

John Bradburne

John Bradburne:

Mystic, Poet and Martyr (1921-1979)

Edited by

Renato Tomei

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Ever without just adding one more verse,
It seems to me a sempiternal trend
For blending with The One is none the worse
Even for endless aeons unbegun,
To wit: God - Holy Spirit, Father, Son.
(From '*L'ensuite*', 1974)

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PREFACE

This volume contains contributions based on the papers presented at the 'First International Conference on John Bradburne (1921-1979): Poet, Mystic and Martyr', held in the Great Hall of the Università per Stranieri di Perugia on 30 March 2017.

It was a truly international occasion, with speakers from Italy, France, Spain, South Africa, and the UK, and an attendance that included academics from several university departments, as well as representatives of the Catholic Church in Italy. Many university students were also present, testifying to the way the story of John Bradburne holds an appeal for young people. A photographic exhibition in the corridor outside the Great Hall presented a pictorial history of his life, 'From the Lake District to Zimbabwe', and various books about his life and work were on display. The languages of the conference were English and Italian, and there was simultaneous translation throughout.

The conference was opened by the university rector, Giovanni Paciullo, with other welcoming statements from the head of the department of human and social sciences, Sandra Covino, and members of the organizing committee, including the president of the committee and editor of the present volume, Renato Tomei, assistant professor of English at the university.

The idea for such an event arose in 2015, during an academic visit to Perugia by Professor David Crystal, at the invitation of Rosanna Masiola, Professor of English and Translation at the university. The motivation was to make John Bradburne's writing available to a wider audience in Italy and elsewhere through the medium of translation; and, as this had not previously been attempted, it was felt that a first step would be to explore the issues involved through an academic conference. Perugia seemed to be the obvious location, for it is close to Assisi - a region through which John Bradburne walked on one of his several journeys around Italy, and which he often refers to in his writing. He knew Perugia well.

The primary aim of the conference was to acknowledge the way his poetry and thought has attracted increasing interest around the world, and to provide the first opportunity for translators of the poems to present their work and to discuss the issues that arise in handling such a challenging oeuvre. In the afternoon session, called (after the title of one of the poems)

'A Ring-a-ring of Rosary', participants heard one poem, 'Saint Francis', read in several European and African languages - Italian (Rosanna Masiola), French (Didier Rance), Spanish (Dianella Gambini), Amharic (Renato Tomei), isiXhosa and Afrikaans (Rajendra Chetty). The event, chaired by Enrico Terrinoni, resulted in an illuminating discussion of the way each of the translators had gone about the task they had set themselves.

Although the main focus of the conference was on the poetry as literature, each speaker adopted a broader perspective, placing the poems in the context of John Bradburne's life and the turbulent times he encountered in mid-20th-century Rhodesia, where most of his writing took place. The main contributions in the morning reflected the title of the conference and of the present volume: 'John Bradburne: Poet, Mystic, and Martyr'. By convention, authors will refer to the poet by his first name.

- David Crystal, author of *A Life Made of Words: the Poetry and Thought of John Bradburne* (2017), gave an account of the evolution of the poetry and its main features and themes, and drew attention to John's status as 'the most prolific poet in the English language'. The final section of this volume contains the full versions of the poems quoted by the authors.

- Didier Rance, author of a biography of John Bradburne, *Le vagabond de Dieu*, whose English translation was published in September 2017, reflected on the nature of the mysticism that permeated John's life, and how it was manifested in his writing on creation, and especially in the way bees played such an important role in his life and thought.

- Marco Impagliazzo placed John within the context of Christian martyrdom, drawing attention to the way his death can be seen as a significant moment in the 'ecumenism of blood' experienced in Africa during the 20th century, which he described as the most violent of all centuries.

- Daniele Piccini added a further perspective by exploring the nature of Franciscan poetics in the writing of Jacopone da Todi and John Bradburne.

An additional dimension was provided by two personal encounters. As part of his talk, David Crystal explained how he had come to be involved in editing the online database of poetry - the result of a chance meeting with a friend from his home town, who had met John while travelling in Africa, and been cared for by him after falling ill with malaria. That friend, Kevin Jones, universally known as Casey (from his initials K C Jones), had received a verse letter from John, which he showed to David, sparking his interest. Kevin was present at the conference, and told his story, which

was greatly appreciated by the audience, as he was the only person in the room who had actually met the subject of the conference.

A second personal perspective took the form of a welcoming letter from Celia Brigstocke, John's niece, who looks after the John Bradburne Memorial Society. She was unable to attend the conference, so the letter was read on her behalf by Hilary Crystal. It gave a brief history of the Society and its current work in Mtemwa, along with childhood reminiscences, reference to some of the reported cures that have taken place since his death, and her hopes for progress in his Cause for beatification.

Although the Cause was not part of the remit of the conference, a groundswell of opinion emerged that this event could play its part in developing a climate which would help promote that progress. The outcome was the 'Perugia Statement', which was signed by many of the participants. This read as follows:

The first International Conference on the life, poetry, and thought of John Bradburne, poet, mystic, martyr, and father to the lepers, was held at the Università per Stranieri di Perugia on 30 March 2017. As speakers and attendees at this conference, we firmly believe that the cause for his canonization should proceed at the earliest opportunity, especially in the light of his roles as a model for young people, the ecumenical movement, and the care of those with devastating diseases, and we ask for your help and prayers in taking this movement forward.

Further support was affirmed in a statement read out by Amilcare Conti, secretary of the Archdiocese of Perugia, on behalf of Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, Archbishop of Perugia and Città della Pieve.

The present volume, as well as the conference, aims at providing a foundation for further exploration of the literary, theological, and humanitarian legacies of John Bradburne, also acting as a stimulus for his eventual recognition as a saint of the 20th century.

CHAPTER ONE

JOHN BRADBURNE: A LIFE IN WORDS

DAVID CRYSTAL

John Bradburne is acknowledged to be the most prolific poet the English language has ever had. His 170,000 lines of poetry far exceed the output of anyone else - twice as much as Shakespeare, for example, or three times as much as Wordsworth. And it was almost entirely written during the last twenty years of his life.

There is just the occasional hint in his early years of a future poetic career. In *Excelsior* (1971), he thinks back to his childhood, and puts an adult gloss on a childish verse:

First time I ever wrote a verse
Was in a ruined wall
At Baconsthorpe, I might do worse
Than quote it, - after all
This other stuff that has ensued
On eight and thirty years reviewed.

I quote aright, I cite the note
Made long ago to play the goat: -

Alas, alack, I am undone,
I want to eat a currant-bun;
But God is good, He told me so,
The trees are swaying to and fro.

Would it be wise
To analyse
That silly-sounding thing?
I'd like to spell
Emmanuel
As Currant-bun: our King

In twofold eucharistic kind
 Of grape and grain there reigns resigned,
 If you will have it so;
 Trees swaying to and fro
 Could be the Springing from the Cross
 Of Hagios Athan-atos:
 A toss and two He took, and then,
 Spread-eagled, soared and sent accord to men.

After school, war intervened, along with a period of several years in which he searched for his vocation. He reflects, in *A Ballad of a Lifetime* (1974):

By my twenty-seventh year, had stirred
 In my fancy scarce a single rhyme;
 Then I came to Rome and, homing, spurred...
 Galaxies of brightness at a time!

He began to write more frequently in 1948, but the vast majority of his 5000+ poems come from a remarkable decade, from 1968 to 1979, when he found his vocation in what is now Zimbabwe. Once the poetic floodgates were opened, he could not close them - nor did he want to, as he says in *L'Ensuite* (1974):

I love this inability to end
 Ever without just adding one more verse,
 It seems to me a sempiternal trend
 For blending with The One is none the worse
 Even for endless aeons unbegun,
 To wit: God - Holy Spirit, Father, Son.

Many of his poems are handwritten, and when we look at them one is immediately struck by the fluency of the writing - there are hardly any corrections. One also notes the structural intricacy of the verse - following a strict metre and rhyme-scheme, and interlaced with puns and other kinds of wordplay. The sonnet celebrating one of the lepers, *Timu* (1969), is a case in point. Few people see all the verbal ingenuity at first reading:

Timu's no Timon, Athens were to him
 Inseparable word from hens at hand,
 Many a time I greet him daily, Tim
 Ever is bright, dimness to him is banned;
 Intent on converse and on getting round
 Wondrously well on only hands and knees,

Enters he here and there, all's fairy ground
 Native to happy Tim who's born to please;
 The produce of his poultry he will beg
 That I may purchase any time I pass
 Only providing that it is an egg
 But not a chicken cheeping 'Fresh is grass
 Even as I am flesh!': three pence a time
 Duly I pay and Timu's lay's sublime.

They usually miss the acrostic made up of the initial letters of each line: TIME I WENT TO BED.

He revels in language play, and explains why in several poems, such as these extracts from *Elastic Corollary cum Gymnastic Symposium* (1977) and *Talisman* (1969):

Ripe puns and hidden names
 Yield joy to Him, and hymning birds
 Unbury merry claims.

...

Birds that spontaneously sing
 Ask not reward or anything
 Of man's appreciation, they
 Being but God's make songs each day
 Especially at morn and eve:
 In giving thanks they thanks receive.

In short: God enjoys language play. And it is play with a purpose.

Why is his poetry important?

Two American poets point us towards the answer. First, Archibald MacLeish:

Anything can make us look; only art can make us see.

Next, Robert Penn Warren:

The poem is not a thing we see - it is, rather, a light by which we may see -
 and what we see is life.

So what sort of life do his poems try to make us see?

In a phrase: eternal life. In *Paradise Tossed Aside* (1978) he expresses the hope he has for his writing:

Man is a vandal and a beastly thing
 Where'er his ears are deaf to Pan's sweet piping,
 Yet he was set as viceroy to King
 Eternal once: oh may this dunce's typing
 Re-stir the springs of immortality
 And may my wit befit eternity.

How does he stir the springs of immortality in us? And what is the 'sweet piping' that he wants us to hear? In over a thousand poems he places before us three major themes.

The nature of the Trinity

His insight into the nature of the Holy Trinity is profound, providing us with images that make this ultimate mystery amazingly accessible. The key is love. As he says in *Logos* (1974):

The Thought, The Word, The Voice are Persons Three
 Of Love in Love with Love for evermore.

'Thought, Word and Voice' is his favourite analogy, explored in hundreds of poems, but he is always on the look-out for others. Here is one, *Heat, Light and Sound*, written not long before his death, on Whitsunday 1979:

There is no light, other than that reflected,
 Excepted it is engendered by blithe heat,
 A fresh analogy is thus projected
 For Father, Son and Holy Paraclete;
 The Father, Love The Thought, I call His Heat,
 The Son His Light diffuses it abroad,
 Christ, who is Love Begotten and Our Lord,
 Speaks to us now through Love The Paraclete;

The Thought and Word and Voice go hand in hand
 And yet God has no hand but that of Christ,
 We see His hand not in the Eucharist
 But by our Faith His grasp we understand;

Assumed is our humanity to One
 Whose face and form are warm as God The Son.

He is convinced that his primary task, as a poet, is to explicate the Trinity. Indeed, as he explains in *A Ballade of a Logosophite* (1975), he has taken it on board as a personal responsibility:

The Thought, The Word, The Voice of One in Three
 Are Father, Son and Holy Ghost of God,
 They are The Persons of The Trinity
 That Christ defined not thus as earth He trod;
 Neither the Church has done till now nor odd
 Is it to be esteemed that she, the Church,
 Has given but to me her mutt the nod
 Which indicates the answer to a search.

It is actually not that hard, he says in *Roma, Italia, Il Mondo* (1975), and it is a critical message for a modern secularist world:

I personally am intent on telling
 To Rome, to Italy and to the World
 That, since true Faith is dwindling and not swelling,
 The One in Three should freely be unfurled
 As Dogma of predominance and hurled
 Hard (by some bard or other) at the throngs
 Of peoples too unsteeped for true songs.

But I must find a Maiden first to go
 And see the Pope with Faith and Hope agog
 And tell him that the Trinity is so
 Simple to know as falling off a log:

This is his role, he says in Logos:

The Thought, The Word, The Voice are Persons Three
 Of Love in Love with Love for evermore,
 I am assured that it is up to me
 To write this down as clown and troubadour.

He comments, in a letter to his mother (22 January 1976):

To come first to what matters most: The Blessed Trinity. This is the most important message of the purpose and purport of my life.

So who has given him this assurance?

The centrality of Mary

Our Lady has. In several poems he affirms his total dependence on her inspiration. This is how he recounts his first encounter with her as a Muse, in *Ut unum sint* (1956):

I did not have the least idea what I should say,
 Yet knew that all about wide living wonders were;
 I loved the breath of Summer and its pleasant day,
 As also Winter's sunset and the frosty air;
 I'd seen the beauties of an Oriental clime,
 The dwelling and the wisdom of a distant race;
 I'd listened rapt to music's harmonies sublime,
 And knew the fascination of a woman's grace:
 But still I waited sad and dumb with aching heart,
 Because it seemed that there was naught which I could do,
 Except to gaze on loveliness - I had no art!
 Then spake Our Blessèd Lady, and my life was new:
 She said - 'My child, give me our hand, I'll guide your pen,
 And we will write about the love God has for men.'

And ever after he sees himself as her amanuensis, writing down what she inspires, as he affirms in *Assumption* (1973):

Thus talk I to myself, addressing thee
 Whilst thou dictatest what I set to page.

His love for her knew no bounds, and many of his poems describe the intense nature of his relationship to Mary, fostered through visionary experience, and explicitly described as a marriage. Think of whoever or whatever you find most beautiful, he tells us in *Oneing* (1971), and you will find all that beauty and much more in Mary:

Wherefore, a man who wills to set
 His heart on Love alone
 Should not despise and not forget
 His Totem, but enthrone
 The sum of that which most attracts
 His being to its cataracts:
 Love will for lust atone.

Upon that throne Our Lady Fair
 May sit as Queen of grace,
 Ask her to take

For heaven's sake
 Such earthly form and face
 As you consider is the height
 Of human beauty in your sight.

This, in a Word, is best to do
 If you would be detached
 From aught which might forbid to woo
 High heaven's gate unlatched:
 Marry Maria and remain
 Beside her Jesus, joy to gain -
 None could be better matched.

It is an intimacy open to anyone, he says in *Esurientes implevit* (1971: 'he has filled the hungry'):

Marry or burn
 And Mary is best
 In breaking a fellow of fat;
 Married to Mary is parried the rest
 And (keep it not under your hat)
 Yet there are many she'd marry if they
 Only would ask her: she'd show, in THEIR way
 Of thinking attractive, how far she surpasses
 The beauty of others,
 She smothers allasses!

And why should we get as close as we can to Our Lady? Because that is the way we can get closest to the Trinity:

Attune your heartstrings to The Trinity,
 Let Yahweh's love bestrum you as His harp
 And let no lesser love of he or she
 Hinder God's hand, land you like cod or carp;
 Love of Our Lady, though, is nothing less
 Than tantamount to counting Yahweh All
 Because they share one name and one address
 And one intent of blending in their call;
 Admire I AM with Miriam who bore
 Our Lord in Bethlehem and brought Him up
 To be the Shepherd Good whom we adore
 Each time we graze by gazing at His Cup.
 There is not anything excelling this
 In any man's or woman's span of bliss.
 (*This Above All*, 1977)

His focus on Mary complements his focus on the Trinity:

He that is alone with The One
 Whose name is Love must be
 With Mary and her Son
 And the blessed Trinity:
 The son of Man and the Lord of light
 And the Father great and Our Lady bright!
 (*Aubade*, 1971)

In *Une Ballade a la Mode* (1974) he even invents a new word to show the closeness of her relationship to the Trinity: 'Quoternity'.

His expression is often vivid, intimate, and daring, and readily open to misinterpretation in an age which often confuses love and sex. But we avoid the difficulty, I think, if we see his language as falling within the metaphorical tradition of Biblical expressions of unity (such as the Church as the 'bride of Christ') or the medieval tradition of courtly love.

The metaphor of marriage is extended in many directions. A natural result of a marriage is children. So if Mary marries a poet, the outcome is inevitable (*Freedom in Wedlock*, 1972):

Our children all are poems, far too many for a file,
 My thrust is that of just a troubadour;
 My action is in words because
 There is no better fashion
 Since Christ our Lord incarnate was
 For sublimating passion.

No marriage ever produced so many children! There are 5246 poems in this remarkable oeuvre - with others still being discovered from time to time (for he usually wrote his letters in verse, and not all have yet been found).

The necessity of ecumenism

When John's cause is successful, what will he be a patron saint of? Lepers, of course. The environment, also, for many of his poems celebrate creation in the diversity of the world's fauna and flora. And then there is ecumenism. His longest work, a manuscript poem of 10,184 lines, is called *Ut unum sint* - 'that they may be one'. It reflects the diversity of his own spiritual background. Raised as an Anglican, he became a Catholic, frequently signed off his poems and letters as 'Jew', and in his travels had close encounters with Islam and Buddhism. Here are some extracts:

'That they all may be one' in God's glorious Son -
All the Christians so sadly divided, and come
To the King who is Shepherd: all flocks He will bring
To one fold, and they safely shall graze in the Spring
And the Heavenly Summer - all peoples He calls
From His turret, high up o'er Jerusalem's walls.

Judaism, I imagine he would say these days, is part of our spiritual
DNA:

Now come we to a deeper truth:
True Catholics are Hebrews all
As much as David and Saint Paul,
And this has Eucharistic proof -

The Body and the Blood of Christ
Which are the Holy Eucharist
Were of the Virgin Mary born
At Bethlehem on Christmas Morn.

And therefore Christ's Humanity
Is wholly Hebrew; and when we
Receive in grace we truly be
United with The Trinity.

For Jesus Christ's Divinity
Is hypostatically one
With all that makes Him Mary's Son
And Hebrew fruit of Hebrew tree.

So Catholics whose hearts are true
Are oned with Christ Our Lord the Jew -
He who can say 'Christ lives, not I,'
Has Jewish Nationality.

But John Bradburne is a Jew who reads the Koran, is happy to pray in
a mosque, and who ends one of his poems ('Saharah') with the Islamic
affirmation 'Allah ek akbar' ('God is great').

I went into the Beira Mosque and sat
Awhile upon the floor-fulfilling mat
And then I prayed to Power, more divine
Than love of wine, Agapheh give for that.
(*Even the Quiet Cloys on Earth*, 1968)

Koran I read in Tripoli
 North Africa and thought
 That much it had of poetry
 If such a lack of sport:
 Its acclamations all are great
 Marching in starch to Heaven's Gate
 Whom unabashed they celebrate,
 By Mariam they're caught!
 (*The White Force Ballad*, 1969)

And this is a Christian who repeatedly praises Buddhist mysticism and sprinkles his manuscript writing with the Hindu sacred syllable 'Om':

Where kindles Love's eternal light on everlasting hills
 Hymn Father, Son and Holy Ghost around that flame which thrills
 Whilst each to each in simple speech begins it with 'Shalom'
 Whence it proceeds as Love it feeds, one syllable, in 'Om'.

When bidden to consider what is best in Hindustan
 The Himalayan foothills in a marvellous pavan
 Process along the memory and hold the mindful gaze,
 And thence proceeds the lama through the woodsmoke to the maze.

Wise sadhus chant by glowing fires of charcoal in the eve
 As point by point an argosy of stars appears to weave
 With whirls of wonder round this orb and silences gyrate
 Whilst Venus pirouettes in green, to bars Inviolate.
 (*Om*, 1963)

I have never read anyone who taps so deeply into so many religious traditions. His conclusion (in *Ut unum sint*) is therefore unsurprising:

Hindoos and Buddhists, Anglicans,
 And many quaint Americans
 And legion others, if they seek
 Sincerely, are the Saviour's sheep.

'Tis men of Faith whom God doth choose -
 And pray remember that the Jews
 Of old were His own faithful race:
 We are adopted by His grace.

The world needs a signpost pointing clearly towards the possibility of religious unity. John provides it in a unique way. Whereas there are many examples of people from different spiritual traditions displaying a

willingness to come together, he shows how it is possible to integrate these traditions into a single personality, a single vision. In a world full of Christian/Jewish/Islamic/Hindu suspicions and tensions, he is a much-needed symbol of hope.

The Bradburne vision

John's vision is one in which Catholic Christianity is seen as special because of the unique role of the Blessed Sacrament, which (as he affirms in *Ut unum sint*) adds an extra dimension to everything else we do:

A thankful heart, a contrite heart,
A heart aflame for love of Christ
Is far above all human art
Without the Holy Eucharist.

But in the furnace of His Love
The Host can lift our hearts above
And make them melt for love of Him
Who sits above the Cherubim.

It is also a vision in which the Bible holds a central place. He would like to learn the Bible off by heart, he says in *Caro factum est* (1968), but thinks this would be difficult! In any case, as a poet he finds it better to nibble away at its truths, bit by bit, until eventually one arrives at the whole:

Sirs, I should read the Bible through
And then decide what's best to do
And if you cannot quite be sure
Read it again: a golden cure
For lassitude and idleness
Is getting it by heart I guess
But I would find that far too hard,
Not near enough to art of bard
Who'd rather take a little bit
And whittle it away with wit
Until each little bit he took
Become One Word who'll claim the Book.

It is a vision, moreover, in which prayer plays a critical role. Indeed, many of his poems *are* prayers, as *Sumer is i cumen in* (1958) illustrates:

Among the fading blooms on pleasure's lawn;
 No more to slumber, heedless of Thy chime
 That keeps un failing watch from dawn till dawn;
 No more the quest for this world's fairest views
 Which can but fill the eye with fresh desire;
 No more the crowding vanities and news
 Which keep from souls the Holy Spirit's fire;
 No more the wanderer way, the wide unrest,
 And weary search for joys that pass and cease;
 No more, Good Lord, to turn from Thy behest,
 For now we know Thy Will to be our peace:
 To Thee we tread the path which Jesus trod,
 So rest our hearts in His - Thy Heart, dear God.

And it is, of course a vision which becomes a reality only through a life of service to others. 'Why is John Bradburne important?' The lepers of Mtemwa would have had no difficulty answering the question, though it would have been in very different terms from those used above: because he provided them, as much as he could, with their daily needs in the form of food, medicine, and loving care:

I'll stay to watch and pray and try
 To bring about undoubted ill's decrease
 By standing sentinel in Christ and by
 Issuing rations where the rations cease.
(A Ballade of Non-Despondency, 1975)

He himself saw an intimate connection between the two worlds of daily survival and eternal life:

Mootamewa is God's darling; those who come
 And go or stay may thus work out salvation.
(Mtemwa, 1973)

One hour with burnt-out lepers when the wind
 Of mood and mode is blowing quite contrary
 May change from mellow fast a fellow's mind
 And make him think naught good but God and Mary!
(In June he Changes his Tune, 1978)

It is this continual relating of the realities of this world to those of the next which is the unwavering focus of his writing.

I said earlier that the role of a poet is to make us see. That was John Bradburne's wish as well.

God, I care not what clod forgot my face
 Nor who remembered ever my address,
 So long a song is poured upon the race
 In strains like rains upon a wilderness
 That those who say not No will say me Yes!
 What use to be abstruse to a degree
 Beyond both critics and the common press
 If, reading me but once, saith dunce: "I see".
 (*A Balladey-minded Epilogue*, 1975)

That is what his poems are for: they are, in their 5000+ different ways, beacons illuminating the nature of truth.

In a somewhat mournful poem, *To the Lodestar* (1974), he reflects on his apparent lack of success as a poet:

When Shakespeare died, at only fifty-two,
 Behold, he'd told the thoughts of all mankind!
 There is no shade of mood in me or you
 Which, in Will's way, may not expression find;
 But, since himself that Bard has done this thing
 In such a princely manner for the throng,
 Shall I endeavour to go echoing?
 Or shall I tintinabulate his song?
 Say nay, it were a nightmare travesty
 To try to gild the lily of his art
 Which is as if The Holy Ghost made free
 Both on our mortal and immortal part:
 My age is fifty-three, my lines are many
 And almost all of them not read by any!

That last line is definitely no longer the case. All the poems are now available on the website <www.johnbradburnepoems.com>, and every day people read something there. Several selections are available in traditional print form through the John Bradburne Memorial Society. And my detailed exposition and critique of the poetry, *A Life Made of Words: the Poetry and Thought of John Bradburne*, is available through the website <www.davidcrystal.com> either as an e-book or as print-on-demand. The Perugia conference has brought the poetry to the attention of a wider audience, and through the various translations presented there will reach more people than ever before.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HERO OF A MYSTIC LIFE

DIDIER RANCE

John Bradburne has been called again and again a “mystic” by those who have met or heard about him, such as Jean Vanier, in the foreword of my biography¹. Is it right? What is mysticism? What does it really mean to be a mystic? From the mystery of God to Quiz on the Net (“Are you a mystic?”), one may wonder ... and wander. A French dictionary defines mysticism as: “the religious belief that man can communicate directly and personally with God”, but the little I know of Christian mysticism taught that the mystic is not the man who can communicate directly and personally with God but the man God directly and personally communicates with. There is communication in both cases, but who takes the initiative is crucial. So, is John Bradburne the Hero of a mystic life?

Poetry and mysticism

John Bradburne is a poet, so we must first address the question of his poetry and mysticism. His entrance into the Catholic Church opened for him a poetic tap, or rather an ocean. As David Crystal has already masterfully addressed the topic of John Bradburne as poet, I’ll just add a few words. First, let us stick to a few truisms about poetry and mysticism. Both are concrete but obscure. To take Paul Claudel’s terms, both belong to “*anima* versus *animus*”, the reasoning thought, which is abstract but clear. But poetry aims at forms, namely realities of this world assumed by beauty, while in mysticism, through grace, man embraces a relationship initiated by Him who is beyond all the forms and realities of a world of which he is the Creator and Saviour. And if Analogy of Being allows us to

¹ Didier Rance, *John Bradburne: the Vagabond of God*, Darton Longman Todd, London, 2017.

speak about the fruitful experience of God with words, these can at best only grasp the bark, not give its contents to taste.

The mystic poet must therefore be generally at first a mystic then a poet. Yet, can he be both at the same time? To name but a few, this has already been debated about St John of the Cross and, earlier, St Ephrem. As for John Bradburne? Are his poems a follow-up or even an expression of grace, mystic or not? Before discussing this point, let's pin down the essence and lived experience of his Christian faith and life. I fully agree with David Crystal that "he has only one theme, and it is the most profound of them: the nature of the triune God, as manifested in Jesus, as born of Mary. From this theme comes all others - God's plan in human history, salvation, love, mission ... Bradburne gets as close as he can to the godhead, through the figure of Mary". John was a God-addict. That pun pins down the focus of our investigation: his relationship with God One and Three and with Mary - an experience which possibly led him to mysticism.

Yet, other dimensions of his poetry may, in their own way, testify to a kind of mystical experience. I could start with his life with the lepers, but I'll keep that for later, as they are inseparable from his life with God. I will thus dwell on an example of another important dimension of his religious poetry, namely nature as a potential topic for mysticism: his relationship with bees.

John Bradburne and bees... It's a lifelong story – and even an afterlife one... He had at times up to 50,000 bees living in his cell. And he mused about them in more than 300 poems (note that it is even more than his admired Virgil). Who do we see, in those poems? An attentive, curious, and inventive observer, who goes from acute comments to playful puns? Yes, but a lot more. Realistic observation and symbolic vision of bees and beehive are united in his verses, and it isn't too much to say it was born from a spiritual friendship with the so-called wild kingdom of bees, as he wrote: "... well / Apparent it seems that a mutual joy is shared by these bees and this idiot boy" (*Maybe Matter for a Morning*, 1969). His poetic and theological 'Summa Apifica' follows a long Christian tradition, especially Franciscan. St Francis asked for wine and honey to be put outside for bees, and John was careful that they neither lacked water or food. St Francis had hives forming in his cell, as did John. In John's cell, they nested near or between his legs under his work table, that same table on which he wrote his poems. Neither them nor John found it odd.

So as God spoke to St Francis through his Creatures (the *Canticle*), he may have spoken to John through and by the bee-world knitted in his poems:

A hive of bees is like one perfect being,
 A colony of bees is like to God...
 A hive is like the Kingdom of a Queen
 Who rules with Christ amidst the Trinity
 Keeping each well-willed member blithe and keen:
 A beehive is a universal wonder
 Loving the sun, naught is more marvel under.
 (*Quis ut Deus*, 1971)

His relationship with bees may be seen as a part and an expression of his life with and in God. We have a good witness for this: one day, Colin Carr, a young teacher (later on a Dominican friar), knocked at the door of John's cell at Chishawasha and entered. He sat down and suddenly realised that there were other guests in the room: dozens of thousands of bees...! When asked, his host told him that they were his guests, and that they would be nice to him if he was nice to them. Had he ever been stung? John replied that "when they were killing off the drones they got a bit excited, and he got the odd sting", but he didn't seem to think that was a big deal. And that was all. They kept talking, while the winged guests kept buzzing around. It's when he left that Carr realised that he had experienced some kind of a miracle: he had "forgotten" to be afraid of bees. As he wrote later on: "I had been at least temporarily a resident in the peaceable kingdom where the wolf lies down".²

The "mystical" itinerary of John Bradburne

It all started in 1942. John was then a 20-year-old soldier, doing his "coming of age" duty; that is, at the time, fighting as a second lieutenant for Britain in the Far East. As his battalion was crushed by the Japanese in Malaya, he somehow escaped with Captain Hart for a month in the jungle. There, he was struck by cerebral malaria – often a fatal illness if not

² A mystical dimension similar to the one with bees and with poetry may be found in John's relation to music. As early as the mid-fifties, he wrote: "Yet there is on Earth a music that expresses at the same time both Heavenward longing and profound peace of soul; such music seems to say 'we are mortals, yes, but promised Immortality: we are pilgrims, but our Native Land's in sight, so our hearts can rejoice as we journey.' This mood may be found among works of certain great composers, especially Bach; but its most complete expression is in the Plainsong of the Church, in the chant called 'Gregorian'. Of this chant the Holy Spirit is the Composer, for all the Liturgy is work of His direct inspiration. And the singer is Christ's Church - the Mystical Body of the Son" (*Ut unum sint*, Introduction).

treated in time... One evening, as he dragged himself under the trees, “something happened”. In his words:

Above the rubber-forest shone a star,
 The brightest Westward, beckoning afar;
 It seemed to me a sign from Christ the King,
 Who out of chaos joy and peace doth bring.
 (*Ut unum sint*, stanza 1408, 1955/6)

This led him to a second discovery: “I felt for the first time that there is something beyond us – if only we could get in touch with it”. He felt he had some kind of “sixth sense” to perceive this “something beyond us” (in a letter to Shirley James). He rarely mentioned it, and the expression is open to various interpretations, but the important thing is that it is linked to the joy and the peace that Christ brought to him, and we are here in the realm of the mystic.

But was it too late for this dying 20-year-old boy? John collapsed. His companion, himself exhausted and starved by a month of flight into the jungle, supported his groggy fellow until they arrived at a seashore. There, Hart stole a small local boat, a sampan, installed John there, and up they sailed towards Sumatra, 100 kms to the west. But soon the frail boat was caught in a typhoon. It washed them back, violently, but still alive, onto the same shore they had left. Hart was looking for another boat when other British soldiers arrived on the same beach. They hijacked another sampan. On the boat, John became delirious and half comatose.

They finally landed in Sumatra. His companions immediately took John to a hospital, just to learn that the Japanese had begun the invasion of Sumatra. John’s state was judged desperate by doctors and, with no great hope, he was evacuated by plane to Medan. There he stayed three days, in between life and death. He had then the vision of a “Lady” (he spoke only twice of it). On the fourth day, the delirium reduced. John later wrote that, as he awoke from this experience, his life had to be changed:

O blest delirium that told
 Me clearly that to find The God
 Was all I really wanted! odd.
 But thus He called me to His Fold
 (*Ut unum sint*, stanzas 1410-11, 1956)

At this point, the Japanese were already nearing Medan, and the Europeans were being evacuated by planes to Padang. Hart carried John to the harbour. There, one of the last English ships, overloaded, was beginning to lift its gangway from the jetty: Hart ran, threw John on the

gangway and clung himself to it, despite the sailors who wanted to push them back. The ship escaped Japanese planes and reached Ceylon where Hart and John, still seriously ill, were transferred to a liner going to Bombay. By the time they left, their previous ship had been sunk by the Japanese air force. The two men finally arrived at Bombay.

So death did not want John, or maybe it's God who wanted him on earth. I think that is the way John understood it, as he began then his spiritual quest. He woke up from that experience claiming he was going to follow his father's path in the Anglican clergy. And notwithstanding he had this vision of a White Lady, he remained "anti-papist". Moreover, at this time, he was also attracted by Hindu and Buddhist spirituality, as well as by young women and alcohol.

The war was to go on for three more years, during which John was to become in Burma one of the famous Chindits. Returning in 1945 to England, he soon became engaged, while continuing to pursue his spiritual quest for God and for a Church. As he later told Judith Listowell: "My greatest desire [was] to belong to a society which could embrace the maximum not exclusive minimum, of people on their way to Heaven". This quest led him at the end of 1947 to enter the Catholic Church at Buckfast Abbey, where he immediately asked to enter as a monk, ignoring the fact that it was necessary to choose between marriage and a monastic life! His previous engagement was soon over.

He actually made five attempts at a monastic or consecrated life, staying from a few months to more than twenty, all of them failing: after a promising start, he was thought unfit for the rules of an organised monastic or religious life. For his part, he felt that not enough time was being devoted to prayer (with the exception of the Carthusians).

In fact, more than a monk, John aspired to be a hermit and to devote himself solely to God. So he tried the eremitic life - more than ten times, over a period of twenty years, from a few weeks to several years, in nature or in cities, in Europe then in Africa, and sometimes in the most incongruous places. He lived in an organ gallery in a church in Italy, on top of a mountain in England, under a reservoir or in a henhouse full of chickens and in a cell full of bees in Africa, and finally amongst lepers, where he found his place: living with them by day, and being a hermit-poet at night. As for sleeping? Don't ask...

Can we understand this life within the classical theoretical framework of Christian mysticism, which has generally been defined as an evolution through three phases: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive? I doubt it. For example, it is impossible to fit it into the framework of Tanqueray's classic textbook *Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*.