

# John Bradburne: the Turning Point

David Crystal

Back in August 2018, the cover of the *Catholic Herald* showed some of the front runners in a race to be 'the next English saint'. In his article, K V Turley reviewed them, pointing out that canonization is a slow and expensive process, requiring lots of patience. And then things suddenly happen. This has been the case with John Bradburne, one of the amazing people described in the article. This Third Order Franciscan missionary was killed in what was then named Rhodesia in 1979 for refusing to abandon the lepers he had looked after for many years. Since his death, Mutemwa, the leprosy settlement where he worked, has become a popular pilgrimage centre. Each year on 5 September, the anniversary of his death, thousands gather to hear Mass and process up the mountain where he walked and prayed. Mutemwa has also been blessed with the phenomenon of the spinning sun - uniquely and fortuitously recorded on video by a passing pilgrimage cameraman.

The John Bradburne Memorial Society (JBMS) was established in 1995 by Celia Brigstocke, John's niece, to do two things: to continue his legacy by providing perpetual financial support for Mutemwa, desperately in need of help, and to promote his cause for beatification, given the widespread belief in his sanctity expressed by all who met him. The first aim has been - and continues to be - met. The second seemed to be getting nowhere, until now. September 2019 is a turning point in his story.

The new momentum began in March 2017, when there was a conference at the University for Foreigners in Perugia. The theme was John's poetry. He was the most prolific poet the English language has ever seen, with over 5,000 poems in his oeuvre, totalling over 170,000 lines (by way of comparison, Wordsworth wrote around 50,000 lines, and Shakespeare around 90,000). Guinness World Records has recognized the feat. The Perugia conference explored the question of how some of his poems might be translated, and there were sample translations there into French, Italian, Spanish, Amharic, Xhosa, and Afrikaans. The English texts are all now freely available online at [www.johnbradburnepoems.com](http://www.johnbradburnepoems.com), and several anthologies have been published by the JBMS.

Participants at the conference, including many young students, enthusiastically signed the petition being circulated at the time for John's cause to proceed, and in the audience were several leading Italian clergy. Through their contacts with the Vatican, in 2018 a postulator was appointed to investigate the cause - Dr Enrico Solinas, a lay judge at the Umbrian Interdiocesan Ecclesiastical Court of Perugia. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints also asked for an administrator to be appointed - the secretary to the cardinal for the Perugia area. Both men spent several weeks in England in July 2018 meeting as many people as they could who knew John - either personally or through his work.



John at Mutemwa

As the editor of John's poetry, I was one of those interviewed. It was fascinating, being questioned by a postulator - not something that happens every day! I had to describe everything I knew about John in a detailed questionnaire, and my thoughts and feelings about the poetry were then thoroughly probed over several hours. Difficult questions, indeed. Why should John Bradburne be made a saint? What is his significance for the Church? How is his spirituality expressed in his poetry? The last time anybody questioned me so intensively was in my university finals! And everyone gets the same treatment, both in the UK and in Zimbabwe. When the postulator has finished his work, his dossier will be huge.

The next task for me was to prepare the poetic evidence. As part of the investigative process, everything John wrote has to be read by three theologians specially appointed to verify that the content is in tune with Catholic thinking. That meant scanning every page of every poem and every letter, so that they can be circulated. At the same time, other people were collecting the evidence of testimonies from the many people who have prayed to John and received help. There have to be attested miracles. Some had already been reported in the JBMS Newsletters, but by no means all, so another dossier had to be compiled. The process is ongoing: the Society is always on the look-out for new evidence of graces received through John's intercession. An address to send such testimony is given below.

No cause can proceed until it is taken up by a diocese. This is normally the place where the putative saint died - in this case, Zimbabwe. But the political and economic circumstances there had made it difficult for the Catholic hierarchy in Harare to progress it. For a while it seemed like a better idea to approach the Westminster diocese, given John's close connections with it. During the 1950s he was an assistant sacristan at the Cathedral and caretaker of the Archbishop's house in Hertfordshire, where Cardinal Godfrey got to know him well. But in the end Archbishop Ndlovu of Harare agreed to take it on, and in March of this year the bishops of Zimbabwe unanimously approved the proposal. The excitement in the country was immense, for many there already view the man as a saint-in-waiting. Then in July the Congregation issued its *nihil obstat* to the Archbishop. At last the formal process can begin.



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So, on 5 September, the 40th anniversary of John's assassination, there will be a special ceremony at Mutemwa, where the cause will be officially launched. Thousands of people are expected to be there, including many from outside Zimbabwe. It should be a spectacular occasion, as well as a hugely emotional one, and a rare spiritual experience. A fortnight later, in the afternoon of the 21st, the celebrations will continue in London, with a Mass at the Cathedral, followed by an exhibition in Cathedral Hall about John's life, along with a talk and Zimbabwean music. John's Franciscan habit will be one of the things on display, as will his beloved typewriter, and some of his manuscripts. This will be the first time John's relics have been displayed publicly.

The news that a second English saint is on the horizon, following Cardinal Newman, has begun to generate interest around the UK. In June there was a weekend devoted to him at the Augustinian Sisters' centre at Boarbank Hall in Cumbria. Why there? Because John was born at Skirwith, just a few miles away. In July, the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University held a conference on Catholicism, Literature, and the Arts, and devoted a session to his poetry. Following the September events, I have no doubt that more such meetings will follow, and the name of John Bradburne will come to be increasingly known. The next stage in the story begins this month.

His sonnet, 'The Thought Expressed', written in 1974, brings together three of his favourite themes: the Holy Trinity, Mary, and the natural world.

The Word of God is valleys, woods and hills,  
Mountains and streams and rivers running broad  
Towards the seas ... at ease the book refills  
With bees in clover, swallows over sward;  
The Word of God expressing God The Thought  
Plays with the dolphins, crests the restless waves,  
Goes surf-riding in idle man for sport,  
Walks with the kings and saunters with the knaves;  
Talks with the swifts concerning their migrations  
And tells the storks which chimneys to select. ...  
In all of this He couples ministrations  
With God The Voice, The Paraclete elect:  
Myriad sights, myriad sounds, I AM,  
But best expressed as born of Miriam.

*To read more about John Bradburne, see the award-winning biography, translated from the French, by Didier Rance, The Vagabond of God (Darton Longman and Todd, 2017). For his poetry, there is my A Life Made of Words: the Poetry and Thought of John Bradburne (2018, available from the JBMS or through [www.davidcrystal.com](http://www.davidcrystal.com)). And a range of other pamphlets and books can be seen at the JBMS website ([www.johnbradburne.com](http://www.johnbradburne.com)), including a CD of John reading some of his poems and a DVD made in Zimbabwe about his time there. For further information, contact the administrator of the JBMS, Kate Macpherson by email at [info@johnbradburne.com](mailto:info@johnbradburne.com) or by post to P O Box 32, Leominster, Herefordshire HR6 0YB.*

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