

Prayer of the Month, May 2017

The Last Laugh

I made hay while the sun shone.
My work sold.
Now, if the harvest is over
And the world cold,
Give me the bonus of laughter
As I lose hold.

John Betjeman, 1906–84

This short poem prayer was written late in Betjeman's life and reflects the mixture of tender melancholy and humour that pervades much of his work. His life is reviewed briefly in the idea of making hay while the sun shines, and then there comes a day of reckoning, seen as both a harvest and as 'the world gone cold'. He hopes that humour will carry him through this last phase of life as he loses his hold on it. In this last line, he seems to be referring to the effects of Parkinson's Disease, which he suffered from during the last decade of his life.

John Betjeman was born on 28 August 1906, near Highgate, London. His father was a cabinet maker, a trade which had been in the family for several generations. The family name was Betjemann, with two 'n's, but John dropped the second 'n' during the First World War, to make the name less German. At Highgate school he was taught by T. S. Eliot and went on to Marlborough College and Oxford University. He developed a passion for architecture and used his popularity as a broadcaster to champion the cause of neglected buildings. Many of his television documentaries concerned railways. In 1933 he married Penelope Chetwode and their children were Paul and Candida. During the war he worked at the Ministry of Information and in a secret department of the Admiralty. His *Collected Poems* came out in 1958 and he was knighted in 1969 and made Poet Laureate in 1972. He often wrote poems about church matters, and many of them are collected into his *Church Poems* (1981), which includes a poem called 'Bristol and Clifton'. He writes, in a letter written on Christmas Day 1947: 'my view of the world is that man is born to fulfil the purposes of his Creator i.e. to Praise his Creator, to stand in awe of Him and to dread Him. In this way I differ from most modern poets, who are agnostics and have an idea that Man is the centre of the Universe or is a helpless bubble blown about by uncontrolled forces.' He died at his home in Trebetherick in Cornwall on 19 May 1984 and is buried at St Enodoc's church.

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