



# Betjeman: A Life

*A. N. Wilson*

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## **Betjeman: A Life** A. N. Wilson

John Betjeman was by far the most popular poet of the twentieth century; his collected poems sold more than two million copies. As poet laureate of England, he became a national icon, but behind the public man were doubts and demons. The poet best known for writing hymns of praise to athletic middle-class girls on the tennis courts led a tempestuous emotional life. For much of his fifty-year marriage to Penelope Chetwode, the daughter of a field marshal, Betjeman had a relationship with Elizabeth Cavendish, the daughter of the Duke of Devonshire and lady-in-waiting to Princess Margaret. Betjeman, a devout Anglican, was tormented by guilt about the storms this emotional triangle caused.

*Betjeman*, published to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth, is the first to use fully the vast archive of personal material relating to his private life, including literally hundreds of letters written by his wife about their life together and apart. Here too are chronicled his many friendships, ranging from "Bosie" Douglas to the young satirists of *Private Eye*, from the Mitford sisters to the Crazy Gang. This is a celebration of a much-loved poet, a brave campaigner for architecture at risk, and a highly popular public performer. Betjeman was the classic example of the melancholy clown, whose sadness found its perfect mood music in the hymns of a poignant Anglicanism.

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