Summoned by bells

UVic’s collection of Betjeman materials appeals
by James Gifford

UVic Libraries’ Special Collections and Archives hold prized materials in modern literature, ranging from nearly 400 letters by T.S. Eliot to Ezra Pound’s elucidation of his poetry for a German translation. A featured series in the leading journal *Modernism/modernity* recently discussed the former, with British scholars demonstrating their fluency with UVic Libraries’ holdings. The library is reaching a broad audience indeed.

Yet, the major collections of literary papers are the true stars. John Betjeman, Poet Laureate and perhaps the most popular British poet of the twentieth century, is in this elite Victoria club, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Robert Graves and Sir Herbert Read in Special Collections and Archives. Betjeman sold his papers to UVic in 1972, the year he succeeded Cecil Day Lewis as Poet Laureate. The foresight of this acquisition can be seen now in the community interest in the papers, with Victoria residents at work on the materials nearly every day. As well, the library can happily note the popularity of recent works on Betjeman that have relied on UVic Libraries’ collections. A second lot of papers was acquired in 1986 after Betjeman’s death. This comprises the largest single collection of Betjeman’s papers (24 meters), and it is augmented by nearly 600 volumes of print material.

Betjeman is truly one of UVic’s ‘stars,’ and a number of scholars at work on Betjeman are guided by this constellation to the shores of our island for research. Perhaps more appropriately for Betjeman, they are summoned by the bells.

As a collection of papers, perhaps the most attractive quality is the range of Betjeman’s correspondence. While the collection includes drafts of poetry and prose, the letters Betjeman received from his peers read as a ‘who’s who’ of British literature and society. Apart from studies of Betjeman himself and his works, this range of materials offers scholars the opportunity to observe the ‘inside’ discussions of the leading artists of the age.

In a time when competition for the best graduate students is acute, UVic has the advantage of foregrounding the very attractive opportunities presented by the McPherson Library’s unparalleled range of unique literary materials.

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Benefits for undergraduates are there as well—authors as ‘unreal’ as T.S. Eliot or as ornery as Kingsley Amis come alive here. Figures of perennial importance, ranging from W.H. Auden to Evelyn Waugh, discuss their trade, and this literary network invites serious attention apart from Betjeman’s own works.

But this is not to say that Betjeman does not have his own appeal as well. While popular culture has become a distinct field of academic research, popular poetry continues to evade our attention. And Betjeman is always popular, even prompting a reading group that is very active here in Victoria. Betjeman’s appeal is also based on critical acumen. His ‘simple’ poetry of everyday life and nostalgia for a vanishing landscape developed out of his keen awareness of the literary movements around him. With T.S. Eliot as a teacher at Highgate, it is no surprise to find that Betjeman’s pleasing accessibility to reader and his attention to vanishing landscapes stands in contrast to his modernist contemporaries: a deliberate contrast.

This is hardly a limitation of his materials—it is a critical position that remains understudied. As Betjeman aptly put it, “When I am describing Nature, it is always with a view to the social background or the sense of Man’s impotence before the vastness of the Creator.”

A modernist with this neo-Romantic sense of the social and the sublime (though an everyday sublime with tennis and toast), Betjeman’s poetry may not demand expert interpretation by posing deliberate difficulties, but the pleasure of reading and rereading surely calls our attention to the richness lurking there.

Perhaps most akin to Oscar Wilde, Betjeman calls his readers twice. Like the bells of his childhood, Betjeman summons rather than confronts his readers. We are caught first with wit and charm, then again when our critical sense is teased into action, rather than called out by name to the front of the class.

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