

## John Bradburne - a reminiscence by Dr. Wayne Perry

It was 1970 and I was finding my feet at Harare Hospital when my new friend Alec Israel cajoled me into visiting JB. Fresh from England at 25 a leper colony was as far from my imagination as a visit to the Pole. I spoke to colleagues "O yes Mtemwa near Mtoko, the health resort of Rhodesia". Of course what that meant in the sardonic language of doctors was that the place was rife with typhoid and malaria, indeed later one could almost differentiate them from the expression on the patient's face. As doctors we never bothered to take the anti-malarial tablets and I don't think John did either. He would typically remark in a letter to me later;

"The basket-man who bears the pills. That never wear away our ills". As young doctors we would harangue him over this with great glee. He loved an argument. We hit it off right away and after a few visits I saw that John having looked for somewhere at the end of the earth was now plagued by more visitors than if he stayed at Buckfast Abbey. He seemed ebullient and content, there was not an ounce of religiosity in him. Sometimes we would shin up a baobab tree and sing hymns much to the astonished delight of the lepers. Being agnostic at that time we had long discussions on evolution, God, and uncle Tom Cobley but though fun we resolved little. The Jacaranda trees were in bloom and the whole atmosphere had a Galilean ambience. The landscape of rock sand and scrub must be similar to the Holy Land and the appearance of an angel would have settled the argument.

The lepers and John were as one and he was totally immersed in their well-being. Of course materially they had nothing and neither did John. This also made a unique bond for I realised later that their only possession was their feeling and suffering i.e. their souls. John was there for them.

He was fun and very far from the conception of a devoted missionary that one imagined.

We continued our debates by letter later and he

would be advising me as here;

*"For subject of your deep research, why not  
Take Breath-too long neglected and forgot;  
Myself I'd back no heresy, and yet  
I think our Breath is God whom we forget.  
We call him Oxygen and Nitrogen  
And one part other gases when we deem  
We scientists know everything, and then  
Into thin air goes Fact: so make your theme  
Untheological as well you may  
But prove that Breath is God, in some odd way."*

If I had succeeded, the Nobel Prize would not have been enough! Naturally I didn't follow his advice.

My acquaintance with John was short and we corresponded for a few years after I left Rhodesia. He gave advice on reading e.g. Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* which I never did read. His letters were a delight, always in verse, he knew no other way. I think he flattered his correspondents. Here's an example 3rd of June 1972;

*"Dear Wayne, your letter was profound;  
With wisdom hidden to abound  
By Love Divine you surely are  
And Medicine prevents no bar  
In you to heavensent respect  
Even for bods you may dissect."*

I expect others received these unanswerable generousities. Still this is not the place to go into his poetry or psychology. I remember his kindness and smiling countenance. Though we are torn between the bleakness of 'King Lear' and the reanimation of the statue in 'The Winters Tale', he knew his 'Swan of Avon' backwards. The poetic drama continues in the minds of our great poets now, and the nightmare of the 20th century has only sharpened our cosmological search. John by his poetry, his life and death has made a unique contribution. Those of us who knew him feel his lasting effect "for these are our metamorphoses, these are our myths."

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*We are always delighted to hear from people who personally knew and remember John Bradburne, especially to have their memories in writing so that the material can be added to the archive towards John's Cause for Beatification.*