
Kevin Gardner’s Betjeman: Writing the Public Life is not the last word on John Betjeman, the beloved poet laureate and architectural activist, because it is practically the first word on this undeservedly ignored British writer, at least in the United States. In addition to Bevis Hillier’s three-volume biography and various anthologies of Betjeman edited by Stephen Games and by Gardner himself, the serious scholarly criticism of Betjeman can be counted on one hand. The trope “groundbreaking” is thoroughly overused, but in Gardner’s case, it is highly deserved. His readable and insightful scholarship offers us a Betjeman for the contemporary climate. Gardner opens windows into the poet’s Anglicanism, his pastoralism, and his sacramentalism through fine accounts of Betjeman’s doubt, his sexual longing, and his sentimentality, the last a heady mixture of nostalgic sweetness and satiric acid. What makes Gardner’s account particularly helpful for audiences in the United States is his insight into a religious and cultural milieu that does not make sharp distinctions of love of place and love of heritage from that of dogma and of the personal spirituality of the Anglican faith. Christianity in America, even in the South, has always lived as part of the country’s marketplace of ideas. Gardner shows us how different the Church of England was (and perhaps still is). Betjeman’s faith was a mixture of belief and doubt, and the particular depth of his best work is an exploration of that tension, a tension located not just in Betjeman’s questions about God, but also in his concerns for the land and for architecture.

Gardner, at the same time, can show us places in Betjeman’s output in which the catholicity of his faith stretches beyond his Englishness. In short, Gardner’s Betjeman is not really “the beloved teddy bear of the nation,” as he was sometimes labeled, but a complex personality who loved God, feared death, and lusted after beauty in building, landscape, and woman. For Gardner, the man’s particular power is existential. Betjeman faces with
sobering honesty the angst of waning Anglicanism and the disregard of Britain’s architectural heritage. Especially in his poetry, we are offered a man whose joviality can turn quickly to a display of pain.

The particular strength of Gardner’s volume is perhaps its only weakness. Since he is turning over fallow ground, Gardner’s study cannot be expected to offer the definitive reading of Betjeman’s thought and practice. There is a side to Betjeman that is not only sentimental, but sanguine, even saccharine. Not all of Betjeman’s poetry, nor all of his travel writing and architectural criticism, is equally powerful. Sometimes Betjeman was just repeating himself. Gardner’s insightful portrait tends to be synchronic, offering us an artist who did not radically change from decade to decade. While Gardner does a good job contextualizing Betjeman, more work remains in helping readers navigate the diachronic changes in the religious and ideological milieu that shaped Betjeman’s subtlety and his inner tensions. Perhaps a temptation for any lover of Betjeman is to read his early work anachronistically in light of his later work. In Betjeman’s early career, his Anglo-Catholicism was certainly interacting with a generation of cultural strength and stridency for Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics alike. Betjeman in his first years was involved with some of the same circles that influenced not only T.S. Eliot, but also G.K. Chesterton a generation earlier. Betjeman was also influenced by the High Anglican Welsh mystic and horror writer Arthur Machen. How did Machen’s gothic tendencies and his decadent spiritualism shape Betjeman’s own poetic symbols and subjects? This kind of exploration needs to be done not only at the beginnings of Betjeman’s career, but also in his later decades.

The older Betjeman may be as much a poet of the waning of the Church of England as R.S. Thomas, but to understand this we need a more thorough navigation of the twists and turns of this loss, especially in the 1960s and 70s. Once the medium of his cultural criticism switches from that of radio to that of television, Betjeman tends to be less and less critical and more and more simply appreciative. In light of the long fight that he fought for architectural preservation, this shift bears more examination. How, for instance, did the 1951 Festival of Britain exhibition shift the ground for architectural criticism and heritage preservation? What happened in the 1950s to the trenchant critic who had decried the moral loss of England in the 1930s? Did this shift influence not only Betjeman’s public prose, but his poetic output? There is also more to be done with Betjeman’s intellectual heritage, in particular the tradition of moral criticism attached to landscape and architectural writing and the tradition of light verse that continued to