

# Loud sing Westminster!

## The Cathedral's Saintly Poet

John Bradburne was a Third Order Franciscan, mystic, poet and friend of lepers. Born in England in 1921, he served with the Gurkhas in Malaya and Burma during World War II. A Pauline-like conversion led him to become a pilgrim-seeker, first with the Benedictines, then the Carthusians, but he remained a layman to the end. His search for God's will led him through England, a period at Westminster Cathedral, to continental Europe and the Holy Land, mostly on foot. In 1962, he went to 'seek a cave' in Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia), where instead he found Mutemwa Leprosy Settlement. There he tended a flock of leprosy patients with loving care, laying down his life for them on 5 September 1979. Since his death there have been many signs of his sanctity, and many answers to prayer. More importantly, many have turned to God through John's extraordinary example.

David Crystal

On 3 February 1957, John Bradburne wrote a letter to his mother about his latest job – a sacristan at Westminster Cathedral.

*How I love that place with its scribes and Pharisees (not hypocrites however) and cranks and wise men, and holy women and scrupulous crackpots, and publicans and sinners and Saints. You will not find such thoroughgoing motley in your quiet see of Canterbury, one part of the Stormy Sea of Peter, over which the Lord loves to breathe a great calm whenever the issue seems hopeless.*

He had been there just a month. The contact must have come as a result of his previous job – as a shop assistant at the Burns Oates bookshop, which at the time was just across the road. He stayed for a year, then Cardinal Godfrey asked him to look after his Elizabethan country house in Hare Street in Hertfordshire.

It wasn't the first time John had encountered the Cathedral. In his account of his pilgrimage from Rome to Jerusalem in 1950, he recalls earlier visits:

*In early 1950, when a looney [sic] bookseller in London, I began again to enquire about working a passage to Israel. But on the eve of the Purification (Feb 2) by an odd circumstance, I spent the whole night, or most of it, walking between Charing Cross and Westminster Cathedral, waiting for the latter to 'open'. During that night I think it was that I decided to try and storm the Charterhouse, there to pray for Israel and drift no longer. I heard the first Mass of the Purification in Westminster Cathedral – a temple that had done much towards my conversion...*

He was very impressed by the Cathedral, and describes it in 'The joy of being cloistered' (written in 1976):

*Very far off from loftiest of Towers:  
Soars Westminster Cathedral with its powers!*

*A looming gloaming of the Holy Ghost,  
A roaming to Byzantium in brick,  
A Campanile carolling Mine Host,  
A glory to the gory Catholic  
Martyrs... and a high tribute to the thick,  
Thicker than water, Precious Blood of One  
Who is The Word Incarnate, Mary's Son.*

In the same poem, he reflects on the contrast between inside and outside:

*The job seems easy to the mobs outside  
Whereas the mobs outside to me seem hard –  
Hit by the city's grit and witless pride  
Of grinding on to powder, yard by yard;  
Ungoaled they go, on gold as they decide!  
For is it not to dust that dust must go  
Whether in cute Corfu or Pimlico?*

The place stayed with him when he was working with the lepers at Mtemwe. A photograph of the interior of the Cathedral is pasted into his anthology of reminiscences, 'In a tent of Arcady' (compiled in 1974).

### Westminster Cathedral's sub-sub-Sacristan

John wrote little poetry during his time at the Cathedral, but he did produce a delightful sonnet after enjoying a visit to Orchard House in St Albans, the home of his friend Stephen King. 'Of holy wells' is in the visitors' book dated 19 February 1957, and reads as if it was created on the spur of the moment as he was about to return to London. It is headed with a small cross and a capital 'M' – a device he often used as a poetic dedication to Jesus and Mary. He didn't want to leave – but candle-duty called!

*Of holy wells, and holy hills, and homes  
As happy as the one in which I write  
I feel that I could fill full forty tomes,  
But that would mean I'd stay another night!  
And if another night I straightway stayed  
The tall Cathedral candles quite unlit  
At Westminster might be the while; dismayed  
The mitred Power might be because of it.  
Wherefore, my royal host and hostess, Hail!  
Hail and Farewell, O happy home and hill  
Where dwells a poppy grower, and a Grail  
Producer, and a lady whose goodwill  
Has helped the Sovereign Lord of Heaven give  
A fair haired trio who rejoice to live.*

A Grail producer? Stephen King's cousin John Webb was a silversmith who made chalices in a workshop at the bottom of Orchard House garden.



### A Sacristan's Confession

John had one abiding memory of his time at Westminster, and tells the story poetically several times. In the middle of his long poem, 'Moke-song for organ-voice' (written in 1977), he recalls one of the perks of being a sacristan.

*A roving sacristan employed  
In Westminster Cathedral  
Small perquisites at first enjoyed  
Till thirst became less frugal:  
Scant residue in cruets he  
Would drink from, say, three masses  
But when it came to seventy  
Bugled his soul Alases.*

*As roaming Catholics may know,  
In London's best Cathedral  
The priestly pressure is not slow  
Nor rare the festival  
When, even before Tierce is sung  
By Canons and the Choir,  
Seventy Masses' bells are rung  
By servers (some on hire).*

That's a lot of left-overs! 'In magno silentio' (1978) takes up the story:

*As sub-sub-sacristan, a simple wight  
Determined to be coloured by the sun  
Whenever I could get into its light,  
I used to drain the cruets: more than one  
Over the eight, on certain days were said  
Seventy Masses there, some for the dead*

*I quoted for the quiet of my mind  
'Muzzle the ox not as it treads the corn'  
But conscience bid me presently to find  
Confessor kindly as was ever born;  
'I've swallowed such a lot of the remains'  
I told him, and his golden answer reigns –*

*'There is a saying, Muzzle not the ox'  
Said Michael Hollings from his hollow box!  
No water wrought upon that giant brain  
And, Master of Love's art, God's heart's his gain  
And, not long after that which I record,  
They made him Chaplain up at Oxenford.*

The quotation about the ox is from Deuteronomy (25:4), and taken up again in 1 Timothy (5:18) and 1 Corinthians (9:9). John had reflected on it at least ten times, he says in another poem, so his confessional encounter must have been as much delight as relief.

### Celebrating the Cathedral

The poems have one other memory of his time at the Cathedral, recounted in 'Epilogue' (1969):

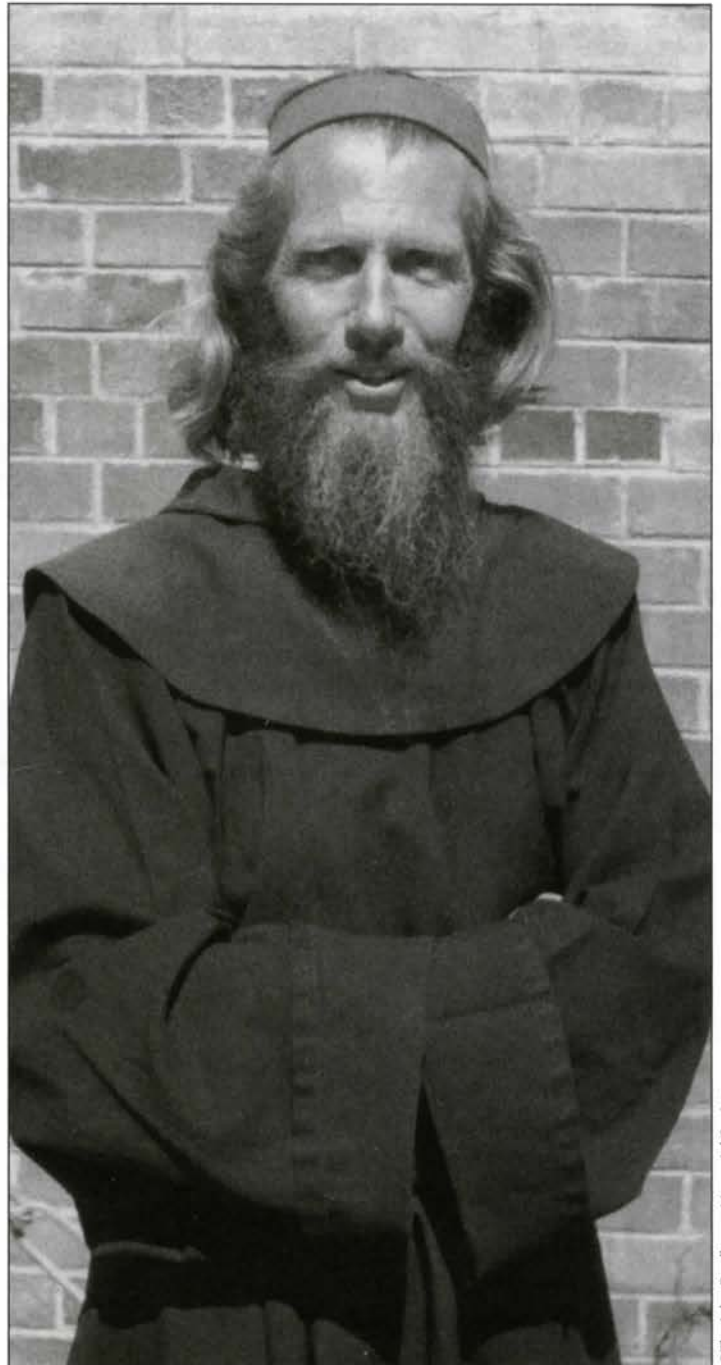
*A chest o'tone-true viols shall resound  
In violet my catafalque around  
And "Greensleeves" (which I piped for Ronnie Knox  
Alone at night beside his only box)  
In Westminster Cathedral shall be heard  
Not on recorder then: but there, rare bird!*

A spine-tingling image – the recorder melody echoing mournfully around the dark and empty Cathedral.

For John, the time at the Cathedral was a celebration. In another letter to his mother (6 August 1957), he sums it all up in a phrase echoing the 'Loud sings cuckoo' refrain of a famous medieval round:

*The birds in London pretty chirpy too. Especially blackbirds  
on scaffolding singing solitary in the very early morning as I  
go to work.*

*Lhude singe Westminster.*



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