

This month is the centenary of the birth of John Bradburne, the poet and warm-hearted eccentric who may be the first Englishman born in the twentieth century to be declared a saint / **By ROGER RIDDELL**

God's outcast

JOHAN BRADBURNE was born in remote Skirwith high up in the Cumbrian Fells, where he spent a happy early boyhood. When I first met him, 14 years before his gruesome murder in Zimbabwe's rural Mashonaland, which he so loved, he was living in a hen house, skin suntanned, sitting in shorts on a low stool hovering over a typewriter, his long straw-hatted hair tied at the back, bees buzzing around his head, uncertain he wanted to be distracted. He died in September 1979, just days before the start of the Lancaster House conference in London which led to the agreement that stopped the guerrilla war in which Bradburne and 20,000 others lost their lives.

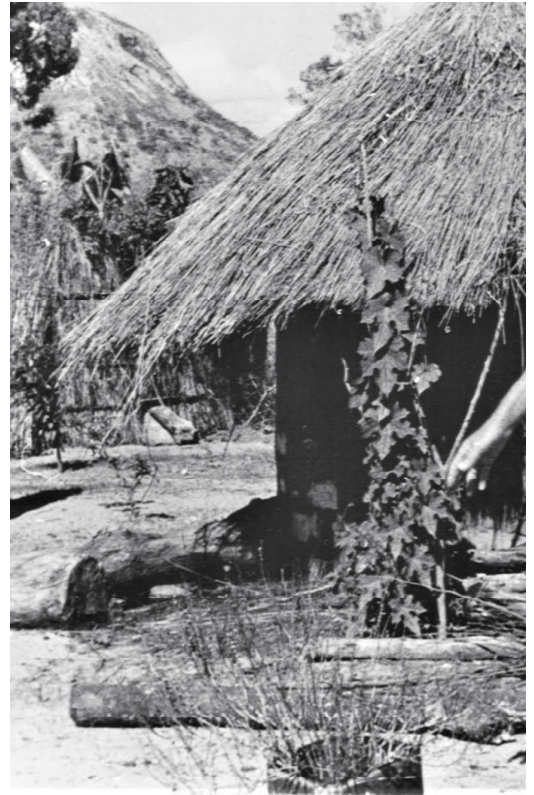
For many years after his death, few outside Zimbabwe's Catholic community had even heard of John Bradburne. Now, more and more people are discovering his poems. He is thought to be Britain's most prolific poet, writing three times as many lines as Wordsworth and almost twice as many as Shakespeare. Three themes dominate his poetry: the natural world, his search to find a role and purpose in his life, and his Christian faith, often viewed through its Jewish roots. He wrote in verse for fun, sometimes taking to pen for drink, or typing his lines tongue-in-cheek. Bradburne was the first to admit that some of his poetry was rubbish or inconsequential. But some of his poems are touching and beautiful, some profound and captivating. Ever the mimic (he called himself God's jester), at times he wrote like Chaucer ("Hail chanticleer"), Hopkins ("First Eve fell fast for fallen find's false fable, Foul weather followed for us folk forlorn") and Ogden Nash ("O Snails and beetles, worms and grubs, Lady birds and slimy slugs").

IN 2019, THE Congregation for the Causes of Saints issued a formal *nihil obstat* for the cause of Bradburne's beatification to proceed, with the full support of Zimbabwe's bishops. He would be the first Englishman born in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries, and the first Zimbabwean, to be proclaimed a saint or martyr. Last year, he was declared Servant of God, and the Ecclesiastical Court began taking testimonies from those who knew him well. As one of the shrinking band of his long-time friends – he last wrote to me (in verse) the year before his death – I have

been interviewed by the postulator, Enrico Solinas, a judge at the Umbrian Interdiocesan Ecclesiastical Court.

Bradburne was born on 14 June 1921, the son of Erica May Hill and Thomas Bradburne, a High Church Anglican priest. He had two brothers and two sisters. His teenage years were spent in Norfolk, where he was a pupil at Gresham's school in Holt. Three days after his 19th birthday he was called up, and six months later he joined the Indian Army, with which his mother's family had connections, and saw active service in Malaya and Burma. His friend, the Jesuit priest John Dove, said of Bradburne: "He was both a hero and a misfit. War demands courage and expertise in killing. The latter was quite foreign to John."

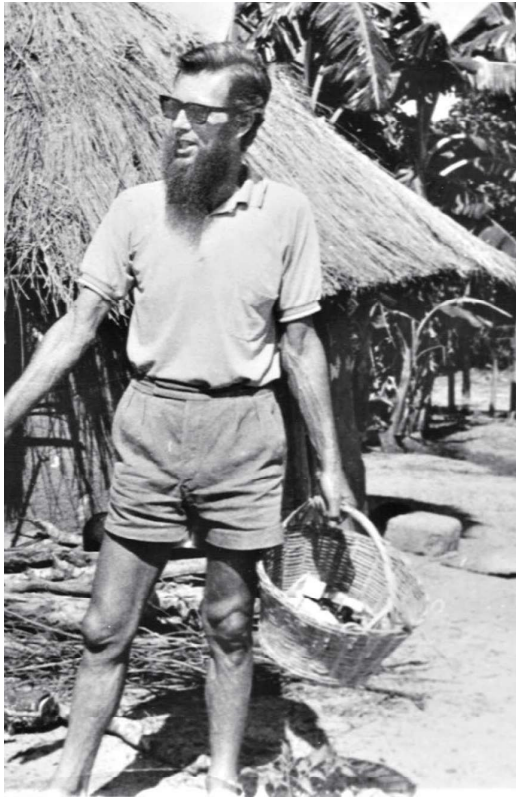
Returning to the England he sorely missed, Bradburne spent the next 17 years as a searcher and seeker, taking odd jobs, a farm labourer and a teacher in a boys' school, but he never settled. Having had some sort of religious experience during the war, he felt the pull of faith, and in 1947 he became a Catholic. Steered away from the Jesuits by Dove, he tried his vocation first with the Benedictines at Buckfast, then the Carthusians at Parkminster, the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion in Louvain, and finally



with the Benedictines again, this time at Prinknash. Yet each time he either chose to leave or, more often, was judged to be unsuitable. With interludes for pilgrimages – to Lourdes, Rome and Jerusalem – his wanderings continued.

Following a spell selling books at Burns & Oates shop in Ashley Place, Bradburne became what he wryly called "fifth sacristan" at Westminster Cathedral next door. There, by chance, he bumped into Cardinal William Godfrey and soon found himself the caretaker of the cardinal's country home, Hare Street House in rural Hertfordshire, where Robert Hugh Benson, a convert and searcher like him, had lived. Hare Street had few visitors, and the cardinal came infrequently, so Bradburne had the run of the place; he cherished the solitude and stayed for over two and half years, a record for him. But when the builders arrived to start renovations to convert the house to a renewal centre for diocesan clergy, he knew he would have to move on, and in August 1962 he found himself in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Though he didn't know it then, the country was to be his home for the last 17 years of his life.

By this time, Bradburne had become a secular Franciscan, and John Dove had fixed up for him to work as a mission helper at the main Franciscan Fathers Mission at Mount St Mary's Wedza, in Mashonaland. Though he fell in love with and soon started writing poetry about the country, he didn't stay long at Wedza, and his wanderings continued until Dove brought him to the Jesuit training centre, Silveira House, which he had recently set up. There Bradburne learned to type and busied himself as best he could as organist,



Left and above, Bradburne in his early days at Mutemwa and below left with his dog, Simba

sacristan, beekeeper, nightwatchman, friend of those who came begging, dog walker and general dogsbody. But as the Jesuit community grew and the centre became more institutionalised, he pined for the solitude he thought he could not live without.

It was soon after this, in March 1969, that Bradburne made his first visit to Mutemwa, a settlement some 90 miles east of Harare where people with leprosy from all over Zimbabwe were sent to live pretty much as outcasts – not for nothing does the Shona word *mutemwa* mean “You have been cut off”. After meeting a few of its more mobile residents and seeing the inhumane conditions they were forced to live in, Bradburne promptly announced he was staying. With great difficulty, he was persuaded to leave, but within a month he was back and, except for the odd brief break, he never left Mutemwa until his death.

THOUGH OFFICIALLY “the warden” (Bradburne knew his Trollope), he saw his role more as a companion of the residents than a distant grand administrator: he sought not only to improve their quality of life, but to live alongside them and build a vibrant community – and he succeeded. More and better food was provided, as were warmer clothing and extra blankets needed for Africa’s bitter winters. Quality medical care came courtesy of Dr Luisa Guidotti, the Italian mission doctor, and her team who made weekly visits to bandage wounds and dispense pills, and keep a watchful eye on Bradburne, known to skip meals and pass on food gifts to the residents. Soon Bradburne not only knew each person by name, but he wrote a

poem about every one of Mutemwa’s residents. He became the eyes for the blind, the ears for the deaf and the fingers and toes for those who had only stumps for hands and feet; he sat with those who were sick and prayed with those close to death. But he also brought joy and laughter, and to celebrate special events they partied, sometimes aided by alcohol. From a colony of stigmatised and forgotten lepers, Mutemwa became a vibrant community of living people.

Bradburne lived in a one-room converted butchery. To his delight, a small chapel was built. Soon after, Bradburne’s growing numbers of supporters tracked down a harmonium for him, and kept him supplied with paper to feed into his poetry-writing typewriter. Bradburne had found meaning to his life and felt fulfilled. Despite the mental anguish of many who had been removed from their families, a number forcibly, Mutemwa was a happy place, as I witnessed myself when I visited. On occasions, Bradburne would cajole me to climb with him to the top of the large granite outcrop behind Mutemwa, called Chigona, and we would remove our shirts and race round the “running track” he had etched out until we were both exhausted.

But then – perhaps inevitably – just short of four years after he arrived, judged to be incompetent (and, perversely, too kind), Bradburne was sacked as warden. But he refused to leave, and for some weeks lived precariously in a tent on the side of Chigona before a hut was built for him just outside the settlement so he could continue as the keeper of the keys of the church, and he visited the residents when allowed. It was an uneasy time, and his relationship with the new warden become more strained as Bradburne saw the standard of care dropping – rations were cut to save money – and his heart and his sense of justice drove him to try to intervene. One warden left and another came; sometimes Bradburne was allowed to interact with the residents; sometimes he

was all but frozen out. Perhaps inevitably too, over time, splits within the community started to surface and divisions arose, with some residents allying themselves more closely to Bradburne and others to the new regime. There was talk of funds going missing or being misused.

Bradburne continued to live a precarious life – pushed on to the margins of the community of the marginalised but determined to stay engaged – until early September 1979, when he was abducted. The Zimbabwe war of liberation had been hotting up in the area for some time; Bradburne had been told it had become far too dangerous and that he should leave, but he stayed, even after Dr Guidotti had been killed, left to bleed to death after being shot by the Rhodesian Security Forces. (Her beatification process began in Modena in 1995.) Three days after his abduction, Bradburne’s body was discovered by the roadside with bullets in his back, some distance from where he had been living.

THE STORY commonly told about his death is that Bradburne – a (saintly) white man who cared for black lepers – was (viciously) killed by Robert Mugabe’s black guerrilla fighters. Even if true, this tells only part of the story. Bradburne was not political, though he had no time for Ian Smith, whom he bluntly dismissed with the words “He is a racist”. Numerous deaths in Zimbabwe’s guerrilla war happened when people with axes to grind led soldiers to believe that those they had a grudge against were political sell-outs or informers. Bradburne had ruffled the feathers of some powerful local individuals who saw him and his uncompromising stand for the rights of Mutemwa’s residents as a threat. What better way to get rid of him than to tell the guerrillas that he was a supporter of the Smith regime? From what has been pieced together of what happened before Bradburne was shot, fierce arguments took place as to whether or not he should be killed. If guerrillas did shoot Bradburne, they would have been guided by what they were being told by influential locals: his death is likely to have less to do with race than with power.

Not only did Bradburne take sides with the marginalised and the struggle to help those with leprosy lead more human and fulfilling lives, but he (doggedly) defended the gains made to their quality of life as best he could in the face of growing opposition. His way of acting may not always have been the most tactful, but his commitment to the people he had grown to love was both deep and unswerving. If John Bradburne is to be heralded as a martyr, he is best seen as a martyr for justice, seeing past the fog of politics to the clarity of the human dignity of the people he had grown to love and whom he strove to uphold and defend.

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