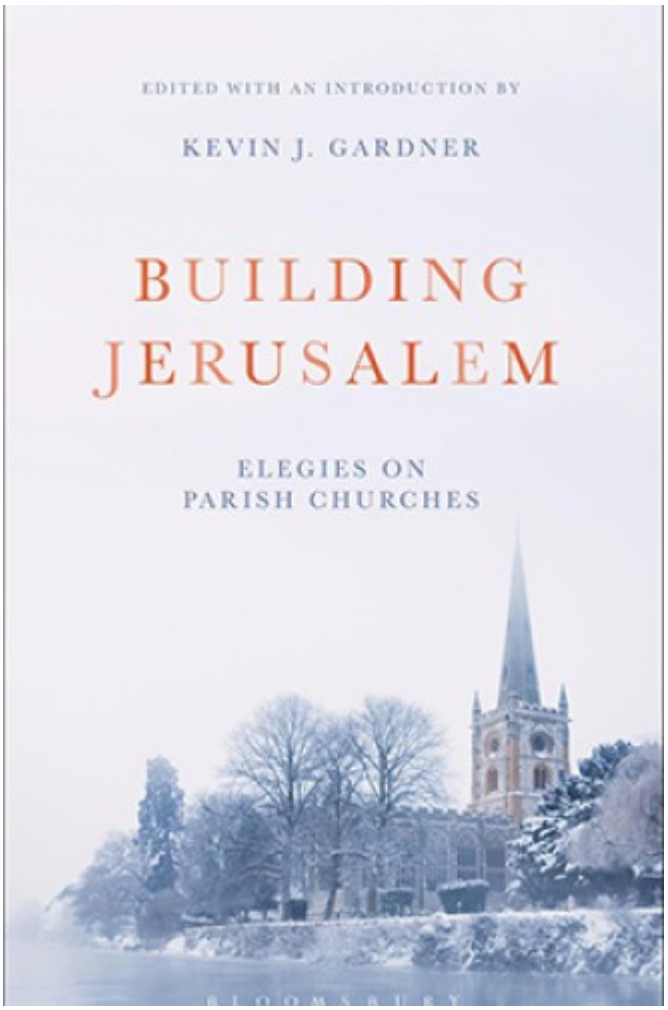
Elegies without consolation

An anthology of poetry mourning the demise of the Church of England

by Jill Peláez Baumgaertner in the January 12, 2017 issue

In Review



Building Jerusalem

Elegies on Parish Churches

Edited by Kevin J. Gardner
Bloomsbury

An elegy is a poetic lament for the dead. It is above all about loss and sorrow. This timely collection of elegies mourns the death of the Church of England. Its editor, Kevin J. Gardner of Baylor University, points out that only 2 percent of the British population currently attend weekly services. In poem after poem by poets such as Geoffrey Hill, Sir John Betjeman, C. Day-Lewis, Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, R. S. Thomas, and Ted Hughes, readers find deserted churches, abbey ruins, overgrown churchyards, lame words from the pulpit, empty vicarages, even 15 churches fallen into the sea—in short, as one poet writes, “resurrection encased in sleep.”

This book displays more than the death of church buildings; these elegies are largely about the death of the church and the resultant death of faith. Philip Larkin’s prescient poem, “Church Going,” is included in this collection and alluded to in several of the poems by other authors. In this poem the speaker, bicycling in the countryside, happens upon a church and steps inside, “once I am sure there’s nothing going on.” He finds “silence, / Brewed God knows how long.” He looks around, steps into the pulpit to say, “Here endeth,” and leaves, having found nothing “worth stopping for.”

> Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
> And always end much at a loss like this,
> Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
> When churches fall completely out of use
> What we shall turn them into. . . .

“What remains,” he asks, when even “disbelief has gone? / Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky.” Those images appear and reappear in the poems in this collection along with a longing for the old forms and rituals that put handles on the mysteries of birth, life, and death. One poet writes, “the sanctuary lamp’s extinct” and notices that “the rood pales to dust.” Another poet, George Barker, laments:

> As I stand by the porch
> I believe that no one has heard
> here in Thurgarton church
> a single veritable word

save the unspoken No.

Elegies traditionally contain consolation, but it is present less and less in contemporary elegies. Barker's poem, for example, ends,

I hear the old bone in me cry
and the dying spirit call:
I have forfeited all
and once and for all must die
and this is all that I know.

For now in a wild way we
know that Justice is served
and that we die in the clay we
dread, desired, and deserved,
awaiting no Judgement Day.

But occasionally, as in the poems of Sir John Betjeman, the neglected church shows signs of life—of repentance and relationship with "God who created the present, the chain-smoking millions and me." Herbert Lomas finds grace and sweetness in London's St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and John Heath-Stubbs, standing in the churchyard of Saint Mary Magdalene, Old Milton, where his father is buried, calls upon the patron saint: "Oh, in Death's garden be / Prime witness of the only Resurrection."

Several years ago I stood on a hill above Tintern Abbey, the Welsh ruins of a medieval abbey immortalized by Wordsworth in his poem by the same name. With me were 35 literature students, and we were very quiet in that beautiful place filled with birdsong and a hundred shades of green as another professor read the poem's famous lines. Wordsworth's paean to nature, he claims, leads to joy, lofty thoughts, and moral sensibility.

Not one line of the poem is about the abbey itself, now an emblem of nature's victory over the church as tourists stand on the grass carpet under the crumbled apse. It's a very romantic picture Wordsworth paints—one that none of the poets in this collection buy into. Nature triumphs, they write, but the cost is a church without energy, "plan or aim," as one poet puts it. Another asks, "Where to go from here?" And yet another poses the question, "Are we even closer to the fulfilling of Larkin's prophecy?"

Of course, church closings are not just a British phenomenon. Recently, Carl Schalk, the noted Lutheran composer, was asked to write a choral piece for the closing of Bethany Lutheran Church in Chicago. Another friend pastors a dwindling church body that has sold its property and is now deciding about next steps. Stories like these are becoming commonplace in the United States.

But unlike the European church, the churches that have closed or fallen into decay in the United States do not still stand like the bombed-out remains of the church at Coventry or the abbeys torn apart by Henry VIII during the English Reformation. They are quickly torn down or repurposed (sometimes for restaurants and private homes). Those languishing in slow or fast decay are condemned. There is nothing romantic about their ruins, and there are no tourists wandering the grounds where faith once flourished.

Of course, the English church also suffers such recycling. As Tony Connor has written:

> The Methodist chapel's
> been bought by the Jews for a synagogue;
> Ukrainian Catholics have the Wesleyan's
> sturdy structure built to outlast Rome—
> and men of the district say St. Mark's
> is part of a clearance area. Soon
> it will be down as low as rubble
> from every house that squeezed it round,
> to bed a motorway and a new estate.

"Rather than this," Connor writes, "I'd see a ruin, / and picture the final splendours of decay." Consolation, Connor suggests, would lie in the beauty of decline.

Surely this is an anti-elegy, a contemporary form, which defines most of the poems in this collection: poems of pure loss, inconsolable grief, and the impossibility of meaning. Literary critic Diana Fuss has written, "What, after all, could be more consoling than the knowledge that there can be no consolation?" She goes on to say, "Bereft of traditional consolations like belief in eternal life or faith in restorative nature, modern poets appear to speak into a void."

So here we are, confronted with loss—of church, faith, and the poetic tradition itself—"God decamped, or dead or daft," as Tony Connor writes. In these poems, to

revise T. S. Eliot’s words, not even fragments can be shored against our ruins.