

**SUMMONED BY BELLS**

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### Summoned By Bells

This paper is about the poetry of John Betjeman, probably little known today in this country and perhaps somewhat forgotten even in Britain despite having become the English poet laureate in 1972, being Knighted by Queen Elizabeth, and enjoying great popular success in the years after World War II. Betjeman, who died in 1984, was both a critically acclaimed and best-selling popular poet with nearly one million copies of his Collected Poems having been sold by the time Betjeman's first American edition was published in 1985.

I came across his long, blank verse poem, Summoned By Bells, in a London bookstore in the 1960s. The poem is an autobiography of his days from childhood through his time at Oxford's Magdalen College. It was a life governed in significant ways by the sound of bells: the bells of the Anglican Church, the bells of Marlborough, his public school, and the bells of Oxford.

Betjeman's work encompassed a broad range of poetic expression: rhymed lines, sonnets, and blank verse. He was a poet who mourned the transformation of the English landscape and the loss of so much of it to tasteless modernization. This is poignantly expressed in Death of King George V where the new King, Edward VIII, arrived in London by air:

#### *Death of King George V*

"New King arrives in his capital by air..."  
*Daily newspaper.*

Spirits of well-shot woodcock, partridge, snipe  
Flutter and bear him up the Norfolk sky:  
In that red house in a red mahogany book-case  
The stamp collection waits with mounts long dry.

The big blue eyes are shut which saw wrong clothing  
And favourite fields and coverts from a horse;  
Old men in country houses hear clocks ticking  
Over thick carpets with a deadened force;

Old men who never cheated, never doubted,  
Communicated monthly, sit and stare  
At the new suburb stretched beyond the run-way  
Where a young man lands hatless from the air.

On the same theme is <sup>mon-ə-de</sup> Monody on the Death of Aldersgate Street Station,  
"monody" being elegiac verse expressing personal lament:

*el-a-gee-ic*

*Monody on the Death of  
Aldersgate Street Station*

Snow falls in the buffet of Aldersgate station,  
Soot hangs in the tunnel in clouds of steam.  
City of London! before the next desecration  
Let your steeped forest of churches be my theme.

Sunday Silence! with every street a dead street,  
Alley and courtyard empty and cobbled mews,  
Till "tingle tang" the bell of St. Mildred's Bread Street  
Summoned the sermon taster to high box pews,

And neighbouring towers and spirelets joined the ringing,  
With answering echoes from heavy commercial walls  
Till all were drowned as the sailing clouds went singing  
On the roaring flood of a twelve-voiced peal from Paul's.

Then would the years fall off and Thames run slowly,  
Out into marshy meadow-land flowed the Fleet:  
And the walled-in City of London, smelly and holy,  
Had a tinkling mass house in every cavernous street.

The bells rang down and St. Michael Paternoster  
<sup>CAV-VER-NUS</sup>  
<sup>pā'ter-noster</sup>  
Would take me into its darkness from College Hill,  
Christ Church Newgate Street (with St. Leonard Foster)  
Would be late for Mattins and ringing insistent still.

Last of the east wall sculpture, a cherub gazes  
On broken arches, rosebay, bracken and dock,  
Where once I heard the roll of the Prayer Book phrases  
And the sumptuous tick of the old west gallery clock.

Snow falls in the buffet of Aldersgate station,  
Toiling and doomed from Moorgate Street puffs the train,  
For us of the steam and the gas-light, the lost generation,  
The new white cliffs of the City are built in vain.

Betjeman could not abide planners with their schemes for changing both suburban and rural England. A satirical commentary is found in The Planster's Vision:

*The Planster's Vision*

Cut down that timber! Bells, too many and strong,  
    Pouring their music through the branches bare,  
    From moon-white church-towers down the windy air  
Have pealed the centuries out with Evensong.  
Remove those cottages, a huddled throng!  
    Too many babies have been born in there,  
    Too many coffins, bumping down the stair,  
Carried the old their garden paths along.

I have a Vision of The Future, chum,  
    The workers' flats in fields of soya beans  
        Tower up like silver pencils, score on score:  
And Surging Millions hear the Challenge come  
    From microphones in communal canteens  
        "No Right! No Wrong! All's perfect, evermore.

John Betjeman, whose father's ancestors emigrated from Holland to England, was born in 1906 in Highgate, then a village-like suburb of London adjacent to Hampstead. His family was well-to-do with his father the head of a family business which manufactured furnishings and other items for the luxury trade. Betjeman's father had hoped that his only child would enter and eventually run the business but even as a child Betjeman was drawn to poetry. As he put it in Summoned By Bells:

For myself,  
I knew as soon as I could read and write  
That I must be a poet. Even today,  
When all the way from Cambridge comes a wind  
To blow the lamps out every time they're lit,  
I know that I must light mine up again.

*[I must interject here that Cambridge University was a hotbed of literary critics who were viewed by many as overly cantankerous.]*

My first attraction was to tripping lines;  
Internal rhyming, as in Shelley's 'Cloud',  
Seemed then perfection. 'O'er' and 'ere' and 'e'en'  
Were words I liked to use. My father smiled:  
"And how's our budding bard? Let what you write  
Be funny, John, and be original."  
Secretly proud, I showed off merrily.  
But certain as the stars above the twigs  
And deeply fearful as the pealing bells  
And everlasting as the racing surf  
Blown back upon itself in Polzeath Bay,  
My urge was to encase in rhythm and rhyme  
The things I saw and felt (I could not *think*).

And so, at sunset, off to Hampstead Heath  
I went with pencil and with writing-pad  
And stood tip-toe upon a little hill,  
Awaiting inspiration from the sky.  
"Look! there's a poet!", people might exclaim  
On footpaths near. The muse inspired my pen:  
The sunset tipped with gold St. Michael's church,  
Shouts of boys bathing came from Highgate Ponds,  
The elms that hid the houses of the great  
Rustled with mystery, and dirt-grey sheep  
Grazed in the foreground; but the lines of verse  
Came out like parodies of A & M. [*ancient and  
Modern Anglican Hymn book*]

Betjeman attended Highgate Junior School and there he submitted his verses, grandiosely entitled *The Best Poems of Betjeman*, to one of his teachers who happened to be T.S. Eliot. The poems, Betjeman observed in later years, were "terrible" but Eliot kindly never let on and Betjeman continued to follow his muse.

In his Preface to High and Low, a 1966 collection of his poems, Betjeman, in response to the request of his publisher, one Murray, explained in rhyme his reasons for choosing poetry as a medium of expression:

*Preface to "High and Low"*

MURRAY, you bid my plastic pen  
A preface write. Well, here's one then.  
Verse seems to me the shortest way  
Of saying what one has to say,  
A memorable means of dealing  
With mood or person, place or feeling.  
Anything extra that is given  
Is taken as a gift from Heaven.

The English language has such range,  
Such rhymes and half-rhymes, rhythms strange,  
And such variety of tone,  
It is a music of its own.  
With MILTON it was organ power  
As loud as bells in Redcliffe tower;  
It falls like winter crisp and light  
On COWPER'S Buckinghamshire night.  
It can be gentle as a lake,  
Where WORDSWORTH'S oars a ripple make  
Or rest with TENNYSON at ease  
In sibilance of summer seas,  
Or languorous as lilies grow,  
When DOWSON'S lamp is burning low –  
For endless changes can be run  
On church-bells of the English tongue.

MURRAY, your venerable door  
Opened to BYRON, CRABBE and MOORE  
And TOMMY CAMPBELL. How can I,  
a buzzing insubstantial fly,  
Compare with them? I do not try,  
Pleased simply to be one who shares  
An imprint that was also theirs,  
And grateful to the people who  
Have bought my verses hitherto.

At Oxford Betjeman conducted himself much in the way Evelyn Waugh, at Oxford at the same time, described student life in Brideshead Revisited: a constant round of parties, cocktails, and other festive activities. Possibly as a consequence and to the dismay of his tutor, C.S. Lewis, Betjeman, despite several attempts, failed to pass Holy Scripture, an extremely easy exam which at the time was a prerequisite to taking the Oxford finals. He was sent down without an Oxford degree.

One other Oxford episode will be mentioned. According to Richard Davenport-Hines' biography of W.H. Auden, Auden was found in bed with Betjeman with Auden having to pay five pounds, not a small sum in those days, to buy the silence of the man who discovered them.

This experience apparently had no lasting effect on Betjeman for in the early 1930's he courted the daughter of Field-Marshal Lord Chetwode. Lady Chetwode was said to have commented, in a manner similar to Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell in The Importance of Being Ernest, that "We ask people like that to our houses, but we don't marry them." But marry they did in 1938 with two children born of the marriage.

Betjeman was not a poet of nature, like Wordsworth, but rather a landscape poet – a poet with a strong sense of place. Witness his poem Meditation on a Constable Picture:

*Meditation on a Constable Picture*

Go back in your mind to that Middlesex height  
Whence Constable painted the breeze and the light  
As down out of Hampstead descended the chaise<sup>shai</sup>  
To the wide-spreading valley, half-hidden in haze:

The slums of St. Gile's, St. Mary'bone's farms,  
And Chelsea's and Battersea's riverside charms,  
The palace of Westminster, towers of the Abbey  
And Mayfair so elegant, Soho so shabby,

The mansions where lilac hangs over brown brick,  
The ceilings whose plaster is floral and thick,  
The new stucco terraces facing the park,  
The odorous alleyways, narrow and dark,

The hay barges sailing, the watermen rowing  
On a Thames unembanked which was wide and slow-flowing,  
The street-cries rebounding from pavements and walls  
And, steeple-surrounded, the dome of St. Paul's.

No market nor High Street nor square was the same  
In that cluster of villages, London by name.  
Ere slabs are too tall and we Cockneys too few,  
Let us keep what is left of the London we knew.



While not wanting to be regarded as <sup>a</sup>humorous poet, Betjeman wrote some extremely funny poems, often lampooning England's mores and class structure. A marvelous example is In Westminster Abbey:

### *In Westminster Abbey*

Let me take this other glove off  
As the *vox humana* swells,  
And the beauteous fields of Eden  
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.  
Here, where England's statesmen lie,  
Listen to a lady's cry.  
Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.  
Spare their women for Thy Sake,  
And if that is not too easy  
We will pardon Thy Mistake.  
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,  
Don't let anyone bomb me.  
Keep our Empire undismembered  
Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,  
Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,  
Honduras and Togoland;  
Protect them Lord in all their fights,  
And, even more, protect the whites.  
Think of what our Nation stands for,  
Books from Boots' and country lanes,  
Free speech, free passes, class distinction,

Democracy and proper drains.  
Lord, put beneath Thy special care  
One-eighty-nine Cadogan <sup>Co. - dug - in</sup> Square.  
Although dear Lord I am a sinner,  
I have done no major crime;  
Now I'll come to Evening Service  
Whensoever I have the time.  
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,  
And do not let my shares go down.  
I will labour for Thy Kingdom,  
Help our lads to win the war,  
Send white feathers to the cowards  
Join the Women's Army Corps,  
Then wash the Steps around Thy Throne  
In the Eternal Safety Zone.  
Now I feel a little better,  
What a treat to hear Thy Word,  
Where the bones of leading statesmen,  
Have so often been interr'd.  
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait  
Because I have a luncheon date.

Almost always at some point a poet turns to love and yearning as a subject and Betjeman was no exception as shown in Pershore Station:

*Pershore Station,  
or A Liverish Journey First Class*

The train at Pershore station was waiting that Sunday night  
Gas light on the platform, in my carriage electric light,  
Gas light on frosty evergreens, electric on Empire wood,  
The Victorian world and the present in a moment's neighbour-  
bourhood.

There was no one about but a conscript who was saying  
good-bye to his love  
On the windy weedy platform with the sprinkled stars above  
When sudden the waiting stillness shook with the ancient  
spells  
Of an older world than all our worlds in the sound of the  
Pershore bells.

They were ringing them down for Evensong in the lighted  
abbey near,  
Sounds which had poured through apple boughs for seven  
centuries here.

With Guilt, Remorse, Eternity the void within me fills  
And I thought of her left behind me in the Herefordshire  
hills.

I remembered her defenselessness as I made my heart a  
stone  
Till she wove her self-protection round and left me on my  
own.

And plunged in a deep self pity I dreamed of another wife  
And lusted for freckled faces and lived a separate life.  
One word would have made her love me, one word would  
have made her turn  
But the word I never murmured and now I am left to burn.  
Evesham, Oxford and London. The carriage is new and  
smart.

I am cushioned and soft and heated with a deadweight in  
my heart.

Love in a lighter vein is expressed in In the Public Gardens:

*In the Public Gardens*

In the Public Gardens,  
To the airs of Strauss,  
*Eingang* we're in love again  
When *ausgang* we were *aus*.

The waltz was played, the songs were sung,  
The night resolved our fears;  
From bunchy boughs the lime trees hung  
Their gold electroliers.

Among the loud Americans  
*Zwei Engländer* were we,  
You so white and frail and pale  
And me so deeply me;

I bought for you a dark-red rose,  
I saw your grey-green eyes,  
As high above the floodlights,  
The true moon sailed the skies.

In the Public Gardens,  
Ended things begin;  
*Ausgang* we were out of love  
*Und eingang* we are in.

Loss, sadness, and death, particularly as he grew older, figured in a number of Betjeman's poems: Death in Leamington captures so well the loneliness of death:

*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?

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.

Dark depression and the lure of self-destruction are central to <sup>Tree-gar-dock</sup> Tregardock:

*set in Cornwall*

*Tregardock*

A mist that from the moor arose  
    In sea-fog wraps Port Isaac bay,  
The moan of warning from Trevoise  
    Makes grimmer this October day.

Only the shore and cliffs are clear.  
    Gigantic slithering shelves of slate  
In waiting awfulness appear  
    Like journalism full of hate.

On the steep path a bramble leaf  
    Stands motionless and wet with dew,  
The grass bends down, the bracken's brown,  
    The grey-green gorse alone is new.

Cautious my sliding footsteps go  
    To quarried rock and dripping cave;  
The ocean, leaden-still below,  
    Hardly has strength to lift a wave.

I watch it crisp into its height  
    And flap exhausted on the beach,  
The long surf menacing and white  
    Hissing as far as it can reach.

The dunlin do not move, each bird  
    Is stationary on the sand  
As if a spirit in it heard  
    The final end of sea and land.

And I on my volcano edge  
    Exposed to ridicule and hate  
Still do not dare to leap the ledge  
    And smash to pieces on the slate.

Betjeman had encountered Lord Alfred Douglas' poetry when in his teens at Marlborough and initiated a series of letters with Douglas, Oscar Wilde's lover and by then in his early fifties, a correspondence finally terminated by Betjeman's parents. As a consequence, Betjeman had a lifelong preoccupation with the tragedy of Wilde's last years and this led to one of his finest early poems:

*The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the  
Cadogan Hotel*

Ca- dug- in

He sipped at a weak hock and seltzer  
As he gazed at the London skies  
Through the Nottingham lace of the curtains  
Or was it his bees-winged eyes?

To the right and before him Pont Street  
Did tower in her new built red,  
As hard as the morning gaslight  
That shone on his unmade bed,

"I want some more hock in my seltzer,  
And Robbie, please give me your hand –  
Is this the end or beginning?  
How can I understand?

"So you've brought me the latest *Yellow Book*:  
And Buchan has got in it now:  
Approval of what is approved of  
Is as false as a well-kept vow.

"More hock, Robbie – where is the seltzer?  
Dear boy, pull again at the bell!

They are all little better than *cretins*,  
Though this *is* the Cadogan Hotel.

as- tra- kan      Ca- dug- in

"One astrakhan coat is at Willis's –  
Another one's at the Savoy:  
Do fetch my morocco portmanteau,  
And bring them on later, dear boy."

A thump, and a murmur of voices –  
("Oh why must they make such a din?")  
As the door of the bedroom swung open  
And TWO PLAIN CLOTHES POLICEMEN came in:

"Mr. Woilde, we've come for tew take yew  
Where felons and criminals dwell:  
We must ask yew tew leave with us quietly  
For this *is* the Cadogan Hotel."

Ca- dug- in

He rose, and he put down *The Yellow Book*.  
He staggered – and, terrible-eyed,  
He brushed past the palms on the staircase  
And was helped to a hansom outside.

The final poem in John Betjeman's Collected Poems is aptly entitled The Last Laugh

*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.

As I approach the close of this paper it may be of interest to hear Betjeman's description of his process for writing poetry as set forth in a 1954 article in The Spectator:

First there is the thrilling or terrifying recollection of a place, a person or a mood which hammers inside the head saying 'Go on! Go on! It is your duty to make a poem out of it'. Then a line or a phrase suggests itself. Next comes the selection of a metre. I am a traditionalist in metres and have made few experiments. The rhythms of Tennyson, Crabbe, Hawker, Dowson, Hardy, James Elroy Flecker, Moore and Hymns from the Anglican hymnbook are generally buzzing about in my brain and I choose one from these which seems to me to suit the theme.

I jot down rough drafts on cigarette packets or old letters before writing them on foolscap, but the aural *oral* element remains dominant:

Then I start reciting the lines aloud, either driving a car or on solitary walks, until the sound of the words satisfied me.

Many critics and poets have praised the work of John Betjeman and called him a "lyrical poet of singular purity with a mastery of the singing line and of melodic flow." In 1958 Edmund Wilson remarked that, apart from W.H. Auden and Dylan Thomas, Betjeman was the most interesting English poet since T.S. Eliot. W.H. Auden's preface to <sup>Betjeman's</sup> ~~his own~~ collection of poems entitled Slick but not Streamlined celebrates the skill and originality of Betjeman, to whom Auden dedicated his The Age of Anxiety when published in 1947.

On the other hand, there are those critics who observed that the appeal of Betjeman's work is limited to readers who share its cultural background. However, this criticism fails to explain the popular success of his work. Some critics have scorned him "as a cult figure promoted to an undeservedly high status by smart journalists and cite his career as an example of the way in which the upper-middle class network of Metropolitan London promulgates a false set of cultural values."

For myself, there is great pleasure in reading Betjeman's poems. They encompass subjects and values that touch us all even though the particular locale or time may be somewhat distant. I find his tone of nostalgia particularly appropriate to our own times, full as they are of disillusionment with what passes for progress and culture. Betjeman's poetry is accessible in its relative simplicity, unlike much of modern poetry whose meaning for many remains obscure.

The poetry of Betjeman deals with the full range of life's experiences – from childhood through adulthood to illness and death – both for himself and the reader. I hope you will be tempted to explore him further.