

John Bee's buzz on bees

A message for our present world

John Bradburne was born in the days of the resurrection of honeybees in England, nearly destroyed all over the country by acarine disease and saved mainly by Brother Adam, a lay monk of Buckfast Abbey. But his first personal contact with the buzzing family, as recorded by him, happens only in 1945, in India, finding a Railway Station office filled with hornets, he asks Station Master if he is not afraid to get this answer : " There is no need to fuss, we do not speak to them nor they to us... We trust them, they'll never do us ill".

After his return to England, John meets at Buckfast Abbey, and helps a little, Brother Adam. He learns from him here basic knowledge about bees¹. In 1948, once he has become a Catholic and has been stricken by the poetic muse, he copies out a notebook of hymns and poems from various authors for his friend John Dove, several mentioning bees : Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Shelley's *Hymn of Pan*, Yeats's *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*². The next year, while still at Buckfast Abbey, one of his first poems tells of bees, in a characteristic half-comic, half serious tone:

In a pub, I was told that a message had come,
Marked "Urgent! From all Abbey bees" ...
'Twas as follows: "Dear Bard, tho' we sing not, but hum,
Our life is not given to ease.
If you look in the Sanctuary, you will observe
There burns near the Altar a flame:
'Tis fed by a pillar of flowers and herbs -
A wax candle - our title to fame!

A song to Our Lady of Buckfast for the resurrection and ascension of Our Lord

Later on, when he stays in Italy, it is at Candlemas 1953 - a feast traditionally associated with beeswax candles - that he embarks on his mystical marriage with Our Lady.

John will find again bees once in Rhodesia, where the Motopo caves drawings bear evidence of a ten thousand years old alliance between bees and men, and at a moment when honey production is on the verge to boom (from five tons in 1963 to one hundred three years later). At Chivhu mission, he learns closeness with beedom :

Busy bees may hum
Round the barrel where I dwell
Posthorn, 01/1963

The decisive meeting takes place in 1966, the day when Arthur and Kit Law drop at Silveira House. Father Dove is absent, but John welcomes them and as soon as he understands the goal of their visit - they are looking for a place to put their hive -, he bursts out with enthusiasm. Soon the hive is set up, the bees "keep the estate", and the three of them have become friends. Arthur will come regularly to take care of his hive, and John will assist him. Next step occurs in 1967, when John, ill at ease with constant visitors disturbing his solitude, starts to pray for a swarm to come and protect him from unwanted visits. And, on July 25th, he may write to his mother: "For the last four or five days I have been fairly preoccupied with bees: off and on during the last few months odd bees, or in twos and threes,

have been visiting my cell, where I live in the day and do my typing and have my meals; [...] At the moment of typing this there must be fifty to seventy bees buzzing all around my cell, and they seem to consider me as Mine Host, for they have not so far stung me at all, for which glory be to God and thanks! I think that bees are very deep pschycologists and if one is not at all aggressive towards them, neither will they be bees aggressive". On August 3rd the situation has developed: "The bees came in force about lunch time and had a good feed of fruit juice till at least 4.30; happily they all flew away before sundown, whereas on several evenings some of them missed the bus and spent a very dreary night in my room which they hated because it is not their hive - YET!". But soon it will be their hive ! Under the table, with John legs as buffer for the entrance. His friends react differently to this novelty. John Dove is scared at first, then gets used to it. Heather Benoy could not stand to enter the room and the two friends spoke together from either side of the door.

The bees will stay up to Christmas, then will disappear. When John returns from Holy Land, the following year, the flow of visitors pulls him once more to pray for bees to come. He is already discussing his departure to Mtemwa when, on April 29th, 1969, the bees return to his cell and he writes to Pep Muspratt-Williams:

There must be fifty thousand bees at hand³
And they are settling down inside a hive
Two feet from where I'm typing this, - all planned
By God I trust it is (I'm still alive!).

He puts up a hive under the table, then leaves for St Patrick Cottage where he is doing night watch. When, at 3 a.m. the same night, he returns to Silveira House,

Within my cell a low but slowly growing hum
Tells me why I have come, to be betimes ere dawn.
Barely two feet from where I tap and type this rune
There is a hive wherein are bees whose lowly tune
Close to the floor is opening the door to dawn:
They must to me and I to them become immune.

Maybe for longer, 30/04/1969

He writes to his mother on May 25th : "It seems my mission is to bees only, to tell them that we men want to forget their stings and our own fear and avarice (which gives us guilty consciences) and to be friends with bees and the rest of creation.. Of course my confidence could be profoundly shaken in a very short while!". In July, Colin Carr, a teacher, goes up to Silveira House to say goodbye to him and finds the bees once he is already in the room. When he leaves, it strikes him that "a miracle had taken place in that room; I had sat there with John and thousands of bees in a small space, and hadn't been the slightest bit afraid. I had been at least temporarily a resident in the peaceable kingdom where the wolf lies down with the lamb".

Mtemwa will quickly appear for John a "Paradise for bees", and for poetry about them. They are everywhere near him, in the trees, especially the bluegums, and sometimes enter the old butchery where he lives. In March 1970 he will gaze at bees "landing on the moon" – in fact a photograph he has put on a box. But they will prefer outdoor places to live in. In September the same year, Shirley James, of the Mtemwa Committee, is arriving in Jacaranda avenue when she catches sight of a nimbed John advancing towards her : his halo is composed of hundreds

of bees all around his head. In August 1972, he tries to follow their example to restrain from alcoholic beverages. In 1973, he transforms his box for poems in a potential hive, with no great success, but never mind:

No bees within my hive but God be praised
They wax the Candles Tall for Jesus raised !
Ave, Saint Anne, 26/07/1973

Up to his last year, he will write about bees and beedom and go on signing *John Bee* or *John Bee (drone)* ⁴.

A Summa poetica

The corpus of John's poems (and letters) devoted to or alluding to beedom is important – several hundred lines⁵ - and he must be the most prolific poet on bees in XXth century England. Deeply rooted as well as well as frankly original, it belongs to a poetical tradition originated in Virgil⁶ and carried over centuries, through Shakespeare's *Henry V* and *Tempest* (John quotes eleven times the line of Ariel song "Where the bee sucks, there suck I") or Tennyson ("The buzzing of innumerable bees"/ Is someone else's memorable line / But I may make it somewhat also mine / By sharing with a swarm my cell at ease", writes John in 1969 ⁷). Even if fancy and wordplays are not absent from this poetical corpus⁸, sheer observations and reflections are its main qualities. John could "publish a book on the habits of bees" from what he watches, from his privileged vantage point, of bees behaviour, feeding or way of communicating, A entomologist could discuss these observations which fill poems and letters and John's empathy method, and distinguish between serious observations and poetical fancies (e.g. when he is speaking of the "smile of bees), but his statements are usually well observed – the cleaning business at awakening, the night buzz ("The night-sound of a hive is like the fall / Of fairy raindrops on the tops of time / Or it is like the breeze in pine-trees tall /Or else like ocean's call to distant clime" – 1973), or a fierce battle between bees and ants (described in *Nascent Apiary* -1973) ⁹.

A Summa religiosa

Above those poetic and objective qualities, John's observations and reflections on bees are ordered to a higher level, the contemplation of God and of the Queen of bees and men by the soul (for St Bernard, the bee is a "picture" of human soul and for St Francis de Sales its "symbol). For him, we have to learn spiritual lessons from beedom :

Their presence is to me the voice of God.
Insistence of a bee exceeding near
(So it would seem) to stinging nose or ear
Bids me search conscience as at Yahweh's nod! [...]
A hive of bees residing in one's room
Sweeps ceaselessly the soul - a wholesome broom
The buzzing of innumerable bees, June 1969

Know more of bees, grow to know more of God;
The keenest, most compact community
On earth is beedom...
A Ballade of a True Commonwealth, April 1975

His religious reflections on bees are not so much biblical¹⁰ than hagiographical. He writes in a May 1969 letter :

First may I say that honey-bees
Live lives like lives of saints, -
Their only joy and only ease
With heart that never faints
(One Heart, the Hive's)

Is to ensure, with pure intent, it thrives.

Several saints linked with bees could be quoted here¹¹, but John roots his care and love of them mainly in the Franciscan Tradition. In his great poem on St Francis and St Anthony, he writes about the first one :

From ease he sped and led God's glees: like
bees to him they swarmed!

Il Poverello, 03/10/1978

St Francis ordered honey and wine to be set out for the bees (Celano, II, 165) : John leaves friends during a common walk because he remembers he has to give water to his winged friends. St Francis bowl becomes a hive in his cell (Celano II, 128) : John's table the same. And even if John mocks himself as being a drone, he is anxious not to fall under St Francis condemnation of the "lazy and sterile hornet" (Perugia Legend, 62).

But John, who owes his discovery and love for bees to a Benedictine Abbey, links them also with monastic life, more precisely with the kind he longs to live, associating community and solitude :

I think these bees are cenobites, and yet
Meseems that each a solitary dwells [...]
These bees are larger than the worker-kind,
Perhaps to contemplation is their call,
*Of a Sunday in Lent 22/02/1970*¹²

Bees are for John occasions for deep theological reflections. In the sophisticated *Quis ut Deus* (1971), he knits together theology, mariology, ecclesiology and theological anthropology with a sincere and catching admiration for bees :

A hive of bees is like one perfect being,
A colony of bees is like to God,
Their sound is compound and their airy seeing
Waits on the Queen whose will's their fairy rod;
To every hive its Queen is heart and mind
That pulses and directs amidst the whole
Whence more and more analogy I find
Bringing up bees from earth to heaven's soul;
A hive is Godlike in its unity,
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 under¹³.

Our Lady is quite often at the center of John's meditation on bees, as shown by a few of her titles in his poems : "Queen of birds and bees", "Queen of bees and of

birds and of beeches”, “Queen of elves, bees and the Paschal-Candle”. And he is, although a drone, his minstrel :

Myself being drone I thank Mary my Queen
And Queen of the hive that alive I am seen!
Heyday freedom, 30/04/1969

The theological and spiritual lessons taught by bees to John are caught from observation of their daily life, e.g. the above mentioned battle with ants :

For men and bees and countless other features
Life is a warfare due to Adam's Fall
Not we alone must own dethronement's features,
Through us affected is creation all | ...]
Even though Jesus has reopened bliss
The kiss it spelt is not yet felt as such; [...]
Brave bees, bespeak my meditation fast
Lest contemplation's light be overcast.
Nascent Apiary 21/07/1973

He sees also in their short life and return to God a spiritual teaching :

Trouble and bubble boom about a bee
But cast no gloom upon its destiny
Of working for the common weal... Wheel ME
To stingless Realm: as near as clear blue sky.
A Ballade of a True Commonwealth, 11/04/1975

John is convinced that he has been tested and chosen for a mission : “It seems my mission is to bees only, to tell them that we men want to forget their stings and our own fear and avarice (which gives us guilty consciences) and to be friends with bees and the rest of creation. Of course my confidence could be profoundly shaken in a very short while!” (Letter, 28/5/1969)¹⁴. And he has also the mission to show that establishing a real friendship with bees is possible:

... well
Apparent it seems that a mutual joy
Is shared by these bees and this idiot boy
Maybe matter for a morning, 29/04/1969

A special reason for his wonder at bees is that they provide Easter candle. He is fond of the Exultet which exalts their role as symbolical both of Incarnation and of Resurrection, stressing the importance of Virgin Mary¹⁵ :

To us, lest the world think bees wanting in praise
The Lord gives this work for a sign;
And while others sing canticles marking the Phase,
We cause His memorial to Shine!"
A song to Our Lady of Buckfast for the resurrection and ascension of Our Lord, 1949

That candle was made by the labour of bees,
No scandal's the Virgin it entered with ease
For she is the Church, the Mystical Body
Is Holy the Spirit, is Holy the Fire, 1969

John Bee's buzz on bees and love of them could seem to be only one of his many eccentricities, but they are in fact of major importance. Not only are bees strongly associated with him for a lot of people, especially the ones who experimented his intercession, not only is he the most important English bee-poet of the XXth century, and a beautiful example of the present relevance of Franciscan-inspired symbolic theology for today, but his bee-poetry may help us to fight one of the greatest present environmental challenges for our humanity. *To bee or not to bee*, the joke is not John's, but could have been, and it is much more than a joke, a question of survival for all of us, as shown by the sentence attributed to Albert Einstein : "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years of life left"¹⁶. By his spiritual friendship with bees, John shows us the way of a true Christian ecology, and of the only real environmentalist revolution, the one of universal Love :

Animals, reptiles, insects, birds and bees
 Are each and all as aspects of God's love...
 Insects are those last mentioned, but with ease
 That honourable mention moves above
 In swarms far more symbolic than the dove
 Of membership in Christ whose Christendom
 Should work combined for good, divine to prove
 Through woe and weal: Om mani padme hum.
A Ballade of a Prayerlike Weal , 28/02/1979

¹ : "They are by nature extraordinarily undemanding and accommodating... It is up to us to understand her ways and adjust ourselves to her truly marvelous nature, not attempting the impossible of "mastering" her, but rather doing all we can to serve her needs" (Brother Adam).

² Yeats ideal looks prophetic as far as John is concerned :

... a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
 Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
 And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

³ In 2007, a Bulawayo resident sees his kitchen and roof invaded by 100 000 bees; he will live with them more than two years before Fire Brigade drives them away.

⁴ After his death, bees will be often seen on his grave, and a lot of unusual or extraordinary events linked with them will happen, including wild African bees coming to the aid of a terrified family about to be assaulted by bandits when they pray to his intercession and the story of Judy told by Father Dove in *Strange Vagabond of God*, p. 180-1.

⁵ Seventeen major poems on bees have been published by David Crystal in *Birds, Bees and Beasts*, JBMS, Leomintser, 2007. The complete corpus, also prepared by David Crystal, may be found on <http://www.johnbradburnepoems.com>.

Other XXth century poets on bees in English language include Silvia Plath (whose father wrote a reference book on bumble bees) and her five poems of the *Bee cycle* written in 1962 in London, and Carol Duffy, the present Poet Laureate, who has written in 2009 *Virgil's Bees* and published in 2011 *The Bees*. Her perspective on poetry considered as "secular prayer" is far away from John.

⁶ The great Latin poet devoted the last part of *Georgics* to bees. John makes several references to it in his poems. Several of the themes he develops finds their source in Virgil : bees are divine, sing divine melodies, they have a virginal conception and are chaste all their life, they drink only water, they constitute a perfect society, they are faithful subjects of one unique Sovereign, they require service and also love, they are worth our admiration and contemplation, they return to God. Most of those assertions may be found also in traditional folklore of Southern Africa (cf. T. J.

Haarhoff, *The Bees of Virgil, Greece & Rome*, Oct 1960, pp. 155-70. These are also the common qualification of bees in medieval symbolism.

⁷ In fact : “And murmuring of innumerable bees”, in *Come Down O Maid*.

⁸ E.g. the *Envoi* of his *Ballade of a Heyday Beedom* (1973)

Prince, honey be to him thinks no bad thing
Of bees but sees them good and God's the swarm,
Even if drones intone "God shave the King"
Themselves as guests: your welcome should be
warm.

⁹It would be interesting to compare John texts with Materlinck *The Life of the Bee*. The Belgian poet, with twenty years of experience, writes as a beekeeper who loves bees when John writes as their loyal friend (see <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4511/pg4511.html>).

¹⁰ In Old Testament, the bee (“little amongst them that fly, but her fruit is the chief of sweet”, Si 11, 3) is seen mainly for her honey, not for herself, and she is absent from the New Testament.

¹¹ St Ambrose, St Rita, St Paulin de Nole..., and, in England, St Aldhelm, author of numerous riddles on bees.

¹² Doing this, John is following a long tradition. It starts with the Fathers of the Desert (“The bee wherever it is does make her honey, so does the monk the work of God ”) and the story of St Modomnoc bringing both monasticism and beekeeping in Ireland, and goes on up to present time (see the chapter on bees in Luke Bell, *A deep and subtle joy, life at Quarr Abbey*, 2006).

¹³ This poem may be read also as a critic of Mandeville’s *Fable of Bees*, maybe the most celebrated text on beedom in English literature. For Mandeville, bees show that private vices are public benefits. John contradicts him and returns to the lesson of medieval Bestiaries : “[in bees] There is no dereliction of duty, because there is natural affection. There is a safe watch, because here is free choice” (Alnwick Bestiary).

¹⁴ It is pleasant to notice that the ‘World record’ of bees stings for a human, 2443, was ‘established’ in Rhodesia the year John arrived in the Colony, by Johannes Relleke (Guinness Book of Records)

¹⁵ For it is fed by the melting wax,
Which the mother bee brought forth
To make this precious candle (Exsultet).

Based on the assonance between *caro* (flesh) and *cera* (wax), the mediaeval symbolism developed the triple analogy wax/flesh, wick/soul and flame/divinity; the wax is also a evident symbol of Our Lady as it is produced by the virgin queen of Bees.

¹⁶ No more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more men. Scientists speak rather of a long agony for humankind if bees disappear (see Alison Benjamin, Brian McCallum, *World Without Bees*, 2009). It may be interesting to notice that in January 1968, just when John finished his first main experience with bees, the Journal of Rhodesian Beekeepers, *The Bee Line*, published an article on this question : "Bees depend on blossoms for nectar and pollen, - their very existence – plants existence depends on pollination from bees, and we human depend on both of them..." ! It was signed by an anonymous “The Drone” !