Kevin J. Gardner is Associate Professor of English at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. A Betjeman scholar, he is the author of *Betjeman and the Anglican Imagination* (SPCK, 2010). He is also the editor of *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman: An anthology of his religious verse* (Continuum, 2005) and *Poems in the Porch: The radio poems of John Betjeman* (Continuum, 2008). In addition to his work on Betjeman, he has published on a wide variety of literary figures over the years, and has a particular interest in twentieth-century writers who address issues of faith and religion.

BETJEMAN ON FAITH

An anthology of his religious prose

Edited by Kevin J. Gardner

SPCK

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To Hilary
and to Graham

‘I long for Jesus as a Man, I long to see Him, to be lifted up to Him, to love Him, not to injure Him as much as I do all the time. I *try* to long for Him when I don’t long for Him. Jesus is the centre of my faith and the Sacraments are one of the ways by which I try to know Him.’

Letter to Penelope Betjeman, 2 June 1949

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Preface

Poet, journalist, broadcaster, preservationist and beloved icon of Englishness: to John Betjeman these successes meant nothing without his faith. Underlying everything he wrote and all he campaigned for was an encompassing Christian commitment that to him meant a regular observance of the sacraments, a lifelong spiritual struggle to merit salvation, and an aesthetic pleasure in the material culture of Anglicanism. As he admitted to Evelyn Waugh, 'Of course, upbringing, habit, environment, connections – all sorts of worldly things – make me love the C. of E. But this would not matter a straw, if I *knew*, in the Pauline sense, that Our Lord was not present at an Anglican Mass.'[1] Faith, complex and serious, was not compartmentalized and separated from his public life. The struggle to sustain his faith and invigorate his church infuses every genre in which he wrote: poetry and letters, essays and journalism, radio broadcasts and television films. Unabashedly revealing his personal beliefs and doubts, he explored theological dilemmas that challenge rational thinkers, argued for the interconnectedness of religion and the arts, discussed the dependence of English society on its established Church, instructed his readers about the life and history of parishes and church buildings, and in moving elegies lamented the loss of churches. He is without doubt one of the most important voices of faith and culture in the twentieth century.

To read Betjeman today is to discover a mind profoundly engaged with a striking variety of topics pertaining to Christian faith and experience. Questions of belief were inescapable for him, and they remain so for anyone who reads Betjeman closely. This volume is sure to portray the more sombre aspects of Betjeman's personality, easily manifested by a sudden recollection of his own mortality or of the uncertainty of eternity. Though religion was a subject of great seriousness to him, it did not always prevent him from injecting a note of humour into a portentous topic. There were parish 'arguments about cow parsley on the altar', for instance, which he includes among those cherished hallmarks of Englishness

[1] Quotations from Betjeman's letters throughout this volume are from *John Betjeman: Letters*, Vol. 1, ed. Candida Lycett Green (London: Methuen, 1994).

most under threat of imminent Nazi invasion.[2] Or there was St Endellion Church, which looked 'just like a hare', yet whose architecture, history and spiritual mystery were worth serious attention.[3] Such memorable whimsy typifies Betjeman's voice, and is rarely absent except in moments of the most sober reflection. Not surprisingly, superficial pleasures can open the door to seriousness, as he admits in a 1937 letter to Alan Pryce-Jones: 'The thing that has happened to me is that after years of sermon tasting, I am now a member of the C. of E. and a communicant. I regard it as the only salvation against progress and Fascists on the one side and Marxists of Bloomsbury on the other.'

Indeed, surprise is one of the great experiences in reading the work of John Betjeman. 'Who knew what undiscovered glories hung/Waiting in locked-up churches', he wrote in his autobiographical poem.[4] The same question could be asked of the archives holding Betjeman's papers. For many the most surprising undiscovered glory in this book may be the sermon he preached at St Matthew's Church, Northampton, on 5 May 1946. Privately printed in a slim volume with sermons preached there by other laymen, Betjeman's sermon is a homiletical masterpiece that suggests an alternative career in the Church had he been so inclined. However, the anxiety he felt determined him not to accept future such requests. Perhaps it was stage fright before a congregation of 600, perhaps it was the distress of having to follow in the pulpit his old Oxford tutor and antagonist, C. S. Lewis. Despite his misgivings, his sermon is rhetorically powerful and theologically substantive, a work of both beauty and humility – and also not without its wry moments of self-deprecating humour. It contains some of the most affective prose that he ever composed and is moreover a deeply personal revelation.

This sermon is surely my most fortuitous discovery about Betjeman and remains for me the central text of this collection, which grew out of original research that I was conducting for my book, *Betjeman and the Anglican Imagination* (London: SPCK, 2010). It was while preparing to write that book that I began to realize that religion was not simply one of Betjeman's many interests but the central preoccupation of his life, and one that influenced his thinking on all other matters. In his poetry, Betjeman's explorations of faith and doubt and his celebrations of the life of the Church are relatively well known, but perhaps this is rather less the

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2 '"Oh, to be in England . . ."', *The Listener*, 11 March 1943, p. 296.
3 See pp. 94–7 of this volume.
4 *Summoned by Bells* (London: John Murray, 1960), p. 48.

case with his prose. Until now, much of Betjeman's religious prose has remained uncollected, available only to readers with access to microform, out-of-print books, and archives. This anthology of Betjeman's religious prose is intended to reveal the great diversity of his thinking and writing on the subjects of the spiritual and social natures of Christianity.

Scholarship can be a lonely business, so it is gratifying to have made the acquaintance and earned the respect of other writers devoted to Betjeman. As always, I am profoundly grateful to Bevis Hillier for his friendship and encouragement and especially for laying the foundation for all my work on Betjeman. His magisterial biographical trilogy continues to inspire and impress me, and all scholars of the life and writings of Betjeman owe Bevis a debt of gratitude. I must also acknowledge two other scholars whose work has made this anthology possible. Bill Peterson's *John Betjeman: A bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006) made the identification and location of Betjeman's more obscure prose a much less exhausting task, and Stephen Games identified several interesting pieces and graciously provided me with copies from his own collection. I deeply admire their scholarship, and I remain grateful for their support, advice and assistance.

For her immediate interest in this book, and for overseeing it through to publication, I am grateful to my editor at SPCK, Alison Barr. Also of invaluable support at SPCK were Mark Casserley, Rima Devereaux, Lauren Zimmerman and the editorial and production teams. Thanks also to copy-editor Steve Gove. During the early stages of editing this book I benefited from the research assistance of Louise North at the BBC's Written Archives Centre, John Frederick of the Betjeman Archive at the McPherson Library of the University of Victoria, and Georgiana Vear at the *Daily Telegraph*, and I am indebted to them for their kind help. I am also grateful for the support of Dr Truell Hyde, Vice Provost for Research at Baylor University, who generously provided me with an Arts and Humanities Faculty Development grant to assist with research-related costs. And finally I wish to express my gratitude to the Estate of the late Sir John Betjeman for their permission to publish and their encouragement of this project.

Further reading

The best single-volume biographical source is Bevis Hillier's *John Betjeman: The biography* (London: John Murray, 2006), effectively an abridgement of his three-volume trilogy published between 1988 and 2004. The best of Betjeman's religious poems are available in two anthologies that I have

edited: *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman: An anthology of his religious verse* (London: Continuum, 2005) and *Poems in the Porch: The radio poems of John Betjeman* (London: Continuum, 2008). Those wishing to read a detailed analysis of Betjeman's Christian imagination are directed to my book, *Betjeman and the Anglican Imagination* (London: SPCK, 2010), while those who might wish to consult some shorter analyses are directed to the following sources: my introduction to *Faith and Doubt* (cited above), my article 'Anglicanism and the Poetry of John Betjeman' (*Christianity and Literature* 53.3 (2004), pp. 361–83), Peter J. Lowe's article 'The Church as a Building and the Church as a Community in the Work of John Betjeman' (*Christianity and Literature* 57.4 (2008), pp. 559–81), and Stephen Games's introduction to *Sweet Songs of Zion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2007).

Part 1

FAITH AND CULTURE

'Now I quite agree with you that the Church is imperfect, that many problems can be solved and aren't solved because of human slackness and weakness. . . . But I know that Christianity is not a negative force but may even do some service by immunizing people against worse creeds, such as Fascism. I believe it's positive and can alone save the world, not from Fascism, or Nazism, but from evil.'

Letter to Roy Harrod, 25 March 1939

Oh, for a faith

from *Ghastly Good Taste* (1933)

I am pleasantly awoken every morning in London by the sound of a church bell at eight o'clock. It sounds above the early lorries and rides triumphant over the roaring engines being warmed up in the garage of the street behind me, before the chauffeurs depart to fetch their precious masters to the office. And every morning as this bell rings, one elderly sexton, two old ladies and a pale youth attend the daily communion – or mass, as it is called among Anglo-Catholics – in St Agatha's. During the day the church remains open, and some more old women and some

> Young men, that no one knows, go in and out
> With a far look in their eternal eyes.

But out of every 500 people who go down my street, I do not think it would be inaccurate to say that less than three call in at St Agatha's. When the bell rings and wakes me in the morning, even though I am tired, I envy the young man and the two old women and the sexton their faith, that will let them face the discomfort of early rising for a mystic experience in St Agatha's to carry them through the day. That early morning bell is symbolic of the lost age of faith; the symbolism becomes even more pathetic when, twenty minutes after the eight o'clock bell, six strokes on the sanctus tell the people cleaning the gramophone shop and the men at the Lex Garage opposite that the Son of Man died to save the world, and has died again just across the road today. . . .

In the village of Thaxted, in Essex, there has been an attempt, not unsuccessful, to centre the life of the place round the catholic service of the church. The church has become a place of importance once more, not a seedy relic continually needing repairs to the chancel; there is some reason for the numerous footpaths which lead to it, dotted across the ordnance map; and the footpaths are not always straight. Church social life was not originally confined to tea-parties and Dorcas Societies. At Thaxted, the public-house is not looked upon as a place of sin. Yet despite the religious atmosphere of Thaxted church, and despite the communal life centring

round it and the able and great character of Conrad Noel, the incumbent, one realizes that it is only in remote agricultural districts that faith, as the medieval Church knew it, stands any chance of surviving. Therefore one cannot blame the canons who lecture and the preservation-mad town councillors and the Wykehamists for treating Gothic architecture in terms of medieval archaeology. Every village with its cottages clustered round its church is a relic. For the cottagers have moved to the towns, and the cottages are filled with arty escapists who are trying to blind themselves with the past, and the workers are in the cinema in Stortford, or on their motor bicycles, or listening to the wireless, or reading Lord Castlerosse or James Douglas in the *Sunday Express*, when the bell for service rings. But do not blame the vicar, he is no longer a man with authority. Blame the age, for that is the only thing which can frighten you. The age has lost one faith, but it does not yet seem to have found another.

Domine dirige nos

The Listener, 9 January 1941

One of the most moving experiences London had to offer before this war was the City on a fine summer evening of a Sunday. Offices were shut, underground trains were infrequent, the sharks had floated away in their limousines on Friday, the streets were empty and the City became the ancient capital of a Christian country. In the late evening light it was easy to imagine that the winding alleys and footpaths between high Victorian office blocks were flanked by overhanging medieval houses, and to add to the illusion there were church bells ringing round every corner. Here and there one saw a few choirboys racing towards the one building that was awake, a neighbouring City church. A single ting-ting from St Alban's, Wood Street, at six, and there was that green gas-lit interior, dusted for Evensong. By a quarter to seven Christ Church, Newgate Street, nearby had started ringing for service while the fuller peals – St Andrew Holborn, St Clement Danes, St Mary-le-Bow – provided deeper and more distant music beneath the single tinkles. And in the streets and from the bridges Sunday re-asserted the forest of chiming towers and steeples, white Portland stone or black, tapering lead, with St Paul's, a mother hen brooding among them, just as before 1666 many more towers and spires were seen from Clerkenwell marshes, gathered round Old St Paul's in Rembrandt's drawing.

Since I was a boy of twelve I have visited the City churches again and again, so that I can remember the interior of every one, for there is not one so dim and so locked that I have not managed to attend a service there. I have even attended a Welsh service for the purpose of getting into St Benet's, Paul's Wharf, one of Wren's best and least known buildings. To the time of writing it has escaped destruction. And it is from sitting in the churches on Sundays, visiting them on weekdays and going to a great deal of trouble to get the key when they were not open, that I have let the impression they made sink into me so that no fire or bombs or business bishop or lazy incumbent can destroy them for me.

One reads the usual paragraphs about the churches the Germans burnt the other night – that Milton lies in St Giles', Cripplegate, Judge Jeffreys in St Mary Aldermanbury, that the Blue Coat boys come back to Christ

Church, once the parish church of Christ's Hospital, to special services, that 'Thomas Ingoldsby' was rector of St Vedast's, Foster Lane. Milton's bones may have been shifted by the Germans, Judge Jeffreys' stone may have cracked and gone, Barham would not recognize St Vedast's and the Blue Coat boys will sit in those high galleries of Christ Church no more. But it was not the well-known names and historic events that made the churches of the City so important, nor even the repeated attempts of certain ecclesiastics to sell the sites, nor even the fact that they had survived the fire, or not survived the fire and been designed by Wren, or survived Wren and been designed by some even better architect, the noble Hawksmoor or delicate George Dance, Junior. The City is about one square mile. Before the fire of 1666 there were 93; Wren rebuilt about 50, and though others were never rebuilt, there were 76 churches in the City in the early nineteenth century. Since that date 25 have been destroyed, and of the 51 that survived the Victorians and the present century, 11 have been almost destroyed by the Germans and another 14 have been damaged with varying degrees of severity.

Nearly every City church, whatever its date, carries with it an atmosphere of cedar-scented pews, richly-cushioned aldermen's chairs, clocks fatly ticking in dark galleries, towering organ lofts and mellow organs, no expense spared on stained glass; and where the clear glass survives it is possible to look through at the sky and think oneself back to the times of the Guilds when London was a dry island among marshes by the Thames, to work through to the days of City companies and merchants consulting turnips while apprentices and charity children looked down from galleries and the rector preached theology in bands. The City churches were Prayer Book architecture, and it is their English texture which has been destroyed and can never be copied. Certainly some of the finer buildings, when Wren was not concerned to wedge as much accommodation as possible into a confined space, can be copied on freer, finer sites. But the small intimate Renaissance interiors like St Vedast's, Foster Lane, are gone forever.

Of the ten buildings which looked to me most ruinous two were among the great interiors of the City, and both were by Wren. St Bride's, Fleet Street, had its old high pews, galleries, organ and clear glass in all its windows except the east one, which was inappropriate and no loss. It was an almost untouched Wren interior. Christ Church, Newgate Street, had fine woodwork and even lovelier was the plaster decoration all over the interior east wall: this survives, but the ceiling is gone and the church is finished. One can only be thankful that the 'cathedral' glass has gone, too.

Fortunately the original steeples of both these churches survive, though St Bride's may well have to come down and be rebuilt – an experience it has suffered before.

Among the other heavy casualties are St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe, a brick and stone Wren building, plain without, for it was not, when originally built, visible from the street. It had very lovely woodwork, pews and organ case, and reminded one of the hold of an old ship. St Vedast's, Foster Lane, had a Wren steeple of triangular shape, which is to me the most lovely of all in the City. It is still there. St Lawrence Jewry was in every way Wren's finest interior, and if only a bomb had destroyed the Victorian glass and not the magnificent organ case, iron sword-rests, pews and plaster work this would have been the most exquisite Renaissance church in London. The vestry, with its carving, its thick and elaborate plaster work, its painted ceiling, was one of the sights of the City. St Stephen's, Coleman Street, is little architectural loss. 'Restorations' had robbed this plain Wren church of its woodwork and character. St Alban's, Wood Street, the last City church to be lit with gas, was generally locked. It was Wren Gothic 'corrected' by Sir Gilbert Scott into any Victorian suburban church. The tower was square and firm and alone survives. St Anne and St Agnes was modest outside, but it had a most beautiful flat-domed ceiling; one small part of this dome survives. It is an interior worth repairing. St Giles', Cripplegate, was robbed of most of its Renaissance and medieval fittings in the latter part of the last century and now the superb little eighteenth-century painted window has gone and many of the monuments. The Perpendicular arcades survive. All Hallows', Barking, another medieval church, was full of treasures, the best of which was the font cover, three cherubs struggling round some fruit, probably the best work of Grinling Gibbons. I should like to know that this has been saved. The Dutch Church at Austin Friars was a Friars' preaching church. It had few fittings, was scraped inside and lit by ugly greenish glass. On its spacious Gothic proportions and the stone floor its later beauty depended, and there is little reason why this church should not arise better from the bombing.

Of the 14 that are damaged, the greatest tragedy is St Mary Abchurch, which had a painted dome by Sir James Thornhill, the father-in-law of Hogarth, a grand carved and festooned pulpit, altarpiece and organ case. The other superb and irreplaceable churches of the 14 which must be repaired are St Mary Woolnoth (by Hawksmoor, Wren's pupil and a more original architect than Wren), St Mary-at-Hill which has the most complete collection of wood and ironwork in the City, St Dunstan's in the East whose 1823 Gothic interior is unique and unspoiled by later generations,

most under threat of imminent Nazi invasion.[2] Or there was St Endellion Church, which looked 'just like a hare', yet whose architecture, history and spiritual mystery were worth serious attention.[3] Such memorable whimsy typifies Betjeman's voice, and is rarely absent except in moments of the most sober reflection. Not surprisingly, superficial pleasures can open the door to seriousness, as he admits in a 1937 letter to Alan Pryce-Jones: 'The thing that has happened to me is that after years of sermon tasting, I am now a member of the C. of E. and a communicant. I regard it as the only salvation against progress and Fascists on the one side and Marxists of Bloomsbury on the other.'

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