

John Bradburne: The Poet for Animals

The John Bradburne Memorial Society (JBMS) is a UK Catholic Charity set up to honour John Bradburne who was a member of the Third Order of St Francis and is currently being nominated to become a saint. Prof. David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster who read English at University College, London and has compiled many poetry books. Here he writes about the extensive animal poetry of John Bradburne and his love of animals.

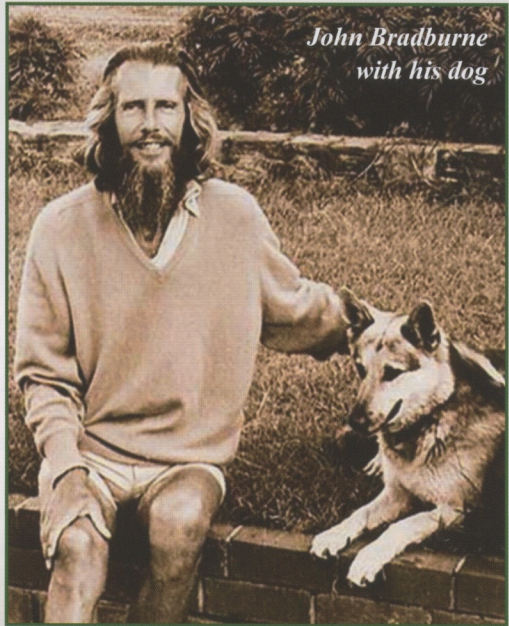
Prof. David Crystal

John Bradburne wrote more poems about animals than any other poet in the English language. This sounds like an ambitious claim, but the evidence is readily available on the website at www.johnbradburnepoems.com¹ where all his poetry has been collected. A remarkable 441 poems will be found there. Anyone beat that?

They are about the entire animal kingdom and cover several countries, from England, where he was born in 1921, through India and the Far East, where he served in the army during World War II, and then in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where he worked as a

lay missionary and was killed in 1979 during the civil war. The leprosy settlement where he cared for the patients so assiduously is at Mutemwa, north-east of Harare; and it was his refusal to leave his lepers, after being warned to do so, that led to his assassination. Today it is a major pilgrimage site and his cause for beatification was formally launched there in September last year.

His poetic love affair with the animal kingdom was intense and lifelong. Among his earliest poems are thirty-two short pieces, headed 'The Birds', written in



*John Bradburne
with his dog*

¹ Go into 'Search for a poem', and then click on 'Advanced Search'. Look at the menu in the Themes box and click on 'Fauna'.

1949. Thirty years later, in February 1979, only months before he was killed, one of the last sequences he wrote was also about birds. He was enthralled by them, and especially by eagles, because of their spiritual significance. The eagle is the crest of St John the Evangelist, symbolizing high flight towards the love of God; and the Shona people of Zimbabwe believe that the eagle is a messenger of God. At one point he paid daily visits to an eagle's nest to see if an eaglet had arrived, and entertained the parents on his recorder while he waited. He was delighted to be given a tame bateleur eagle to look after, and was greatly distressed when it escaped and died. His association with eagles continued after his death. It is a matter of record that eagles have a habit of unexpectedly turning up in Zimbabwe when Bradburne events are taking place.

As do bees, in any part of the world. Bees regularly visited him in swarms during his stay at Silveira House in Harare. He welcomed them into his small room, and valued them because they kept visitors away, so he could get on with meditation and writing. 'Blessed solitude' is the theme of many poems.

Today the bees came in
 With a humming merry din
 And settled in their swarm amidst my hive;
 Till meridian they waited
 And then they celebrated
 The fact that in this cell is man alive:
 Alive to solitude,
 Dead to the world - intrude
 Let none who with my sunny solitude would strive!

The arrival and departure of the bees is described in detail. The analogy between the queen bee and Mary as Queen of Heaven drew him irresistably. So don't be surprised if you engage with John Bradburne and some bees start buzzing around!

All animals fascinated him, as he remarks in the first stanza of this 1968 poem:

One wonders much about Creation's shapes,
 Such a variety, the men, the apes,
 The elephants, the donkeys and the cats;
 Even the crocodiles, the snakes, the rats,
 The things predatory (in tooth and claw
 So red) are wondrous, wed to nature's law.

He describes them with a warm-hearted lightness of touch:

Old orang-utan worthies with droll chimpanzees
 Travel rapturously on a palmy trapeze -
 Avuncular most, they construct castanets
 Out of coconut shells for the small marmosets
 That together with lemurs, chinchillas and such
 Wait excitedly, jabbering - 'thank you so much!!'

Domestic animals figure too. The mission had a pet cat (Garbage) and two dogs (Huru and Simba), and when they die he writes poems in memoriam.

So the odd dog died and the long long grass
 Sighed, 'Lay him away by the pine
 Where eagle lies buried while over her pass
 Her peers that her presence divine'.

There are strikingly vivid descriptions of animal colours, sounds, and behaviour. Original figures-of-speech and word coinages abound:

Elephant is a walking Royal Plural
 A trumpet-voice rejoicing high morale.

Daylight ending
 Beetle flying like an autogyro,
 Steep descending,
 Landing ground, a flower-garden's hedgerow.

The oriole remains, a flautist-chief
 With throbbing breast as golden as a sheaf.

He doesn't forget the tiny beings that are around him:

Spritely comer, moth of night
 Clad in gules and sable;
 Cherishing electric light
 As though it were life's cradle.

And he paints vivid word-pictures of the country of his birth

Consider this Country of manifold grace,
The sweep of her fields and her emerald space,
And think of a morn when the Summer is born
On the wide open 'gallops' where thoroughbreds race
As fast as the winds and as sleek as the swallows
That glide on the airstreams and travel apace.

Consider the cattle that browse o'er the meads -
The Hereford, Devon, and Alderney breeds,
The Friesians fine and wild Galloway kine
And the multitudes broad of the pasturing beeves
That graze on lush grasses or drowse in the shallows
Of still, rural waters 'neath shade of the leaves.

Consider moreover the flocks, and their sheep
Below in the fold or far up on the steep -
On slopes of the Fell where swift peregrines dwell,
Or feeding in valleys of verdure and sleep
Where lambs bleat a treble, where quickly there follows
The sound of the ewes in assurances deep

He lived for a while near the River Otter in Devon, so naturally he writes about its inhabitants:

The otter that knows all the flow of the vale
And the flowers that grow on the banks
Has a whiskery nose and a ruddery tail
And it goes under water with thanks.

Its feet are as webbed as a weaver's are not,
Its toenails are perfectly kept,
It isn't afraid of the changes from hot
To cold whence the salmon have leapt.