
St Barnabas Jericho

in Literature

by Dr Amanda Vernon



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A backdrop for personal drama, the scene of a grisly murder, a space for reflection on Christ's incarnation—St Barnabas has been drawn upon for many purposes by literary writers. Although the church's literary appearances are, with a few notable exceptions, fairly brief they indicate the historical importance of St Barnabas in the religious and social life of Oxford. They also demonstrate how the church has served as a source of literary inspiration for the various and diverse writers who have studied, lived, and worked in the city.

Set in Christminster, a fictional version of Oxford, Thomas Hardy's infamously-bleak *Jude the Obscure* (1895) is one of the earliest depictions of St Barnabas in literature.¹ The novel's commentary on ecclesiastical art and architecture is informed by Hardy's own work as a gothic draughtsman and assistant architect to Arthur Blomfield. The novel's protagonist, Jude Fawley, is a stone-mason who lives for a time in Beersheba (Jericho), and attends the 'ritualistic church of St Silas' (St Barnabas).² His partner, Sue Bridehead, works as an Anglo-Catholic ecclesiastical artist. Late in the novel Jude and Sue return to Christminster and there experience an appalling tragedy involving their children. The scene in which the interior of St Silas is depicted is one that contrasts the expansiveness of the church and the imposing nature of the metalwork cross with the vulnerable form of the bereaved Sue lying prostrate on the floor:

High overhead, above the chancel steps, Jude could discern a huge, solidly constructed Latin cross—as large, probably, as the original it was designed to commemorate. It seemed to be suspended in the air by invisible wires; it was set with large jewels, which faintly glimmered in some weak ray caught from outside, as the cross swayed to and fro in a silent and scarcely perceptible motion. Underneath, upon the floor, lay what appeared to be a heap of black clothes, and from this was repeated the sobbing that he had heard before. It was his Sue's form, prostrate on the paving.³

Suspended above Sue like the sword of Damocles, the huge cross seems less a source of consolation than a threat. The 'weak ray' of light from outside does little to penetrate the gloom of the church or to lighten Sue's guilt-ridden grief. Hardy's depiction of the church reflects the novel's critique of religious hypocrisy and the cold comfort Sue receives as she tries to make sense of her tragedy.

In Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), the narrator, Charles Ryder, includes St Barnabas in his description of Oxford on a Sunday morning. As he takes his walk he hears 'the change-ringing cease and, all over the town, give place to the single chime which warned the city that service was about to start'.⁴ Those who are out and about on this Sunday morning are mostly church-goers 'on their way to St Barnabas, St Golumba, St Aloysius, St Mary's, Pusey House, Blackfriars, and heaven knows where besides; to restored Norman and revived Gothic, to travesties of Venice and Athens'.⁵ St Barnabas is included in this passage as one of the many churches that make Oxford's ecclesiastical and architectural landscape so rich (but is, alas, likely the travesty of Venice he refers to!). The varied styles and traditions exhaust Ryder's description—'and heaven knows where else besides'—and, were the novel being written today, would likely still do so given the continuation of this rich Oxford heritage.

While many of the references to St Barnabas in literature focus on its social, historical, or architectural aspects, John Betjeman's work also invites us to reflect on the church theologically. In *An Oxford University Chest* (1938) Betjeman gives a lovely description of St Barnabas both from an architectural perspective and as a living and breathing church community.

He describes the church as having ‘the most live and active social organization of all Oxford churches’, and writes that he has ‘no hesitation’ in saying it ‘is far the best of [Arthur Blomfield’s] work I have seen—and I have seen much.’⁶ The church and its ‘tubular bells’ appear alongside other Oxford churches in several of Betjeman’s poems, including ‘Myfanwy at Oxford’ (1958) and his blank verse autobiography *Summoned By Bells* (1960), but it is ‘St Barnabas, Oxford’ (1958) that offers his most extended poetic impression of what he declares is ‘by far the best Victorian church in Oxford.’⁷

The poem opens with a rather intriguing line: ‘How long was the peril, how breathless the day’.⁸ Rather than explaining what ‘peril’ has been survived, however, the speaker shifts our gaze to St Barnabas, which is glowing in the late afternoon sunlight:

In topaz and beryl, the sun dies away,
His rays lying static at quarter to six
On polychromatical lacing of bricks.

Time seems to stand still as we look at the decorative brickwork of this Oxford Movement church. The rays of the sun are not only ‘static’, but static at a particular clock-time. It is nearly six. Despite the sense of stopped time in what we see, though, we can hear time moving as we listen to the sound of the church bells floating ‘down the road’. Depicted in this way, St Barnabas becomes a place where time and eternity meet. The quarter-to-six bells are, fittingly, ringing the angelus. They call our attention to another event that took place at the intersection of time and eternity: Christ’s incarnation. With shock or surprise or reverence (the appellation ‘Good Lord’ could indicate any of these, and all seem fitting when thinking about the Incarnation), the speaker offers up a prayer echoing the incarnational theme: ‘Byzantine St Barnabas, be Thine Abode.’

The question of whether God responds to the speaker’s prayer to dwell in the streets of Jericho seems to be answered in the next stanza’s reference to the ‘baldachin pillar’ that is ‘guarding the Mass’. Christ abides in St Barnabas in the Mass. As the answer is given the speaker shifts our gaze again, this time to the distant past before St Barnabas was built.

It is a time and place where ‘blue meadows’ existed to be enjoyed, where ‘fritillaries hung in the grass’, and where poets took refuge in the ‘shadows’ of elms. The description is nostalgic—a ‘farewell’ tinged with regret. The canopy-like fritillaries have now been replaced by the ‘baldachin pillar’ and the leaves of the elms have become decorated capitals topping the pillars that line the nave. Glanville and Clough, too, have been replaced for it is ‘not poets but clergymen’ who ‘hastened to meet / Thy reddedn’d remorselessness, Cardigan Street.’ The word ‘remorselessness’ might describe the seemingly-endless rows of Victorian terraced brick houses that surround the church, but it also refers to a lack of remorse or regret about what has been lost. The poem’s ending leaves us feeling a sense of that peril with which it began. We have lost the ‘blue meadows we loved not enough’—what else might we lose because of a lack of love?

Fast-forward to the 1980’s (a good decade for St Barnabas in literature) and we find the church appearing in a variety of fictional works. In A.N. Wilson’s *The Healing Art* (1980), John Brocklehurst, newly arrived into Oxford and unable to see the dreaming spires from where he stands waiting for a taxi, concludes that the church’s ‘Venetian water-tower’ is ‘the most impressive architectural monument in sight.’⁹ Colin Dexter’s *The Dead of Jericho* (1981) offers a fittingly-ominous impression of ‘the towering Italianate campanile of St Barnabas’ Church’ (23), which is just round the corner from the scene of the crime. In gloomy anti-hero-detective fashion, Inspector Morse stands ‘in the rain a while, looking up at the dirtyish yellow tower that dominated the streets.’¹⁰ Unfortunately, when tempted to go inside the church for a look, Morse finds the door locked. The reader is, therefore, deprived of any description of the church’s interior (possibly for the best given the description of the exterior). With one more passing reference to ‘the looming, ominous bulk of St Barnabas’ great tower,’ the novel turns from descriptions of the church to the matter at hand: murder.¹¹ St Barnabas is given a bit more justice, architecturally speaking, in another murder mystery of the ‘80s: P.D. James’ *A Taste for Death* (1986). In this whodunnit, the narrator compares the (fictional) St Matthew’s Church, London with ‘Blomfield’s similar basilica at Jericho in Oxford’—and similar it certainly is.¹²

In addition to mentions of the baldachin and the Pre-Raphaelite paintings on the eight panels of the pulpit there is an evocative description of the church's exterior, 'the green copper cupola of the soaring campanile of Arthur Blomfield's extraordinary Romanesque basilica, built in 1870 on the bank of this sluggish urban waterway with as much confidence as if he had erected it on the Venetian Grand Canal.'¹³ We get a sense not only of the building as an elegant addition to its urban environment, but also the architectural chutzpah that gave the neighbourhood such a distinctive church.

Philip Pullman's children's fantasy *Northern Lights* (1995), intertwines magic, science, and religion in a parallel-world Oxford.¹⁴ In this novel, St Barnabas remains a central feature in a very recognisable Jericho. The 'gyptian' children, part of the canal boat community, are described as 'running full pelt through the narrow streets of Jericho, between the little brick terraced houses and into the great square-towered oratory of St Barnabas the Chymist'.¹⁵ 'Chymist' is a fitting addition to this fantasy version of St Barnabas as it conjures up ideas of seventeenth-century scientific exploration merged with the magical mysteries of alchemy.

As far as I am aware, the most recent literary appearances of St Barnabas can be found in Pip Williams' historical novels *The Dictionary of Lost Words* (2020) and *The Bookbinder of Jericho* (2023). The earlier novel tells the fictional story of Esme, whose father works as part of the team compiling the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. St Barnabas is the church that the child Esme and her father occasionally attend in order for Esme to 'make up my own mind. About God and Heaven. That's why we go to church.'¹⁶ St Barnabas remains a constant throughout Esme's life. It is a place she wanders into to sit in silence after a difficult conversation and the church in which she gets married. In *The Bookbinder of Jericho*, St Barnabas's bell tower is a landmark for the bookbinder Peggy, whose canal boat is moored within earshot of the bells and whose view in the early morning winter is of 'the inky canal and the darkly shadowed sky and [...] the bell tower of St Barnabas rising up, a darker shadow against the rest.'¹⁷

For both young women, the church is a consistent presence in the tumult of their lives during the First World War.

Exploring literary representations of St Barnabas reveals the fascination that so many writers have had with this unusual parish church. This fascination is notable not only because of the varied nature of the works in which St Barnabas appears, but also because the church remains off the beaten track. Tourists to Oxford are far more likely to visit the University Church or some of the beautiful college chapels, while those who live in the city may well be unfamiliar with St Barnabas (this has, at least, often been my experience when asked where I worship). Considering St Barnabas in literature is particularly illuminating because it gives us an opportunity to see the church through another's eyes. It also allows us to reflect upon our own relationship with this sacred space. In many of the literary works discussed the church is a backdrop for the 'real business' of relationships, crime-solving, or childhood adventures. In others, it is a space where a seemingly-absent God is sought or where the contemplation of light on bricks leads to a moment of spiritual recognition. Whatever our relationship to church, this sacred space tucked away in a corner of Jericho stands not only as a landmark, but also an invitation to look, listen, and reflect.

1 This does, however, depend on your definition of literature. We might look to the earlier, and very evocative, description of St. Barnabas' May 1876 Holy Thursday service in Francis Kilvert's Diary. The entry gives a sense of the experience of a packed-out Victorian service at St. Barnabas, even if Kilvert's low-church convictions led him to conclude that the service 'appeared to me to be pure Mariolatry'! See Francis Kilvert, *Kilvert's Diary: 1870-1879*, ed. by William Plomer (Penguin, 1987), 339.

2 Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. by Ralph Pite (Norton, 2016), 147.

3 Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 283

4 Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (Penguin, 1962), 58.

5 Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 58.

6 John Betjeman, *An Oxford University Chest* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 119-20.

7 Betjeman, *Oxford University Chest*, 120.

8 John Betjeman, 'St. Barnabas, Oxford', in *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman: An Anthology of Betjeman's Religious Verse*, ed. Kevin J. Gardner (Continuum, 2005), 136. All subsequent references to the poem can be found on this page.

9 A.N. Wilson, *The Healing Art* (Secker and Warburg, 1980), 121.

10 Colin Dexter, *The Dead of Jericho* (Pan Books, 2016), 23-4.

11 Dexter, *The Dead of Jericho*, 31.

12 P.D. James, *A Taste for Death* (Vintage, 2005), 7.

13 James, *A Taste for Death*, 7.

14 St. Barnabas also appears in some of the other books in Pullman's *Northern Lights* universe including the recent *La Belle Sauvage* (2017).

15 Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (Scholastic, 2007), 58.

16 Pip Williams, *The Dictionary of Lost Words* (Vintage, 2020), 12.

17 Pip Williams, *The Bookbinder of Jericho* (Chatto and Windus, 2023), 297