny voice  
'Wake up! It's nearly *five*.'  
Oh! Chintzy, chintzy cheeriness,  
Half dead and half alive!

Do you know that the stucco is peeling?  
Do you know that the heart will stop?  
From those yellow Italianate arches  
Do you hear the plaster drop?

*Death* 37

Nurse looked at the silent bedstead,  
At the gray, decaying face,  
As the calm of a Leamington ev'ning  
Drifted into the place.

She moved the table of bottles  
Away from the bed to the wall;  
And tiptoeing gently over the stairs  
Turned down the gas in the hall.



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### The Cottage Hospital

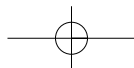
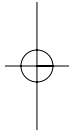
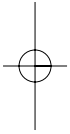
At the end of a long-walled garden  
in a red provincial town,  
A brick path led to a mulberry—  
scanty grass at its feet.  
I lay under blackening branches  
where the mulberry leaves hung down  
Sheltering ruby fruit globes  
from a Sunday-tea-time heat.  
Apple and plum espaliers  
basked upon bricks of brown;  
The air was swimming with insects,  
and children played in the street.

Out of this bright intentness  
into the mulberry shade  
*Musca domestica* (housefly)  
swung from the August light  
Slap into slithery rigging  
by the waiting spider made  
Which spun the lithe elastic  
till the fly was shrouded tight.  
Down came the hairy talons  
and horrible poison blade  
And none of the garden noticed  
that fizzing, hopeless fight.



*Death* 39

Say in what Cottage Hospital  
whose pale green walls resound  
With the tap upon polished parquet  
of inflexible nurses' feet  
Shall I myself be lying  
when they range the screens around?  
And say shall I groan in dying,  
as I twist the sweaty sheet?  
Or gasp for breath uncrying,  
as I feel my senses drown'd  
While the air is swimming with insects  
and children play in the street?



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## House of Rest

Now all the world she knew is dead  
In this small room she lives her days  
The wash-hand stand and single bed  
Screened from the public gaze.

The horse-brass shines, the kettle sings,  
The cup of China tea  
Is tasted among cared-for things  
Ranged round for me to see—

Lincoln, by Valentine and Co.,<sup>1</sup>  
Now yellowish brown and stained,  
But there some fifty years ago  
Her Harry was ordained;

Outside the Church at Woodhall Spa  
The smiling groom and bride,  
And here's his old tobacco jar  
Dried lavender inside.

I do not like to ask if he  
Was 'High' or 'Low' or 'Broad'  
Lest such a question seem to be  
A mockery of Our Lord.

Her full grey eyes look far beyond  
The little room and me  
To village church and village pond  
And ample rectory.

<sup>1</sup> An early photographic company, based in Dundee, they began to produce topographic prints in the 1860s that proved extremely popular with middle-class families.

*Death* 41

She sees her children each in place  
Eyes downcast as they wait,  
She hears her Harry murmur Grace,  
Then heaps the porridge plate.

Aroused at seven, to bed by ten,  
They fully lived each day,  
Dead sons, so motor-bike mad then,  
And daughters far away.

Now when the bells for Eucharist  
Sound in the Market Square,  
With sunshine struggling through the mist  
And Sunday in the air,

The veil between her and her dead  
Dissolves and shows them clear,  
The Consecration Prayer is said  
And all of them are near.



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**Variation on a Theme by  
T. W. Rolleston<sup>1</sup>**

Under the ground, on a Saturday afternoon in winter  
Lies a mother of five,  
And frost has bitten the purple November rose flowers  
Which budded when *she* was alive.

They have switched on the street lamps here by the  
cemet'ry railing;  
In the dying afternoon  
Men from football, and women from Timothy White's  
and McIlroy's  
Will be coming teawards soon.

But her place is empty in the queue at the International,  
The greengrocer's queue lacks one,  
So does the crowd at MacFisheries. There's no one to  
go to Freeman's  
To ask if the shoes are done.

Will she, who was so particular, be glad to know that  
after  
The tears, the prayers and the priest,  
Her clothing coupons and ration book were handed in  
at the Food Office  
For the files marked 'deceased'?

<sup>1</sup> T.W. Rolleston (1857–1920) was an Irish poet most famous for 'The Dead at Clonmacnois.'

### Variation on a Theme by Newbolt<sup>1</sup>

The City will see him no more at important meetings  
In Renaissance board rooms by Edwin Cooper designed;  
In his numerous clubs the politely jocular greetings  
Will be rather more solemn today with his death in mind.

Half mast from a first floor window, the Company's bunting  
Flops over Leadenhall Street in this wintry air  
And his fellow directors, baulked of a good day's hunting  
Nod gloomily back to the gloomy commissionaire.

His death will be felt through the whole of the organization,  
In every branch of its vast managerial tree,  
His brother-in-law we suppose will attend the cremation,  
A service will later be held in St Katherine Cree.

But what of his guns?—he was always a generous giver.  
(Oh yes, of course, we will each of us send a wreath),  
His yacht? and his shoot? and his beautiful reach of river?  
And all the clubs in his locker at Walton Heath?

I do not know, for my mind sees one thing only,  
A luxurious bedroom looking on miles of fir  
From a Surrey height where his widow sits silent and lonely  
For the man whose love seemed wholly given to her.

<sup>1</sup> Sir Henry Newbolt (1862–1938) was an English poet and historian known for his poetry about the sea.

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**I.M.**  
**Walter Ramsden<sup>1</sup>**  
**ob. March 26, 1947**  
**Pembroke College, Oxford**

Dr. Ramsden cannot read *The Times* obituary today  
He's dead.  
Let monographs on silk worms by other people be  
Thrown away  
Unread  
For he who best could understand and criticize them, he  
Lies clay  
In bed.

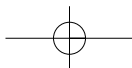
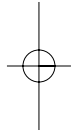
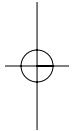
The body waits in Pembroke College where the ivy taps  
the panes  
All night;  
That old head so full of knowledge, that good heart that  
kept the brains  
All right,  
Those old cheeks that faintly flushed as the port suffused  
the veins,  
Drain'd white.

Crocus in the Fellows' Garden, winter jasmine up the wall  
Gleam gold.  
Shadows of Victorian chimneys on the sunny grassplot  
fall  
Long, cold.  
Master, Bursar, Senior Tutor, these, his three survivors, all  
Feel old.

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Biochemistry and Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford.

*Death* 45

They remember, as the coffin to its final obsequations  
Leaves the gates,  
Buzz of bees in window boxes on their summer  
ministrations,  
Kitchen din,  
Cups and plates,  
And the getting of bump suppers for the long-dead  
generations  
Coming in,  
From Eights.



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## Inevitable

First there was putting hot-water bottles to it,  
Then there was seeing what an osteopath could do,  
Then trying drugs to coax the thing and woo it,  
Then came the time when he knew that he was through.

Now in his hospital bed I see him lying  
Limp on the pillows like a cast-off Teddy bear.  
Is he too ill to know that he is dying?  
And, if he does know, does he really care?

Grey looks the ward with November's overcasting  
But his large eyes seem to see beyond the day;  
Speech becomes sacred near silence everlasting  
Oh if I *must* speak, have I words to say?

In the past weeks we had talked about Variety,  
Vesta Victoria, Lew Lake and Wilkie Bard,<sup>1</sup>  
Horse-buses, hansoms, crimes in High Society—  
Although we knew his death was near, we fought against it  
hard.

Now from his remoteness in a stillness unaccountable  
He drags himself to earth again to say good-bye to me—  
His final generosity when almost insurmountable  
The barriers and mountains he has crossed again must be.

<sup>1</sup> Bard (1874–1944) and Victoria (1873–1951) were popular performers in the music halls. Lake (1874–1939) was a film actor.

## Five o'Clock Shadow

This is the time of day when we in the Men's Ward  
Think 'One more surge of the pain and I give up the fight,'  
When he who struggles for breath can struggle less strongly:  
This is the time of day which is worse than night.

A haze of thunder hangs on the hospital rose-beds,  
A doctors' foursome out on the links is played,  
Safe in her sitting-room Sister is putting her feet up:  
This is the time of day when we feel betrayed.

Below the windows, loads of loving relations  
Rev in the car park, changing gear at the bend,  
Making for home and a nice big tea and the telly:  
'Well, we've done what we can. It can't be long till the end.'

This is the time of day when the weight of bedclothes  
Is harder to bear than a sharp incision of steel.  
The endless anonymous croak of a cheap transistor  
Intensifies the lonely terror I feel.



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## Old Friends

The sky widens to Cornwall. A sense of sea  
Hangs in the lichenous branches and still there's light.  
The road from its tunnel of blackthorn rises free  
To a final height,

And over the west is glowing a mackerel sky  
Whose opal fleece has faded to purple pink.  
In this hour of the late-lit, listening evening, why  
Do my spirits sink?

The tide is high and a sleepy Atlantic sends  
Exploring ripple on ripple down Polzeath shore,  
And the gathering dark is full of the thought of friends  
I shall see no more.

Where is Anne Channel who loved this place the best,  
With her tense blue eyes and her shopping-bag falling  
apart,  
And her racy gossip and nineteen-twenty zest,  
And warmth of heart?

Where's Roland, easing his most unwieldy car,  
With its load of golf-clubs, backwards into the lane?  
Where's Kathleen Stokes with her Sealyhams? There's  
Doom Bar;  
Bray Hill shows plain;

*Death* 49

For this is the turn, and the well-known trees draw near;  
On the road their pattern in moonlight fades and  
swells:  
As the engine stops, from two miles off I hear  
St Minver bells.

What a host of stars in a wideness still and deep:  
What a host of souls, as a motor-bike whines away  
And the silver snake of the estuary curls to sleep  
In Daymer Bay.

Are they one with the Celtic saints and the years between?  
Can they see the moonlit pools where ribbonweed  
drifts?  
As I reach our hill, I am part of a sea unseen—  
And oppression lifts.



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### On a Portrait of a Deaf Man

The kind old face, the egg-shaped head,  
The tie, discreetly loud,  
The loosely fitting shooting clothes,  
A closely fitting shroud.

He liked old City dining-rooms,  
Potatoes in their skin,  
But now his mouth is wide to let  
The London clay come in.

He took me on long silent walks  
In country lanes when young,  
He knew the name of ev'ry bird  
But not the song it sung.

And when he could not hear me speak  
He smiled and looked so wise  
That now I do not like to think  
Of maggots in his eyes.

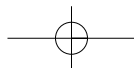
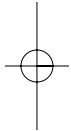
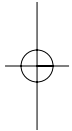
He liked the rain-washed Cornish air  
And smell of ploughed-up soil,  
He liked a landscape big and bare  
And painted it in oil.

But least of all he liked that place  
Which hangs on Highgate Hill  
Of soaked Carrara-covered earth  
For Londoners to fill.

*Death* 51

He would have liked to say good-bye,  
Shake hands with many friends,  
In Highgate now his finger-bones  
Stick through his finger-ends.

You, God, who treat him thus and thus,  
Say 'Save his soul and pray.'  
You ask me to believe You and  
I only see decay.



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## Remorse

The lungs draw in the air and rattle it out again;  
The eyes revolve in their sockets and upwards stare;  
No more worry and waiting and troublesome doubt again—  
She whom I loved and left is no longer there.

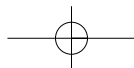
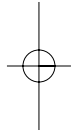
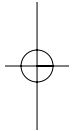
The nurse puts down her knitting and walks across to her,  
With quick professional eye she surveys the dead.  
Just one patient the less and little the loss to her,  
Distantly tender she settles the shrunken head.

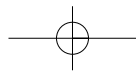
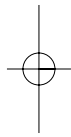
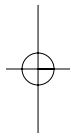
Protestant claims and Catholic, the wrong and the right of  
them,  
Unimportant they seem in the face of death—  
But my neglect and unkindness—to lose the sight of them  
I would listen even again to that labouring breath.



## The Last Laugh

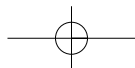
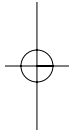
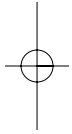
I made hay while the sun shone.  
My work sold.  
Now, if the harvest is over  
And the world cold,  
Give me the bonus of laughter  
As I lose hold.

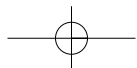
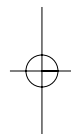
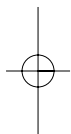




3

*Belief*





### 3 *Belief*



Although John Betjeman was greatly preoccupied by a fear of death and by uncertainties about his eternal destiny, and indeed about the existence of God, these anxieties were held in a kind of creative tension with his belief and resolve in his Christian faith. The poems in this chapter reveal how at times he found faith in the encouraging example of others, or by way of an occasional spontaneous overflow of spiritual emotion, or even in the paradox of a rational acceptance of divine mystery. In describing his belief, Betjeman's tone in these poems ranges from intellectual objectivity, to monastic devotion, to emotional jubilation and even to jocular levity. His faith was too complex and multifaceted to manifest itself in only one fashion. Belief was no simple matter for him, even when he felt a measure of security in his faith, and these poems reveal that he brought intellectual honesty and spiritual depth to his poetic reflections on Christian belief.

The first four poems are united by a common theme: the constructive influence on Betjeman's faith of the spiritual journeys of others. 'The Commander' reveals the communal faith to be a fundamental element in Betjeman's life, one the poet equates with other virtues he treasured so highly: the bonds of family and friendship, a delight in English architecture, a respect for nature, and the importance of human decency. In this tribute to George Barnes, a senior BBC official who died in 1960, Betjeman honours his friend by attributing to his example the necessity of accepting the onset of death with humility and embracing a simple trust in God's promise of eternal life.

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'Felixstowe' begins with mournful seaside echoes of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'; however in contrast to Arnold's exploration of the loss of faith, Betjeman's speaker – a nun who is the last surviving member of her order – continues to find faith in God's love, despite her isolation and loneliness. She observes the world going about its daily business, oblivious to her and to the work of God, and in spite of worldly temptation her devotion and faith never waver.

Both 'Saint Cadoc' and 'The Conversion of St Paul', though very different sorts of poems, show the examples of saints' lives increasing the poet's faith. 'Saint Cadoc', a tribute to the Celtic mysticism of a sixth-century Cornish saint, evokes an intense pitch of emotional religiosity. As he treads the ocean paths once walked by Cadoc, Betjeman petitions the saint to pray for him and begins to celebrate the natural unity of all things in God – sea, earth, saint and poet. In the end, he finds his solace from the fear of death in the comforts of Celtic Christianity. In contrast, 'The Conversion of St Paul' exemplifies Greek rationalism and stoicism as Betjeman ponders the faith of the Church's founding apostle. The poem's occasion – a public response to an agnostic's attacks on Christianity on BBC radio – demands that the troubling questions of faith be dealt with in a logical and rational manner. Betjeman thus argues in verse that St Paul's conversion, though more dramatic than the typical Christian's, serves yet to model conversion for all believers. Paul's initial rejection of Christianity is what made him so committed and effective an apostle and so devout in his faith. Betjeman also uses the story of Paul's conversion to describe his own. As a tolerant Anglican, he knows that no conversion experience can provide a formula for all believers: some see Jesus and never lose his presence, while others see once and never see again. But most believers, Betjeman argues, constantly experience Christ's 'fitful glow', a symbol of the ebb and flow of faith in the heart of the struggling believer.

Elements of Celtic Christianity, particularly the idea of the immanence of God in the natural world, can be seen in the next

three poems, 'Uffington', 'Wantage Bells' and 'Autumn 1964'. These poems are characterized by a spontaneous and joyful outburst at the discovery of God not in a church but in nature, a discovery made more profound by the unexpected ringing of church bells. 'Uffington' begins with an ambiguous image describing the tension of village church bells: Betjeman's marvellous use of consonance in 'peal' and 'pall' symbolizes the crux of the poem, the fearful and majestic power of divine mystery. The church bells seem to summon the very presence of God, yet they also remind us of impending death. This duality captures Betjeman's uncertainty about the nature of the divine and the necessity of accepting some ambiguity as inevitable in a life of faith. In 'Wantage Bells' he encounters God quite plainly in a garden. Although it is a spring Sunday morning and church bells are sounding, it is the prolific and arresting beauty of his garden, not the bells, that arouses Betjeman. The bells subconsciously remind him that this garden is not an accident of nature but is in fact the intentional and most generous gift of a Creator who remains present in his creation. It was not church where the poet found God, although church did subtly remind him of God's bounty and love. In fact, Betjeman may be suggesting here that God is as likely to be found in nature as in church. 'Autumn 1964' emphasizes a balanced and reciprocal relationship between God's creation and man's institutional efforts to celebrate and preserve for eternity the fact of the Incarnation. During a glowing autumn Sunday sunrise, the poet anticipates the approaching bells of worship, which will peal out in praise not of God himself but of the beauty of God's creation as evidence of his immanence. In response, all of creation joins in praising God's gift of eternal life, which Betjeman depicts in the language of baptism and salvation. The astonishing beauty of creation is material evidence of God's reckless generosity. No element of Christian worship can adequately honour or thank God for his bounty, let alone reciprocate; all Christian worship can do is to remind us of the utter profundity of his gift.

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Betjeman senses that we always live in the presence of divine mystery; he cannot explain it, but he does not doubt that his feeling is based in genuine truth.

The mystery of Christian faith is a central issue in the next four poems: 'Churchyards', 'Lenten Thoughts of a High Anglican', 'Advent 1955' and 'Christmas'. In these poems, the sudden and wondrous appearance of God in the most unlikely of places gives Betjeman a sense of spiritual security and renders him susceptible to the embrace of mystery and miracle. These poems are also characterized by an unusual tonal complexity that weds the high seriousness and rationalism of 'The Conversion of St Paul' with a joviality that typifies much of Betjeman's light verse. 'Churchyards' is an especially deceptive poem in its use of light-hearted rhythms to convey a seriousness about death and faith. The poem amuses first by recounting the churchyard's shared history with the alehouse, using this fact to remind us that churches preserve the history of communities and, by extension, of the nation as well. Yet it is in the traditional churchyard that Betjeman says we are likely to encounter God, because in these ancient burying grounds are village faithful who believed that after death they would receive new bodies and the gift of eternal life. Despite the poem's jaunty tone, however, Betjeman's lines ring out with a sense of disappointment in his and his culture's inability to believe with such complete security as generations past. In 'Lenten Thoughts of a High Anglican', Betjeman describes a mysterious and sexually alluring woman who receives Communion each Sunday. In an effort to increase his parishioners' attentiveness, the minister has told his congregation not to stare around and become distracted during the church service. But Betjeman's experience contradicts the minister's warning: perversely, God comes to him via the mysterious and alluring woman. What better illustration could one find of the principle that God's manifestations are surprising and extraordinary than in these two poems? Whether fantasizing about a woman's sexual life or contemplating the history

of English village life, Betjeman suddenly becomes aware of the presence of God. The intrigue and arousal surrounding the 'mistress' speaks to Betjeman of God's mysteriousness; while the churchyard, with its history of simple belief and communal life, teaches him simply to embrace the mystery of faith.

With similar wonder and humour, 'Advent 1955' and 'Christmas' both satirize the materialism inherent in the secular celebrations of that festival. The simplicity of Christ's nativity in a humble barn becomes a revelation for Betjeman, particularly when contrasted with the vanity and folly of decorations, ludicrous gifts and obsessions with Christmas cards. In both poems, Betjeman reminds us that Advent is the season for us to prepare for the gift of God to humanity, without which we would, quite simply, not be able to live in the presence of the divine. 'Christmas' in particular reminds us of the contrast between the triviality of our holiday festivity and the majesty and mystery of Christmas's true import: the Incarnation. Betjeman juxtaposes the banality of our celebrations of Christmas against the metaphysical reality of God becoming man, of the divine presenting itself to us. In the midst of mundanity comes the astonishing appearance of God. For Betjeman, the mystery is so profound, so inexplicable, that all human efforts to celebrate this signal event of Christianity fail to offer appropriate glory. The gifts we exchange with each other – our symbolic re-enactment of God's gift – are no less trivial and base than our effort at honouring God in worship. In the midst of normal human triviality appeared God incarnate, and yet more mysterious, the poem concludes, is the fact that God remains incarnate today in the metaphysical reality of the Eucharist.

Faith in the Eucharist to embody the real presence of Christ is at the heart of the final two poems of this group: 'In Willesden Churchyard' and 'A Lincolnshire Church'. 'In Willesden Churchyard' is an elegiac meditation on the encroaching of blight on pastoralism and of doubt on faith. Betjeman's specu-

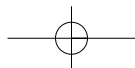
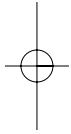
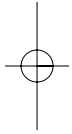
62 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

lation about the lives of those buried here points to his recurring anxiety about death and eternity. Symbolizing the loss of England's pastoral past in tombstones pitted by chemical pollution, he succumbs to fears of his own flesh decaying. But in the midst of this reverie he moves from a fear of death in the absence of God to an awareness of God's 'immanence' in the church nearby. Although the word 'glows' suggests God's vital intensity, Betjeman's spatial separation from God seems to deny him full communion; God is in the church while the poet remains in the churchyard. Perhaps the sacrament ameliorates his fear, but perhaps Betjeman remains fearful of death despite the proximity of the sacrament: that God is present in the church but absent for him. The ambiguity of belief is the very means to a stronger faith, as 'A Lincolnshire Church' shows, a church that interests him not for its architecture or its faith but for its embodiment of the communal spirit of Lincolnshire's wolds and marshes and the larger spirit of 'Dear old, bloody old England'. As soon as Betjeman enters the church, however, he senses something more profound: the mysterious presence of the divine. Despite his attempts to separate himself socially and spiritually from other English sinners, he begins to realize that all believers are united in a spiritual community that transcends the walls of social distinction that our innate snobbery urges us to build. As the church door shuts behind him, he falls to his knees, aware that God is both spirit and flesh; being in the presence of this mystery excites him spiritually, though he cannot explain or define it. After confessing his sinfulness, he becomes aware of a priest in the church, an Indian whose presence in a Lincolnshire village parish church he finds inexplicable. Sharing the presence of the divine with this priest creates a spiritual union more vital and profound than any social union. Here at the altar, where this meeting occurs, is where God becomes incarnate in the Eucharist. This is 'where the white light flickers', where the poet can see only darkly, where truth



*Belief* 63

cannot be determined absolutely, where the known and unknown come face to face. This, Betjeman tells us, is where we approach God – or he approaches us.



64 *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*

## The Commander<sup>1</sup>

On a shining day of October we remembered you, Commander,  
When the trees were gold and still  
And some of their boughs were green where the whip of the  
wind had missed them  
On this nippy Staffordshire hill.

A clean sky streamed through institutional windows  
As we heard the whirr of Time  
Touching our Quaker silence, in builders' lorries departing  
For Newcastle-under-Lyme.

The proving words of the psalm you bequeathed to the gowned  
assembly  
On waiting silence broke,  
'Lord, I am not high-minded . . .' In the youthful voice of  
the student  
Your own humility spoke.

I remembered our shared delight in architecture and nature  
As bicycling we went  
By saffron-spotted palings to crumbling box-pewed churches  
Down hazel lanes in Kent.

I remembered on winter evenings, with wine and the family  
round you,  
Your reading Dickens aloud  
And the laughs we used to have at your gift for administration,  
For you were never proud.

<sup>1</sup> Sir George Reginald Barnes (1904–60) spent much of his career in the BBC and was its first director of television. He was a great friend of Betjeman.

*Belief* 65

Sky and sun and the sea! the greatness of things was in you  
And thus you refrained your soul.  
Let others fuss over academical detail,  
*You* saw people whole.

'Lord, I am not high-minded . . .' The final lesson you taught me,  
When you bade the world good-bye,  
Was humbly and calmly to trust in the soul's survival  
When my own hour comes to die.

