



# The jungle fighter who aspired to be a saint

*The bishops of Zimbabwe have agreed to open the Cause for the Canonisation of John Bradburne, a jungle fighter who became a Franciscan and died in the service of lepers, reports Simon Caldwell*

**S**ooner rather than later the Cause for the Canonisation of John Bradburne is likely to open, possibly on September 5, the 40th anniversary of the murder of the missionary in what is now Zimbabwe.

There is abundant evidence of a cult devoted to Bradburne as in Africa each year some 25,000 pilgrims make the journey to Mutemwa Leprosy Settlement, which he refused to abandon in spite of the dangers to his life, to pray for his intercession.

In the UK he is admired by such figures as Charles Moore, the former editor of the *Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, and when a crowd-funding appeal was launched to help to meet the costs of the Cause advancing, among the donors was Frank Cottrell Boyce, author novelist and screenwriter – and the man behind the 2012 London Olympics Ceremony – who handed over £400.

Such a show of solidarity is understandable given that sainthood is an expensive business and Bradburne's Cause must begin in Zimbabwe, a country more noted for famine in recent years than for opulence.

Yet things have been moving at a steady pace. Last year Archbishop Robert Ndlovu of Harare asked the UK-based John Bradburne Memorial Society to act as petitioner for the Cause and the group appointed Enrico Graziano Giovanni Solinas as postulator and Amilcare Conti as administrator.

Both are based in Perugia, Italy, and are experienced in the work of gathering material for the scrutiny of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

The bishops of Zimbabwe have now unanimously agreed that Bradburne's Cause should open (when it concludes, they will have their first saint) yet a formal announcement from the Vatican is still awaited. Should the Cause progress, it will be inevitable that it will attract huge interest from around the world.

One reason is because of the dramatic circumstances in which Bradburne died and a second is because of the hugely attractive, albeit occasionally eccentric, character of the man himself – a poet, a wanderer and a war hero.

Bradburne was the son of an Anglican cleric and was born at Skirwith in the Eden Valley of Cumbria in 1921.

During the Second World War he served with



the Gurkhas in Malaya before he spent a year in Burma with the Chindits, a special operations unit dropped behind Japanese lines to attack supply routes.

During the war years he underwent something of a religious conversion (he sung psalms in battle) but it was while staying at Buckfast Abbey, Devon, in 1947 that he was received into the Catholic faith.

For the following decade he travelled extensively, wrote poetry and experimented with the eremitical life and with absolute poverty before finally deciding to become a Franciscan tertiary.

He confided to a Franciscan priest that his only three wishes were to serve leprosy patients, to die a martyr, and to be buried in the habit of St Francis.

In 1962, he wrote to Fr John Dove, a friend



'Poet and wanderer': All pics courtesy of the John Bradburne Memorial Society

from his wartime years who had become a Jesuit priest, and who was serving in then Rhodesia, to ask: "Is there a cave in Africa where I can pray?"

Two years later the Rhodesian Bush War broke in the former colony. The civil war raged for 15 years yet Bradburne not only refused to flee but became warden of Mutemwa where he showed exceptional loyalty to the lepers.

When he arrived there he was met with a "sea of suffering", according to Didier Rance, his biographer.

The lepers were covered in filth and afflicted by running sores, their limbs twisted and contorted by the disease, and the "sight of curled-up dislocated fingernails" added to the horror.

Surprised by the arrival of Bradburne and his friend, Heather Benoy, the lepers scurried into their huts only to re-emerge later with sacks or blankets covering their heads.

Deeply puzzled, Bradburne asked what they were doing and was told the lepers were forced to cover their faces by the director of the centre because they were too ugly to be seen by any outsiders.

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*'I am very happy here – this is my journey's end'*

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Overcome with pity, Bradburne could only mutter the words: "My God, my God ..."

Awful as it was, the leper colony would become the Jerusalem that Bradburne had been seeking spiritually in decades of wandering across three continents.

He became a devoted servant to the lepers and he would later tell his friends, Kit and Arthur Law, that "I am very happy here – this is my journey's end."

Bradburne spent the last 10 years of his life there, and died, aged 58, at the outskirts of the colony, shot in the back.

He had made enemies through his obstinate care of the lepers and some of them saw the conflict as an opportunity to get rid of him.

A story was invented about Bradburne working secretly as a spy for the security forces and he was abducted by a group of people known as the Mujhibas, with whom he had quarrelled, and on Sunday September 2 1979 he was delivered to the guerrillas.

There are differing accounts of what happened, but the guerrillas have always insisted that they took a benign view of him and that they did not kill him. Instead it was suggested to Bradburne that he went to Mozambique for the duration of the war, or even that he should continue to care for the lepers unhampered. He was set free but ambushed three days later by the Mujhibas, and his body was left by a roadside. The war would

come to an end just three months later.

Almost immediately after Bradburne's death there were reports of supernatural signs possibly associated with his sanctity.

Among these is the blood dripping from his coffin at his funeral in Harare Cathedral the following week.

It was witnessed by Fr David Harold Barry, a Jesuit, but when the coffin was opened there was no trace of any blood inside.

Only then was it noticed, however, that Bradburne had not been dressed in Franciscan habit as he requested. The funeral proceeded once his body was clothed according to his wishes.

Numerous healings have been informally attributed to his intercession, including the cure of a man in Scotland from a brain tumour and of a woman from South Africa who had lost the use of her legs.

A cursory reading of Bradburne's life and works reveals a man of great joy with a deep love for nature that found expression in Franciscan spirituality and which today chimes with the observations of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, the 2015 encyclical "On the Care for Our Common Home".

His care for the poor and the outcast was not only "Franciscan" in the sense of the tradition of the order and the character of this papacy but was also truly Christ-like.

Bradburne was also described by Fr Barry as "the most humble man I have ever known", yet he was ambitious for sainthood, once writing from Italy to a friend asking him "pray for my sanctification". This was not for his own sake, he explained, "but because it would encourage so many souls if such wreckage might come to canonisation".

This is important because, again, similar sentiments find expression in the teachings of Pope Francis, who reminded the faithful in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, his 2018 Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness, that Our Lord does not desire mediocrity but instead "He wants us to be saints".

The life and works of John Bradburne are poised to speak to future generations of Catholics and the coming weeks are crucial to determining whether the formal announcement that his Cause will be opened this September will be made.

It is a time when Catholics in the UK and Zimbabwe should unite their prayers in the hope that, come September, they might share their joy.

