

In the cause of God's vagabond

John Bradburne, the murdered missionary, is the most prolific poet in the English language. Sharing his work online has been a rollercoaster

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You've been hacked." It's the message no internet user wants to hear. In my case, the message came at the end of February this year from French spiritual writer Didier Rance, who wanted to check a reference on the John Bradburne poetry website. He typed in www.johnbradburnepoems.com, as I've done thousands of times over the past decade, but instead of the familiar screen appearing, he found himself being offered extreme weather clothing from Canada Goose.

I checked. He was right. Instead of a galaxy of poems about the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the birds and beasts of Africa, and, above all, the lepers in the settlement of Mtemwa in Zimbabwe where John worked – and died – in the 1970s, I got an array of parkas, jackets, pants, gloves, mittens and hats. I thought it was a disaster. It had taken me nearly 20 years to edit all of John's poetry and make it accessible online. And it had disappeared.

Why did the editing take so long? Because John Bradburne is the most prolific poet the English language has ever had. Think of the major poets you've read. Wordsworth wrote about 50,000 lines; Shakespeare 80,000. Bradburne wrote nearly 170,000 lines – well over 5,000 poems – an achievement accepted last year by Guinness World Records. The John Bradburne Memorial Society celebrates it as one side of the work of this remarkable man, who refused to leave the lepers he cared for in the middle of the Rhodesian civil war, and was abducted and killed by one of the factions.

Mtemwa has since become a place of pilgrimage, and every September 5 – the anniversary of his death – the settlement, and the nearby hill where John often prayed, is filled with thousands of visitors. Signs of sanctity have steadily grown, faithfully recorded by the society in its newsletters, and a movement for his canonisation is gaining increasing recognition.

A lot is happening. In 2012, Didier Rance published an award-winning biography of John Bradburne in French, called *Le Vagabond de Dieu* – God's vagabond. This year, an English translation is being completed. The Memorial Society continues to fund-raise to support the Mtemwa settlement. And there is increasing interest abroad. A group in Italy is planning a trans-



JOHN BRADBURNE MEMORIAL SOCIETY

Lay Franciscan John Bradburne worked with lepers in Mtemwa, Zimbabwe

lation of some of John's poems into Italian, and is thinking of a big anniversary event in 2017, possibly at Assisi. More and more people had been going to the poetry

He wrote a galaxy of poems on the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the birds and beasts of Africa

website as a consequence. And suddenly it was down.

I got in touch with Canada Goose, but they could do nothing. The hack wasn't anything to do with them, they said, but a rogue competitor. "Not our problem." I got in touch with the site's service-provider, but they couldn't do anything either.

Security was a matter for individual site owners, it seems. "Not our problem."

So it was my problem. I sent an urgent email to the brilliant team that had designed the original site, back in 2008. Could the database be retrieved, from behind the hack?

I had a nervous 24 hours before the answer came back: yes. But – there's always a but – we had better improve our security. And while we're at it, the 2008 site looks awfully dated. How about a complete refurb? A fresh, clean look? And wouldn't I like to have an easier way of editing the poems?

Would I! The old site had been a devil to maintain: an intricate and tedious access system which involved logging on to the service provider and then working in



JOHN BRADBURNE MEMORIAL SOCIETY

Prolific: John Bradburne wrote twice as much as Shakespeare

computer code. We could avoid all that. I thought about it for, oh, all of 10 seconds, and asked him to go ahead. It would cost, but it would be worth every penny.

One needs ease of access. New poems keep being discovered. John wrote to everyone he knew in verse, even to his mother. He hated writing in prose. You can see dozens of examples on the website, now fully restored. And every now and then one of his correspondents finds an old verse-letter in a drawer, and sends it in. So I'm still adding new material. And editorial notes always have to be kept up to date. When someone writes so much on such a wide range of topics, from theology to leprosy, there's a need for commentary. It's a never-ending process, and it needs to be managed quickly.

The reworking took a few months, but the job is done now. The new site is beautiful – fast, clear and secure. It now takes me a fraction of the time it used to take to edit a poem. Users tell me they love the new look. And it will be a boon to the Vaticanisti who process canonisation causes. The hacking, I now see, was a blessing in disguise.

David Crystal is a linguist, academic and author. His latest book is The Gift of the Gab: How Eloquence Works (Yale University Press)

**POEMS BY
JOHN BRADBURNE**

The Autumn evenings of Mashonaland
Are marches over miles and miles of peace
Up stealing into starlight where a stand
Softly calls velvet night whence do increase
To volubility e'en tiny sounds,
Each crackling leaf's a cannon on the loam,
Leaps leagues the startled buck as feet it
bounds,
Lethal, the leopard and the cheetah roam;
But recently upon an Autumn eve
Whilst twilight still stood sentient I saw
The pattern of infinity which weave
Angels upon the pines, at heaven's door
Standing a-tiptoe, pirouetting each
In silence far more eloquent than speech.

*A sonnet included in a letter to his mother,
May 11, 1967, sent soon after his arrival in
Rhodesia*

The clouds this dawn are formed like eagle-
wings
Proceeding East until the head is gold
As sunrise on horizon, nothing sings
Save chanticleer whose volley's nearly told;
The season's mood is sultry, broods the sky
Pregnant with blessing rain that will not bring
The tawny grassland to rebirth till I
Have prayed some soul's release, to praise Our
King
The Son of God: the Sun of Justice shines
East like a Priest, with Mercy Christ combines.

*"Prime", one of his most lyrical poems,
written in November 1968*

Love is eternal, other substance not,
Love is the substance of the Trinity,
Love is the essence will preserve from rot
Souls and it fits us for eternity;
Love is of immortality the gage
Whilst they that love not lie already dead,
Love is true token through life's pilgrimage
That Christ is in us, risen as He said;
Proceeding from the Father and the Son
Love is the very Person of their fire,
Strongly Love longs to bring all things to One
Who is the only goal of pure desire:
Sin is the lack of Love, in Love is that
Makes heaven, e'en on earth, our habitat
And light our load in sight of Zion-spire.

*"Hip-Hip-Hurray" (1972, one of many poems
exploring the mystery of the Holy Trinity)*

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