

# Nature and Childhood in John Betjeman's *Summoned by Bells*

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## Introduction

John Betjeman (1906–1984), who was knighted in 1969 before being appointed Poet Laureate in 1972, was one of the leading English poets of his generation. In addition to his poetry, Betjeman also achieved fame as a journalist, broadcaster and as one of the founders of the Victorian Society. He was a poet of many talents that enabled his poetry to reach a wider public.

Out of his numerous works and achievements, this essay will focus on his autobiographical poetry, in particular *Summoned by Bells* (1960), and to examine the way he relates his view of nature with his childhood experiences. During his childhood, he made many visits to the English countryside, above all to his beloved Cornwall, and his memories of these places become one of the central themes of his works. Betjeman's view of nature is often compared with the Romantic poets' concept of nature and their use of poetic forms. In this essay, Betjeman's interest in nature will be discussed in reference to the poetry of William Wordsworth, which also deals with the themes of nature and childhood.

**Key words:** nature; childhood; memory; time; place

## I. Nature and Childhood

As Candida Lycett Green comments in her anthology of her father's prose writings *Coming Home*, "Betjeman wrote about grand houses and modest churches, about the seaside, countryside, cities and villages from Aberdeen to Dublin, from Norfolk to Cornwall"<sup>1</sup>; his affection for the British rural and urban landscapes spread far and wide. His memories of his trips begin from his early childhood and the importance of such places is weaved into his autobiographical poem *Summoned by Bells* (1960), which tells us about his child-

hood up to his university days and is written in blank verse. In Chapter 4 of this poem, entitled “Cornwall in childhood”, Betjeman presents his childhood experience at the seaside. The following lines picture the beach in the morning and how he was touched by the sea creatures and the sounds of the sea:

. . . before breakfast down toward the sea  
 I ran alone, monarch of miles of sand,  
 Its shining stretches satin-smooth and vein'd.  
 I felt beneath bare feet the lugworm casts  
 And walked where only gulls and oyster-catchers  
 Had stepped before me to the water's edge.  
 The morning tide flowed in to welcome me,  
 The fan-shaped scallop shells, the backs of crabs,  
 The bits of driftwood worn to reptile shapes,  
 The heaps of bladder-wrack the tide had left  
 (Which, lifted up, sent sandhoppers to leap  
 In hundreds round me) answered “Welcome back!” (34)<sup>2</sup>

As the chapter's title indicates, Betjeman specifies both the place and his past experiences and seems to connect these ideas strongly, while the child's response to nature is recalled through the natural images that constitute that place.

Recalling his past, Betjeman reflects on how he was touched by the natural scenes and by the objects they contained. His awareness of a child's sensitivity to nature is described more generally in the following lines:

Childhood is measured out by sounds and smells  
 And sights, before the dark reason grows.  
 Ears! Hear again the wild sou'westers whine!  
 .....  
 Nose! Smell again the early morning smells:  
 Congealing bacon and my father's pipe;  
 The after-breakfast freshness out of doors  
 Where sun had dried the heavy dew and freed  
 Acres of thyme to scent the links and lawns;  
 The rotten apples on our shady path  
 Where blowflies settled upon squashy heaps,

Intent and gorging; at the garden gate  
 Reek of Solignum on the wooden fence;  
 Mint round the spring, and fennel in the line,  
 And honeysuckle wafted from the hedge  
 .....  
 Eyes! See again the rock-face in the lane,  
 Years before tarmac and the motor-car. (38–39)

Here, Betjeman specifies the importance of the child's feelings for nature: not of artificial objects but of nature itself. The happy memories of those days he had spent with his father are also mentioned in the smell of "my father's pipe".

Wordsworth also praises the child's sensitivity to nature, but from a rather different point of view from that of Betjeman. In Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey", the images of nature in childhood are described in far more complex terms:

... For nature then  
 (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
 And their glad animal movements all gone by,  
 To me was all in all. — I cannot paint  
 What then I was. The sounding cataract  
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite: a feeling and a love,  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, or any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 73–84)

In Wordsworth's poem, the significance of nature is seen in the way that for the child nature is not only represented through the objects of the landscape but denotes a spiritual transcendence as well:

... Of all the mighty world  
 Of eye and ear, of both what they half-create,  
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognize  
 In nature and the language of the sense,  
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,

The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. (106–112)

Compared to Wordsworth's depiction of nature in childhood as something far greater than just the images of natural objects that the child senses, Betjeman's description of nature is carried out on a more human scale. Like Wordsworth, Betjeman's poem is written in blank verse. What seems to differ from Wordsworth's idea of nature is, however, that Betjeman is less likely to value nature as a force that determines human existence as well as giving strong emphasis on the meaning of the place itself.

As have been mentioned, Betjeman's interest in natural landscapes and its natural objects are thoroughly evident in his childhood experiences; his view of the natural landscape is certainly one of the key components of his childhood memory. Nevertheless, the natural objects that figure in these scenes are more likely to be connected with his memory of his childhood holidays and his strong sense of place, in this case, Cornwall. Geoffrey Harvey analyses Betjeman's sense of place as follows:

The little station is worth preserving, not for economic reasons, or even to gratify the instinct of nostalgia, but because it retains for us in a vital way a closer contact with the realities of the natural world, imaged by the red sky and the cedar tree which complete the landscape. (73)

Harvey's discussion is focused on the train station, which seems irrelevant to nature, but what he is trying to say is that Betjeman is neither necessarily nostalgic nor made nostalgic by nature. Harvey suggests that Betjeman's focus differs from that of Wordsworth because "the benign tyranny of place is not only spiritual" (15), and goes on to assert that "[i]t also derives from their overwhelming moral commitment to preserving and sustaining the human scale of things" (15). Thus, for Betjeman the features of the natural landscape "remain as mute but resonant witnesses to lives shaped within particular environments, which become part of the texture and meaning of ordinary lived experience" (Harvey 15). The landscape is no more than one part of the poet's memory of the places where he spent his childhood holidays.

## II. Family Relations

In *Summoned by Bells*, there is another episode that relates to Betjeman's concern for his past experiences and his memory of places. Chapter 2 of the poem, entitled "The Dawn of Guilt", is about Betjeman's relationship with his family, in particular to his reluctance to work in the family business, which his father had started. For Betjeman insisted that "[f]or myself, / I knew as soon as I could read and write / That I must be a poet" (16). In the poem, he expresses his sadness at the discord between his father and himself: "My dear father, how I loved him then / Before the years of our estrangement came!" (11). Yet, at the same time the poem allows him to recall the happier times he spent with his father:

... But in the west  
 Were health and sunshine, bumps on Hampstead Heath,  
 Friends, comfort, railways, brandy-balls and grass;  
 And west of westward, somewhere, Cornwall lay. (19)

The Cornish scenes presented in these lines suggest the positive relationship he once had with his father in the days before his family was to become "The Hopeless Dawn" (19). The trip to the west of England and the sensation of natural landscapes seems to have functioned as a consolation in his later life.

The connection between memory and place are also a theme of "Norfolk", where he again discusses his relationship with his father and how he feels about him. In this poem, he revisits the place that he had visited with his father forty years previous. The assured relationship with his father is described as one of the unforgettable experiences of his younger days:

I used to fill my hand with sorrel seeds  
 And shower him with them from the tops of stiles,  
 I used to butt my head into his tweeds  
 To make him hurry down those languorous miles  
 Of ash and alder-shaded lanes, till here  
 Our moorings and the masthead would appear. (7–12)<sup>3</sup>

The young Betjeman is walking with his father to their sailing boat after supper, and they are listening to the sounds of the water nearby, which carries on

to the following lines:

There after supper lit by lantern light  
 Warm in the cabin I could lie secure  
 And hear against the polished sides at night  
 The lap lap lapping of the weedy Bure,  
 A whispering and watery Norfolk sound  
 Telling of all the moonlit reeds around. (13–18)

These lines serve as a prologue to the poem's darker theme, when he describes how "the Devil" came to "attack" the good friendly relationship with his father:

How did the Devil come? When first attack?  
 These Norfolk lanes recall lost innocence,  
 The years fall off and find me walking back  
 Dragging a stick along the wooden fence  
 Down this same path, where, forty years ago,  
 My father strolled behind me, calm and slow. (1–6)

Betjeman is making a return trip to this place to which he feels some kind of sentimental attachment. He finds that it has not changed, and although the strife between himself and his father can never be mended, Betjeman hopes that "Time" will heal their relationship in just the same way that the broken church has been restored:

The church is just the same, though now I know  
 Fowler of Louth restored it. Time, bring back  
 The rapturous ignorance of long ago,  
 The peace, before the dreadful daylight starts,  
 Of unkept promises and broken hearts. (20–24)

One aspect of Betjeman's early interest in nature is that it is never a wholly sentimental one, and differs in that way from Wordsworth. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was brought up in the surrounds of the Lake District and learnt from an early age to seek consolation in nature. In Betjeman's case, the nature that he experienced during his childhood does not determine his later

life in the way that Wordsworth believed it should. For Betjeman, it is rather the concept of time and the memory of the past that becomes important when he writes about nature in his poetry. Though his affection for nature is not to be ignored, he uses natural scenes to recollect his childhood days: the memory of his childhood days, especially the days he had spent in the company of his strict father. The concept of nature becomes one of memorialization of his experiences and the visits he had enjoyed, and it is to be expected that his feelings for nature should form one of the unforgettable memories of his youth. He uses the natural objects of the countryside to recollect his happy childhood.

### Conclusion

Though Betjeman may seem to follow the Wordsworthian view of nature, especially in his use of poetic forms and in his love for the natural world, we can see that their philosophies are actually very different. Wordsworth's interest in nature begins in early childhood and grows in intimacy throughout his life, although it starts to fade in old age. Betjeman's fondness for nature is more modern and contemporary than spiritual or transcendent in tone. He views nature as the background of his personal experiences and as essential to his belief in the preservation of the community. His sympathies lie not with the beauty of the natural landscape but rather with the past. The moments of natural beauty that occur in his poetry are not necessarily expressive of his affection for nature itself, but become more remarkable when they are seen in the context of his childhood days.

### Notes

1 Candida Lycett Green's comment that is quoted in this paper is from the Forward introduced in John Betjeman's *Coming Home: An Anthology of His Prose, 1920–1977* published by Methuen in 1997.

2 The numbers that are quoted in this paper are the page numbers from the first edition of *Summoned by Bells* published by Murray in 1960.

3 The lines from "Norfolk" are quoted from John Guest's anthology, *The Best of Betjeman*. The numbers indicated are the lines from this poem.

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