August 28, 2006, marked the centenary of the birth of Sir John Betjeman, a date that went almost entirely unnoticed in the United States but that occasioned innumerable publications, exhibitions, broadcasts, and retrospective celebrations in the United Kingdom.¹ Books by and about Betjeman are

¹ These included a star-studded West End charity gala attended by the Prince of Wales, a Cornish birthday party and concert, a steam locomotive dedication, numerous literary events
enjoying sales in the UK unimaginable for any other poet of our time: among
these are new editions of his verse, new and reissued prose collections, and
two new biographies. Betjeman’s success is attributable to the delightful
accessibility of his poems as well as to his extensive work in broadcasting and
documentary filmmaking and to the leading role he took in architectural and
cultural preservation. As a result of his celebrity, various myths have been
perpetuated about Betjeman’s antimodernist stance: that he was an eccentric
poet of light verse, a nostalgic preserver of a vanishing myth of England and
Englishness, and the jocular and loveable “teddy bear to the nation,” as he
was dubbed by the Times upon his selection as poet laureate in 1972. Thus
far Betjeman has not generated much literary criticism; however, the recent
publication of several serious reassessments of the intellectual and literary
qualities of his poetry, together with these new publications, has reopened
the field of Betjeman studies.2 One of the things that makes John Betjeman
such an interesting case is that he was a devout and practicing Christian who
openly confessed his faith in his poems and broadcasts. At least a third of his
poems touch on religious subjects; they describe ecclesial architecture and
the beauty of worship, his will to believe and his frustrations with religious
hypocrisy, and the church’s role in providing a cultural identity and spiritual
framework for the nation. Though Christianity was sufficiently central in
Betjeman’s poetic imagination for him to title his blank-verse autobiography
Summoned by Bells, belief was never easy for him, and questions of faith and
doubt remain essential to understanding both his public and private per-
sonae. In the end, John Betjeman’s jolly public façade masked many deep
anxieties both personal and theological.

This complex life can be appreciated through any of a number of new
publications of his poetry and prose. An updated edition of Betjeman’s Col-
lected Poems, introduced by Andrew Motion, has been released by his long-
standing publisher, John Murray (in the US by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux).
Originally published in 1958, it has remained in continuous print, selling an
astounding three million copies. The new edition contains for the first time
Summoned by Bells, previously available only as an individual volume. The

and festivals, exhibitions at the Bodleian, the British Library, and Sir John Soane’s Museum, a
week of dedicated Betjeman-themed programming on BBC Radio 4, three new films on BBC
Two, and rebroadcasts of Betjeman’s own documentary films on BBC Four and ITV.

2) In addition to the critical evaluations of Betjeman’s verse by poets Hugo Williams and
Andrew Motion in the volumes reviewed here, see Professor Dennis Brown’s monograph in
the Writers and Their Work series, John Betjeman, and my own essay, “Anglicanism and the
Poetry of John Betjeman.”