

John Ormond

'Cathedral Builders'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

John Ormond was born in Dunvant, near Swansea, in 1923. The son of the village shoemaker, Ormond did not come from an affluent background, but the nature of his father’s trade gave him a lifelong appreciation of the value of skilled labour and artistic craftsmanship. These egalitarian convictions were further informed by his religious upbringing, attending the village’s Independent, Nonconformist chapel, Ebenezer, where church affairs were organised and governed non-hierarchically by the local congregation rather than an ordained clergy. However, Ormond began to question his faith when he went on to study Philosophy and English at University College, Swansea. Here he was exposed to modern philosophical ideas, and also began to develop serious ambitions as a poet. His talents were soon proved: he began publishing in poetry magazines in 1941, and by 1943 had published his work in an anthology alongside two other young poets.

In 1945, Ormond left Swansea to pursue a career as a journalist in London. Within a matter of months he had been made staff writer for the prestigious photojournalist magazine *Picture Post*. His work at this magazine, which combined his talent for language with his passion for the visual, would prove invaluable when, in the mid-1950s, he secured a job at the BBC in Cardiff. Starting as a television news assistant, he was soon promoted to the role of documentary film producer. This was to be a new beginning of a uniquely dualistic creative career as a poet and filmmaker. By the time of his death in 1990, he had produced some 40 films and published over 200 poems.

Ormond’s passion for music, the arts, and politics, alongside his appreciation of artistic craftsmanship, permeates all his work in verse and on screen. His poems are often characterised by a subtle, ironic humour, and, although composed in a deceptively plain-speaking language – perhaps aimed, like television, at large, popular audiences – they are always meticulously crafted. The major theme of his work is the profound value and universal importance of human creativity, which, perhaps in place of the formal Christian faith he had earlier questioned, he afforded an almost religious significance.

Ormond wrote ‘**Cathedral Builders**’ having taken a break from writing poetry for some years. In 1963, he visited the region of Arezzo in Italy to produce his film, *From a Town in Tuscany*. The sight of builders singing and working on scaffolding high above him one day inspired him to write a poem, and famously ‘broke the blockage that had kept me virtually silent for too many years’.¹

(1) John Ormond, ‘Letter from Tuscany’, *Poetry Wales*, 24/1 (1988), 21.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title '**Cathedral Builders**' is characteristic of Ormond's unshowy, ironic style, and sets the tone and theme of the poem. The plainness of the phrase is set in contrast with the grandiosity of the subject matter: cathedrals are some of the most magnificent, ornate buildings on earth, designed to inspire awe and religious devotion. Yet the poem is, crucially, not an exaltation of these grand, consecrated structures, nor of the church elites who occupy them. Rather, it is a celebration of the ordinary lives of the uncelebrated workers who actually build cathedrals. Note that the title does not name the cathedral – in fact, the poem was inspired by a church with a wonderfully sonorous name: the Santa Maria della Pieve. (Although, as Rian Evans notes, it was also partly inspired by the restoration of Llandaff Cathedral after damage during the war.²) Neither does the poem name a single builder. Instead, the title hints at the universality of the poem's theme: a celebration of the unsung lives of all builders of all cathedrals – perhaps all labourers – anywhere and everywhere.

Form.

At first glance, the poem appears to be a standard ballad, given its four-line stanzas of roughly equal length. The ballad is a form that evolved from the oral tradition; it traditionally combines regular rhythm and a strict rhyme scheme with accessible, everyday language to convey stories or messages of communal interest and relevance to popular audiences. Ormond's use of this form is significant: it is highly unorthodox to use the ballad form to write about something as grandiose as a cathedral. In using this form, Ormond ironically hints that this is a poem about ordinary people.

Moreover, Ormond adapts the ballad form to this theme in interesting ways. Note that stanzas 1-4 alternate between perspectives on the builders at work (1 and 3) and perspectives on their personal lives (2 and 4). This enables him to emphasise the ways in which work and life intersect, but also gives the poem a sense of narrative development: in stanza 3 progress has been made on the structure, and in stanza 4 the builders are getting older. However, the poem also subtly deviates from the ballad form. '**Cathedral Builders**' has no rhyme scheme, and although it contains lines of similar length, it deviates from the usual iambic tetrameter and trimeter. Also notable is the fact that, despite its length, the poem consists of one single sentence.

(2) Rian Evans, in *John Ormond, Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), p. 275.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The first stanza establishes the scene of the builders at work. In keeping with the theme, the first word is not a singular but a plural pronoun; this is, after all, a poem about all workers and their combined efforts, not about one single person. Line 1 is a classic example of Ormond's playfully ironic, down-to-earth humour. The first image of these builders – at work on a grandiose cathedral, dedicated to and in honour of God – is far from one of spiritual devotion. Instead, and in keeping with the comical image of **'sketchy'** ascent, the iambic pentameter of line 1 immediately stumbles clumsily into a rhythm in line 2 that, like the scaffolding the builders climb, remains wobbly and irregular throughout the poem. Note also the use of aspirate consonance in lines 2-3: the "h" sound (**hoisted hewn rock into heaven, / Inhabited sky with hammers'**) mimics the breathlessness of the builders' work.

Lines 3-4 contain an excellent example of Ormond's ironic wordplay: **'defied gravity, / Deified stone'**: the phrase contrasts two similar-sounding yet profoundly oppositional words, and in doing so signals the apparent contradiction that constitutes the act of building such a structure. In **'def[ying] gravity'**, the builders employ building techniques made possible by human scientific discoveries (e.g. gravity) that call into question the existence of God. Yet they do so in the service of the spiritual mission of **'Deif[ying] stone'** – creating a building in which to celebrate Him. This hints at an intriguing philosophical question that underpins this poem: does the very act of collaborative human scientific endeavour in fact **'def[y]**', or even disprove, God?

Lines 5-8.

We don't have time to ponder this question for too long, as the poem continues breathlessly, without an end-stop, into the next stanza. In line 5 we see the workers **'[come] down'** – and here the spatial logic of the poem is established, which follows the alternating movement of the builders ascending and descending, at work on the scaffolding and at home in their houses, across the five stanzas. This spatial movement further enforces the thematic tension between religious elevation and the significance of the lives of ordinary people on the ground.

Line 5 employs a pun that further plays on this contrast, and highlights the significance of the builders' lives: they come down to their **'suppers and small beer'**. **'[S]mall beer'** is both an old name for a weak alcoholic drink commonly brewed and drunk in medieval times (perhaps connecting the workers to an older Christian society) and an idiomatic phrase meaning inconsequential, unimportant, or irrelevant. But seeing as the speaker uses it ironically in this context to depict the cathedral builders drinking alcohol, we are given a sense not of the 'smallness' of their lives, but of the profound significance of ordinary working life: drinking beer may be **'small beer'**, but it is still an important part of everyday life, and therefore worth celebrating.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7–8 pursue images of the workers' home lives, and again adopt a down-to-earth language in comic contrast with the seriousness of spiritual devotion that the cathedral itself represents. '**Quarrel[ling]**', '**cuff[ing]**', '**l[ying]**' and '**sp[itting]**' are far from pious Christian activities, yet they are a part of life for these workers.

Line 8 ends with a seemingly paradoxical phrase: '**were happy or unhappy**'. Recalling that the subject of the poem is a plural one (i.e. all cathedral builders – perhaps even all workers), the phrase conveys a sense of the different lives lived, some of which are happy, some unhappy. There is also the broader implication that this is what being human is really like; over the course of a single life, we are alternately happy and unhappy. It also signals the broader temporal scope of the poem: since a cathedral is a collaborative effort that takes generations to build, whole lifespans are lived in the meantime.

Lines 9–12.

This stanza returns to the everyday job of building: the builders are back up on their ladders, and time is passing by quickly, as conveyed in the evocative phrase that runs over lines 10–11: '**Impeded the rights of way of another summer's / Swallows**'. This is another classic example of Ormond's ironic use of a workaday idiom: here he comically repurposes the phrase '**rights of way**' – a term more associated with the highway code than with Romantic naturalistic writing – by juxtaposing it with the lyrical assonance/consonance of '**another summer's / Swallows**'. Notably, the phrase is itself '**[i]mpeded**' by the line break, thereby echoing the birds' disrupted flight.

Lines 11–12 further emphasise the sense of time passing, this time with respect to the builders' bodies: they '**grew greyer, shakier**'. Again, Ormond uses punning wordplay to humorously convey a humanistic sense of the workers' lives: they become '**less inclined**' – '**inclined**' of course being something they would have been used to as perennial ladder climbers. Moreover, the idea that old age has made them less able to '**fix a neighbour's roof**' shows that, despite the '**cuff[ing]**' and '**l[ying]**' described in stanza 2, they would nevertheless have lived by neighbourly Christian values.

Lines 13–16.

Here, in keeping with the poem's structuring around the alternating movement up and down the ladders, the builders are back on the ground. Older now, they watch as a younger generation continues their work. Indeed line 13, in which '**naves sprout arches, clerestories soar**', is the only concession Ormond makes to a more fanciful lyricism in this poem – perhaps in order to convey the magnificent sight of a cathedral taking shape. Nevertheless, this grandeur is contrasted with the rather unchristian response of the builders: they enviously '**Curse**' the glaziers, whose artistry enjoys more praise than their own work.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-20.

The poem's emphasis on collaboration and continuity of effort – its suggestion that even something as holy as a cathedral is always the product of the combined labour of working people – is conveyed in the first phrase, which continues the last stanza, where the builders '**Decided... / To leave the spire to others**'. Notice the builders do not take centre stage in the celebrations, but rather stand back '**in the crowd**'. This signals that they are not with the elites of the church, who are conveyed by their '**vestments**'. The use of metonymy here associating the church elites with their clothing is significant, for it implies the builders' point of view on the proceedings. Even in old age the builders are not immune to unchristian '**Env[y]**', although this is perhaps justified, considering that the '**fat bishop**' who will now sit in the cathedral has done none of the real work of building it. Yet even with cold feet, the builders are able to stand back and proudly admire their work. '**Cocked up a squint eye**' is packed with more wordplay: '**Cocked**' echoing the idea of being 'proud as a peacock', and '**squint eye**' implying that the builders are likely to be both squinting due to old age, and also with pride (we might see a squinted eye as a gesture of knowingness and shared knowledge). Indeed, it is, of course, the builders who have the last word in this poem: at the end of one single sentence, which has conveyed work, life, love, illness, children, marriage, happiness, unhappiness – the whole story of collective life – it is the builders who have the right to stand back and stake their claim to the completed building, in the superbly bathetic, idiomatic phrase, '**I bloody did that.**'

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Cathedral Builders' is by far Ormond's best-known poem. It is widely collected in anthologies of British poetry, and often read on radio. It received a renewal of attention in April 2019 after the fire at Notre-Dame. And although, as Rian Evans notes, it sometimes 'vexed' Ormond that it was his most famous – at the expense of his many other excellent poems – it is undoubtedly one of his most accomplished.³ It is also a succinct encapsulation of his artistic philosophy. Ormond possessed a love of the arts, and in his career as a poet and documentary filmmaker, he created many films and poems celebrating artists and their craft. His view of art was one informed by his working-class background; the son of a skilled shoemaker, Ormond valued the work not only of the exalted artist, but also the skilled labourer – the craftsman or artisan – and maintained a commitment to egalitarian principles his whole life. He had also, growing up, attended a non-hierarchical Nonconformist congregation – a very different denomination to those that build cathedrals. 'Cathedral Builders' is an expression of this egalitarian philosophy: rather than exalting the grand façade of the finished cathedral – indeed, there are, significantly, no descriptions of the finished cathedral at all – the poem uses a range of poetic techniques to convey the perspective of the uncelebrated labourers who commit their lives to the actual work of building such structures. The lives of these workers may not be showy or refined, but in presenting their down-to-earth authenticity, Ormond emphasises the fact that great accomplishments are often the result of the collaborative effort of ordinary people. Ultimately, whatever the pomposity of those '**fat bishop[s]**' in their '**vestments**' who will take credit for the building, it is the workers who have the last, knowing word: a pithy phrase that perfectly encapsulates the builders' pride: '**I bloody did that.**'

(2) Rian Evans, in *John Ormond, Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), p. 275.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the poem focus on the builders, rather than the cathedral itself?

What activities do the builders get up to when they are not at work?

What kind of language is used to describe the builders and their lives?

Is the builders' final comment on the cathedral an appropriate response to the finished building?

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph by Julian Sheppard

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Santa Maria della Pieve: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Maria_della_Pieve#/media/File:Igreja_Santa_Maria_della_Pieve_Arezzo.jpg

Notre-Dame: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notre-Dame_de_Paris#/media/File:Notre_Dame_de_Paris_2013-07-24.jpg

Llandaff Cathedral: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Llandaff_Cathedral#/media/File:Eglwys_Gadeiriol_Llandaf_01.JPG

Crystal Cathedral, California: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Cathedral_\(Garden_Grove,_California\)#/media/File:Crys-ext.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Cathedral_(Garden_Grove,_California)#/media/File:Crys-ext.jpg)

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

British actor Samuel West tweeted the poem on the day of the Notre-Dame fire. It received 1.8k retweets and 4.7k likes. The outpouring of emotion in the tweeted replies demonstrates the effectiveness of poetry's ability to channel popular sentiment and feeling: <https://twitter.com/exitthelemming/status/1117867531870453760?lang=en-gb>



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