OBITUARY

Sir John Betjeman 1906-1984

There have been many formal obituary notices of Sir John Betjeman, and there is no need in these pages to add to them; but some notice must be taken of a valued Fellow of the Society, a Vice-President since 1971, who was a doughty champion of the causes in which we believe, and these recollections of a dear friend for fifty years are offered in affectionate memory. He would himself have contributed a poem to this volume in honour of his great friend Henry Anglesey, but was already too ill to contemplate it when invited; and Henry is a relation by marriage of his widow Penelope.

I have written "fifty years" and the surprising thing is that I cannot write "sixty". We must often have knelt together at Oxford in Pusey House. The reason we did not know each other as undergraduates must have been that Oxford was then divided into "hearties" and "aesthetes", and I, as a running Blue, was "hearty" while he, the friend of Harold Acton and Maurice Bowra, was an "aesthete". This silly distinction meant nothing in the London of the thirties and, frequenting the same churches, we soon came together.

Our Deputy Chairman, John Parker, has even earlier recollections, and has recorded them elsewhere, for he was at Marlborough with John. Marlborough was not a happy experience for John—but he would not have been happy at any public school—and his time at Magdalen was bliss as he has recorded in *Summoned by Bells*. But then came disaster. Divinity Moderations ("Divvers") was then a compulsory early examination. It was a very easy examination—a little knowledge of the Kings of Israel and the journeys of St. Paul would get one through—but John failed it, and failed it despite "the hours/ Spent on my knees in Cowley, Pusey House, / St. Barnabas', St. Mary Mag's, St. Paul's". The *Magdalen College Record* reveals that his failure was "indirectly connected with undeniably poor relations with C.S. Lewis, his tutor in English"—a strange story as Lewis was like him a great lover of the Church of England. So he went down without taking a degree, but this did not diminish the affection that he felt for Magdalen or Magdalen for him. In due course he was made an Honorary Fellow. It is the Oxford manner. Edward Grey, sent down from Balliol for a like reason, became not only an Honorary Fellow at his college but Chancellor of the University.

He had to earn a living and, when invited to join the pages of *Who's Who* he described himself, not inaccurately, as "poet and hack". Lady Rhondda, that great patron of literature gave him space in *Time and Tide* and the *Daily Telegraph* was helpful. When asked what his first editions brought he replied, "They are

the only editions", but even when he attained fame he never became a wealthy man. When I congratulated him on the popularity he had attained he replied, "They like my poetry because they can understand it". That was true. His verse was not great poetry but in the most literal sense his lines were memorable, and he became the nation's most loved Laureate since his hero Tennyson. In *Summoned by Bells* he records that T.S. Eliot was a master at his preparatory school at Highgate, and when he sent him his verse, *The Best of Betjeman,* no comment came but "A boy called Jelly said 'He thinks they're bad'". I can cap the story. In 1959 I asked Tom to propose the toast of John at the annual dinner of the Friends of Friendless Churches in recognition of his services to poetry and the preservation of churches. He replied that he was sure John's services to churches deserved recognition. The silence about his poetry was eloquent. It was sad as Eliot, like Lewis, was another leading Anglican layman. He was going to Yorkshire in any case and in the end Roger Fulford proposed the toast; the exchanges were delicious.

It was as a poet that John looked at architecture. He was not a scholar, and would have been hard put to distinguish the different mouldings. From time to time he agitated, but he was not good at it because he lacked follow through. It was as a poet that he looked at buildings, and he had a wonderful eye for beauty in stone or brick or wood or glass. Four incidents stand out in my memory. He was standing with the then Warden of Keble gazing in rapture at Butterfield's chapel when a passer-by said "Frightful, isn't it?"—which was the usual verdict up to the Second World War. John seized him by the lapel of his coat and said, "Don't you realize that you are looking at one of the greatest buildings in Europe?". He was a leader in the renewed appreciation of Victorian architecture, but that was the chief need at the time and he loved all good building. As members of the London Diocesan Advisory Committee we were deputed one day to advise on what should be done with the bodies of some persons who had thought themselves too grand to be buried with the common people in the churchyard of St. Mary's, Willesden and by a quirk of fortune found themselves on the roadside when a new highway was created. When we had resolved that question John insisted that we should look at the tomb in which Charles Reade is buried with his friend Laura Seymour, and I remember how wistfully he looked at it and how he admired the unexpected charity of the Victorians. My third recollection is of John stumping out of a meeting of the D.A.C. in fury at the policy of the diocesan secretary: if he had only waited a fortnight he would have been sacked by the then Bishop of London along with John

Summerson, Lawrence Tanner, Osbert Lancaster, myself and others for presuming to try to save St. John's, Smith Square. As another example of the way he would act on impulse I remember how he resigned from the Athenaeum when a new scheme of concealed lighting was introduced in the Drawing Room. It was, in fact, a good scheme and John eventually repented and asked for re-admission, to the relief of his fellow members.

Recognition came to him in the end in abundance—C.B.E., Knight Bachelor, Poet Laureate, Honorary decorates, Honorary Fellow. These honours never turned his head. "Never seek an honour, never refuse one" was his sensible advice.

There was always an element of the actor in John—one reason why he was so good on the television screen—and he acted old even when only middle-aged. But in due course his years caught up with him and took their toll. Many members will recall how frail he looked already in 1977 when he took the chair as a Vice-President at our annual general meeting in Guildhall. Keats has asked of "poets dead and gone", "Ye have left your souls on earth, / Have ye souls in heaven too?" John has certainly left fragrant memories on earth, and in a positive answer to Keats' question the Friends of Friendless Churches has invited John Piper to design a stained-glass window to be placed in memory of his friend and collaborator in All Saints' Church at Farnborough on the Berkshire Downs, where John lived for some years and where he set that delightful story, *Archie and the Strict Baptists.*

Ivor Bulmer-Thomas