

JOHN BETJEMAN 1906 – 1984

By Melanie Weston with lots of help from her Grandfather Basil Garsed

The Twentieth Century was one of great change; politically there were two World Wars and numerous 'smaller ones'. Scientifically; amazing advances were made beyond any previous human experience – the motor car, telephones, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, radio, TV, central heating (though the Romans had it two millennia previously!), refrigerators in the home, computers – the list is endless! Socially, changes were happening to reflect the changing governments and introduction of new laws.



Where will the future student find real appreciation and knowledge of it all? - Well much from poetry, which 'can express and project an image or a view in far few words than prose can do'. The poem Myfanwy, illustrates this perfectly, the following verses especially so.

Golden the light on the locks of Myfanwy,
Golden the light on the book on her knee,
Finger marked pages of Rackham's Hans Anderson,
Time for the children to come down to tea.

Oh! Fullers angel-cake, Robertson's marmalade,
Liberty lampshade, come shine on us all,
My! What a spread for the friends of Myfanwy,
Some in the alcove and some in the hall.

To turn to poets, great ones or unknown, one man stands out as the one who sends into our minds and hearts a vivid picture of life as it was, not just in one part of England or Ireland but the reality of life, good and bad, joyous or sad, of our past society. This man, Poet Laureate for many years was gentle, honorable, non materialistic, open to the joys and wonders of creation, a man of Christian Faith yet sometimes sad, depressed and afraid of death.

John Betjeman was born on August 28th, 1906, near Highgate, London. His 40 year career as a poet encompassed his many loves, niggles and passions of his life. Knighted in 1969 and appointed Poet Laureate in 1972, on the death of Ceil Day Lewis, he was hailed by the Times newspaper: 'By appointment: Teddy Bear to the Nation'.

His father was Ernest Betjemann, a cabinet maker, a trade, which had been with the family for several generations. Betjemann was the family name but during the First World War John dropped the second 'n' to make the name seem less German.

In 1925 John went to Magdalen College Oxford, where he gained a reputation as an entertainer, but did not complete his degree, having failed a Divinity exam, owing to the many distractions of college life! He went on to become a teacher at Thorpe House School, Gerrards Cross before numerous other jobs, which are reflected in his later poetry, including assistant editor of the Architectural Review and film critic for the Evening Standard. An old Oxford friend published his first book of poem in 1931, and soon afterwards he met and married Penelope Chetwode the daughter of a former Commander –in chief in India.

JB's work was prolific throughout the 30's and 40's. When the Second World War broke out, Betjeman was rejected for active service and went to work for the Ministry of Information, which

ultimately led to becoming the press attaché to Sir John Maffey, Britain's High Commissioner in Ireland, based in Dublin. His official role was to influence public opinion in Britain's favour. A particular coup was arranging for the battle scenes in Laurence Olivier's patriotic film 1944 film of Henry V to be filmed in Ireland.

He compiled regular reports on Irish politics including the activities of the IRA. It has subsequently emerged from within the IRA that the IRA planned to assassinate Betjeman to divert attention from the divisions within its own organization. Luckily, Betjeman's prospective assassin recognized his name and jumped to the conclusion that because he was a good poet he could not be a secret agent. The hit was called off!

After the war Betjeman returned to England and resumed his career as a poet and architectural critic. In 1948 his wife converted to Catholicism, whereas Betjeman became increasingly agnostic: after his father's death, he wrote:

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.
(On a Portrait of a Deaf Man, 1940)

However, Betjeman retained a strong sense of the value of belief. In 'Ghastly Good Taste', he had written: 'The only hope that I can put forward is that England will emerge from its present state of intense individualism.....Not until it is united in belief will its architecture regain coherence.'

John Betjeman had a gift for comic writing and the combination of eccentricity and Englishness are key ingredients to his enduring popularity. Socially, he was seduced as an undergraduate out of the middle class and into the upper class, where people were notionally freer and more fun, but artistically he remained true to his roots so we have the marvelous satirical poems of lost suburban proprieties and aspirations. This is shown particularly well in his poem 'Middlesex', which reveals his homesickness for the secure social position and social aspirations of the class he grew out of and also of course mentions good old Greenford!

Gaily into Ruislip Gardens
Runs the red electric train,
With a thousand Ta's and Pardons
Daintily alights Elaine;.....

Parish of enormous hayfields
Perivale stood all alone,
And from Greenford scent of mayfields
Most enticingly was blown
Over market gardens tidy,
Taverns for the bona fide,
Cockney singers, cockney shooters
Murray Poshes, Lupin Pooters,
Long in Kensal Green and
Highgate under soot and stone.



He was a strong and active conservationist; he campaigned for the preservation of Victorian railway stations and the reopening of disused churches, which he believed could assist the revival of Christianity. For Betjeman himself longed for unthinking belief and an end to reflection and doubt. Some of his feelings are reflected in 'Verses Turned...'

Across the wet November night
The church is bright with Candlelight
And waiting Evensong.
A single bell with plaintive Strokes
Pleads louder than the stirring Oaks
The leafless lanes along....

And must that plaintive bell in vain
Plead loud along the dripping Lane?
And must the building fall?
Not while we love the church and live
And our charity will give
Our much, our more, our all.

So if you wish (or not) to understand your parents and where they 'came from'

The Grandad's and the Grandma's who bore with tales
Of war and peace and bumbledon
Or why the rulers rant and rave
But still send out the very brave.
Pick up the works of this one man
Who reflected England as no other can.

Betjeman was a forward thinker and very aware of the changes going on in the world and their impact on future generations. I will finish with one of my personal favorites for really summing up then, now and the future? I hope this little taste of Betjeman inspires you to go and get a book of his poetry and sit down to a real treasure.

Harvest Hymn

We spray the fields and scatter
The poison on the ground
So that no wicked wild flowers
Upon our farms be found.
We like whatever helps us
To line our purse with pence;
The twenty-four hour broiler house
And neat electric fence

All concrete sheds around us
And jaguars in the yard,
The telly lounge and deep freeze
Are ours from working hard.

We fire the fields for harvest,
The hedges swell the flame,
The oak trees and the cottages
From which our fathers came.
We give no compensation,
The earth is ours today,
And if we loose on arable,
The bungalows will pay.

