

Hopkins and Bradburne

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If Gerard Manley Hopkins is the preeminent Catholic poet of the 19th century, then John Bradburne is his equivalent in the 20th. My task, over the past twenty years, has been somewhat analogous to that of Robert Bridges publishing a first collected edition of Hopkins' poems 29 years after his death. A similar period elapsed before the first collected edition of Bradburne's poems appeared, online.

It had to be online, because of the scale of the enterprise. No conventional publisher could possibly handle him. Bradburne turns out to be the most prolific poet the English language has ever had. That is quite a claim, but it is easily justified. If we define prolificness by number of poetic lines, then among the front runners are Wordsworth, with about 54,000 lines, and Shakespeare (combining the poetic lines in the plays with the poems) with just under 88,000. Bradburne produced 170,000 lines - at least, for not everything he wrote has yet been found. His longest manuscript is over 10,800 lines. That's just a little longer than Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Of course quantity isn't everything, as Hopkins' 3000 lines or so brilliantly illustrate. Someone might write thousands of lines of absolute rubbish. And certainly, from time to time, when Bradburne was feeling flippant or had had a drink or three, he wrote doggerel. Sometimes his writing is banal and cliched. Sometimes he is verbose and repetitive. But most of his poems are none of these things. And the parallels to Hopkins are striking.

Biographical background

First, a brief Bradburne bio. He was born in Cumbria in 1921, the son of an Anglican clergyman. After secondary school in Norfolk, he joined the army in 1939, and served in Malaya and Burma, before being invalided home. Some sort of Pauline experience in Malaya turned him from adventurer into pilgrim. He became a Catholic in 1947 when staying at Buckfast Abbey. After some months with the Carthusians, he felt the urge to travel, and for 16 years wandered between England, Italy, and the Middle

East, trying out various religious vocations, but never staying very long at any. Eventually he became a lay member of the Third Order of St Francis, obeying its rule, and singing the daily office of Our Lady. He lived its hours, rising at dawn for Matins and ending the day with Vespers and Compline.

Dissatisfied with his random peregrinations, he wrote to his lifelong Jesuit friend Father John Dove in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe now) asking ‘Is there a cave in Africa where I can pray?’ He arrived there in 1962, became caretaker of a Jesuit centre in Salisbury (Harare), and in 1969 was appointed warden of the leprosy settlement at Mtemwa, where he remained until his death. The single-minded loving care he gave his patients eventually brought him into conflict with the management committee, and he was sacked. But he refused to leave them, living in a prefab tin hut, without water and sanitation, just outside the village, and continuing to help them as much as he could. Then, during the Zimbabwean civil war, his efforts to prevent the exploitation of the lepers made him suspect. He was abducted by guerrillas, and on 5 September 1979 he was shot.

Soon after his arrival in Rhodesia, in 1962, he had confided to a Franciscan priest that he had three wishes: to serve lepers, to die a martyr, and to be buried in the habit of St Francis. His first two wishes had evidently been granted. As for the third, at his Requiem Mass, eye-witnesses saw three drops of blood fall from the bottom of the coffin, forming a little pool on the ground. The coffin was re-opened, but no sign of blood was found. However, it was noticed that he had been buried in a shirt. It was replaced by the Franciscan habit.

Since his death, many unusual events have been reported in relation to his name. His monument at Mtemwa is now a place of pilgrimage, a local Fatima, and there is a growing movement in support of his cause for sainthood. Around 15,000 pilgrims visited Mtemwa for the twentieth anniversary of his death in 1999, and they continue to do so, even in the currently difficult times in Zimbabwe. Each month, some 300-400 pilgrims make their way to the village. The John Bradburne Memorial Society continues to raise funds to support the work there - fewer lepers today, but many disabled and destitute people, both adults and children.

Parallels

The parallels between Bradburne and Hopkins are striking. They each began as Anglicans, then converted - Hopkins when he was 22, Bradburne at 26. Each had an

awkward correspondence with his father about the conversion. Hopkins became a Jesuit; Bradburne was influenced throughout his life by John Dove, and several of his poems are about or to Jesuits. Hopkins and Bradburne both burnt their early poetry - Hopkins once, Bradburne several times, until he realized that there was no point: in a letter to a friend in 1977 he writes:

I often long to burn all 1000 pages and their duplicates, but still they remain. I have found in the past that destroying everything for the sake of simplicity leads inevitably to building up twice as much clobber again as soon as possible.

Both had periods of illness and depression. Both kept diaries for a while. Both were dissatisfied with their poetic output. Both were virtually unrecognized as poets throughout their lives, except by some close friends, and unpublished. In 1974, Bradburne glumly ended a poem with the lines:

My age is fifty-three, my lines are many
And almost all of them not read by any.

There are striking parallels in the subject-matter of their writing, over and above their religious convictions. Both are passionate nature poets, fascinated with the inscape of the created world, and aware of the way everything is 'charged with God'. Corresponding to Hopkins' 'Spring', here is Bradburne's 'Spring in the Air':

The Thought of God is written in the air,
Weather and wind express Him with His Word,
Behold the hills so high above low care
And hark to Yahweh's Voice in larksong heard;
The Thought of God is God The Father good,
The Word of God expresses what God thinks,
The Voice of God wings vibrant in the wood
Singing, or in our hearts with silence links;
These Three are Love Begetting, Love Begotten
And Love Proceeding as The Voice of both,

Love is our God and King and nothing loth
To sink into the silence, unforgotten:

and then, to end, a typical Bradburnian dig:

Switch off that Radio, it rots the scene,
Besots our souls that Television Screen!

Hopkins and Bradburne share favourite vocabulary. Take the famous 'Glory be to God for dappled things' in 'Pied Beauty'. Hopkins uses the word eight more times ('dappled-with-damson west', 'dappled with dew', 'dapple-dawn-drawn', 'drop-of-blood-and-foam-dapple', 'dapple-eared lily', 'her dapple is at an end', 'The dappled die-away / Cheek', and in the verb 'new-dapple'). Bradburne uses it 19 times, collocating it especially with water and its inhabitants ('dappled shallows / pools / waters / river / stream / flow / lily-pond / trout / shelf (of a river)'), but also landscape ('dappled garden / farms') and even some abstract nouns ('dappled charm / glances / nuance'). Hopkins didn't seem to go in much for the prefix 'be-' (apart from in 'bespoken' and 'bereft'), but I think he would have approved of Bradburne's 'bedappled' in 'Halcyon Daze':

Extreme is the peace where the willow-wren sings,
On shallows bedappled haunt halcyon wings.

Both men recognized that their poetry was in some way strange. 'No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness', said Hopkins. Bradburne calls himself or his work 'odd' dozens of times, as in this stanza from 'A Ballade of a Glowing Recluse':

I knew that noone would approve my mile
On mile of punning and my stunning glee
In play on words... such airy-fairy style
Befits but oddbod, bard and byrd and (be
Never too certain of yourself) a free
Abandonment to Muse the way she'll come

All over someone precious, peacefully,
Breathing a mild "Om mani padme hum"...

There are major similarities in the use of specific stylistic features. If there were to be a competition between Hopkins and Bradburne for the use of alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme, I'm not sure who would win. On the one hand we have in 'Inversnaid':

Degged with dew, dappled with dew

or, in 'The Golden Echo':

loose locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace

On the other hand we have in Bradburne's 'Cradlesong':

Rely upon our Lady in abandonment as belle
As bids her babbling babes and bards be birds that burble 'El'.

or the opening lines of 'Brewing':

First Eve fell fast for fallen find's false fable,
Foul weather followed for us folk forlorn...

Both men take liberties with syntax. Both are great neologizers. Alongside Hopkins' 'unchilding' and 'undenizeden' we find Bradburne's 'unthorncrownd' and 'unbefeminined'; or compare Hopkins' 'wind-wandering ... bank' and Bradburne's 'wanderwilling Abraham'. They are both great rhymers, with at times daring Byronic couplets. Here is Hopkins in 'Hurrahing in Harvest':

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heaven to glean our Saviour;
And eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And here is Bradburne, in a Letter to a benefactor, Lady Crosthwaite Eyre:

Castles in Spain than castles in Austria
May be more vain but they never are costlier!

Bradburne summarizes his attitude towards wordplay and rhyme in a couplet in 'Metaphysics on Holiday':

No thought so sublime but by rhyme is improved,
No court but in time may by laughter be moved.

The laughter element is crucial. He writes poems punning in an Irish accent, or a West Country one, or a German one, or role-plays being drunk. He switches between English, Latin and French, often punning between them. I don't think any other poet has made so many puns. Here is just one example, in 'Elegi abjectus esse':

Psalm on, ye salmon, leap where greenwood bough
Touches the limpid thrilling water!

But virtually every poem has something like this. Why pun so much? His answer is simple. God loves it:

... as free
As Truth can be with play on words,
Ripe puns and hidden names
Yield joy to Him, and hymning birds
Unbury merry claims. ('Elastic Corollary cum Gymnastic Symposium')

Influences

The parallels are many, but is there evidence of a specific influence of Hopkins on Bradburne? Bradburne nowhere in his letters refers to Hopkins, though he does talk of other writers who influenced him; but read him he certainly did. There is an explicit reference in a title: the poem 'To Our Hope' is glossed '(after Hopkins)':

Lady of grace, Mother of all the living,
Thine's to embrace divinely as thy Lord
The whole round rolling globe which Christ is giving
More and still more to thee for sweet accord;
In naught created is there wrought attraction
That, of itself, is harmful or impure,
Provided sided with that liquefaction
Active, creative, of the King our Cure;
Therefore, Fair Lady, creatures Mothering
Reform us in our senses by His power
So that we feel thee, stealing and appealing
Over us; fold us in, great David's tower!
Love is our liking, Lady, thine is fair,
The whole round globe thou robest, like the air!

There are several echoes here of 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe', such as 'mothering', and the final couplet, echoing lines 38-9:

She, wild web, wondrous robe,
Mantles the guilty globe...

Hopkins also gets a punning mention in 'Anthologized':

'Deutschland' wrecks
Only to Resurrection, manly walks
Hopping to kindle kindred sprites the decks
Brave Gerard!

And in 'De libertate', Bradburne half-remembers other lines from 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe':

A Lady compared to the air that we breathe
Is a garland which Hopkins did manlily wreathe

Round the head and the heart of the Mother of God
And in all I recall but three lines at her nod.

World-mothering air and air wild as thou art
Enfolds and enisles at Immaculate heart
Abandon supreme and the stream of the Life
Not other than thine is the wine of my Wife.

Bradburne loves the verb 'enisle', using it over 50 times in his poems.

Differences

The parallels between the two poets are striking, but of course there are important differences. Bradburne is a traditionalist when it comes to poetic form and rhythm. He had a penchant for ballads, with their regular structure of three 8-line stanzas followed by a 4-line envoi, each stanza with the same final line. He wrote over 700 of these. And he pays far more attention to the sonnet form, with over a thousand sonnets in the database. There is little in Bradburne that resembles sprung rhythm, though there are at times strong similarities in his metre. As an example, take the insistent four-beat features of 'Inversnaid':

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down...
...
Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through...

Compare this now with the galloping rhythms of Bradburne's 'Oculi Semper ad Dominum', which begins with a quotation from Virgil: *Quadru pedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum* ('the hoofs of the steeds on the ground with a four-footed trampling'):

Wild they are, and we thunder afar -
Over the hills and under the star,
Into the dales and across the dales,

Over the mountains of England and Wales,
Rockets are past and now at the last
We fly with the thunderbolts Christ has cast.

Outpouring

170,000 lines. 'My life seems made of words', he says, in a letter to his mother. He just can't stop writing. He never wants to end a poem, as he says at one point (from '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.

When he writes letters to his relatives and friends, he prefers to write them in verse, though often with an apologia, as in this letter to his mother (23 June 1967):

If ever it annoys you that I write in verse
Please say so, though I warn you that my prose is worse!
'The art of pleasing is in being pleased' once said
Someone, possibly Hazlitt, (I am sparsely read).

Much pleases me to write in rhyme my letters, which,
Were I to pen in prose, would to a labour switch:
In love of writing rhymes all labour's wholly lost
And you are spared the price of reading drudge's cost.

The letters are an extraordinary mix of domestic trivia and profound theology. At one point we get couplets like this (letter to his mother, 3 August 1967):

A pair of shorts for Christmas would be fine:
Waist about thirty, inside leg say nine.

At another we get a sudden switch from banal content to deep theological reflection
(letter to his mother, 7 October 1973):

Dearest Mother, many thanks for your last letter.
Whenever in the least demoralized
Amidst habitual and daily round
I climb my granite mountain middle-sized
And find that joys spring up while woes are drowned;
It is a simple effort to attain
And run around the summit of the mount,
Now in October waiting for the rain
Delights it as in desert might a fount;
Upon this day I've had free absolution,
Upon this day a baby was baptized
In hid Mootamewa, - soon I'll have ablution
Daily atop my mountain middle-sized:
I've sung a rondo sprung upon my ground,
Grow evermore more young, Amour, abound!

Love is the Triune substance of the Lord,
Begetting and Begotten He proceeds
Being Himself perfection of accord
From all eternity, before time's deeds;
Before all doing, Love is Thought Divine
And Thought's Divine fulfilling in the Word
And Voice the Vehicle of being heard
By Him Himself rejoicing and ashine;
He has no need of visible creation
Or of creation none on earth may see
But, in His endless heavenly elation
At Being in Love, He amplifies His glee:
As analogical as it is true,
Love is like one who longs to share a view.

What could be more of a contrast than a reference to his daily toileting followed by an insightful exposition of the Trinity?

Bradburne's poems show someone who was deeply spiritual yet endearingly human. Works of considerable theological and devotional insight and striking descriptions of nature sit alongside the mundane realities of everyday life and the poverty and disease with which he routinely had to deal. He is no romantic. I am quite sure Wordsworth must have been from time to time constipated, but I don't recall him ever writing a poem about it. Bradburne does. And he does not shirk from conferring poetic immortality on his lepers. He describes their sores in vivid detail, and writes moving descriptive verses on all eighty of them.

Is this stylistic juxtaposition a strength or a weakness? Especially in his longer poems, Bradburne is very much a stream-of-consciousness poet. He writes what comes into his head, and does not revise, so his thought moves erratically in all directions. If he is in the middle of a poem, and the need to look after a leper calls him away from his typewriter, when he returns he often continues his poem incorporating aspects of what he has just been involved with, regardless of what he had been talking about before. The longest poems lack structural and semantic unity, as a result. The length of many of the shorter ones are constrained by such elementary factors as the availability of space on a page. Paper being in very limited supply, he uses every centimetre of it. If he finishes a poem and it is a few lines short of a page, he will compose another poem to fit the space, to ensure that nothing is wasted. That's why we find so many two and four-line poems in his oeuvre. There are poems written in school exercise books, in tiny notebooks, on scraps of torn paper, and in his reading matter - in the front or back inside covers of his books, or crammed into a space between chapters. I am not literary critic enough to know how best to evaluate this sort of constraint. And a literary critical evaluation of Bradburne remains to be done, for anyone who has the stomach for it. 170,000 lines!

Inspiration

Whence came this extraordinary poetic fluency? He several times alludes to the inspiration he received from Mary, as in this extract from 'Ut Unum Sint':

Good patient people, this my verse,

Such as it strains through murky me,
Would yet have been a great deal worse
Save for my Mother Blest, Marie -

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 your hand, I'll guide your pen,
And we will write about the love God has for men.'

And we have written, she and I,
For seven years - from curlew's cry
(Our range has been) to Seraph song;
With cuckoo singing all along!

And in 'If only I had the time' he refers to Mary in effect dictating to him:.

We never stop to wonder what to say,
The impetus of our committing Muse
Imprisons us in fairy-spells that sway
Whichever rhyme and rhythm she may choose;
Mistressed amidst this cosmic influence
We utterly abandon to her power
The whole expression of our song and dance
Which merges with the sunshine and the shower;

Blest are the seasons while this Nurserymaid
Aids and abets us and directs our themes
And she is very gracefully arrayed
To nurse our verses, none the worse for dreams:
Without two banks what stream will reach the ocean?
Between both rhyme and metre fleet's our motion.

Hopkins calls Mary 'Rosa Mystica'; Bradburne 'Mystical Rose'. Both wrote poems 'Ad Mariam'. But Mary is far more central to Bradburne's thought than she is to Hopkins - over 750 poems have Mary as a main theme. Other specifically Bradburnian themes are the Trinity and what today we would call an ecumenical outlook, with the continuities between Christianity and Judaism strongly expressed.

It is difficult to resist the view that something very special was happening here. Bradburne sometimes appends times-of-day to his writing, so that we know when a poem started and when it was finished. 'The Anathema of Melancholly' is a huge 6471-line composition, which he says was written in 'a fortnight' - an average of 462 lines a day. When writing continuously, he produced just under a line a minute. I defy anyone to produce a perfect sonnet on a thoughtful topic, with striking imagery, appropriate metrical structure, copious alliteration, assonance, and word-play, and an acrostic thrown in to boot, written at that rate. 'Of Angels and of Birds' is an example:

Angels are not imaginary things,
Needs must thereon imaginative thought
Go gadding gaily with its playful wings,
Even abet and aid they in such sport!
Lo and behold, those Arches biblical
Standing as Angels principally three
Are Michael, Gabriel and Raphael
Nor may they fail to walk with you and me;
Divine I oft, aloft amongst the birds,
Becalming glimpses of angelic charm,
In owls by moonlight with their hooting words
Read 'Holy' thrice, trisagion's their psalm:
Discern the quickness, brightness and precision,

Sight of the birds is bard's delightful vision!

Discoveries

170,000 lines. And an unknown number of thousands burnt. And an unknown number more yet to be discovered. For Bradburne wrote verse letters to all kinds of people, often saying thank you for gifts to Mtemwa, and who knows how many of these poems are lying undiscovered in attic drawers around the world. I keep thinking I have completed the database, and someone then sends me in a new batch. I have added 80 new poems to the database this year alone.

And it all started with a coincidence. When my wife and I returned to Holyhead to live, in the mid-80s, we bought the house belonging to the parents of an old school-friend. This friend visited us one day, to see the old family home, and as he was leaving he pulled a letter out of his wallet and asked me whether I had ever seen anything like it. It was a letter in verse, from John Bradburne. It transpired that my friend had fallen ill on a trip through Africa in the 1960s, and had been cared for by Bradburne, and they had kept in touch. I then said one of the silliest things I have ever said in my life. I asked my friend 'Is there any more like this?' He put me in touch with John Bradburne's niece, who runs the Memorial Society, and a few weeks later a suitcaseful of poems arrived at the house. I am reminded of Robert Bridges' plaint, in his introductory verse to Hopkins' collected poems: 'And thy lov'd legacy, Gerard, hath lain / Coy in my home'. They stayed coy in my house too, for a while.

But the Internet stops you being coy. It is all up there now, at <www.johnbradburnepoems.com>. And I have edited five slim volumes of his work, available from the Memorial Society at <<http://www.johnbradburne.com/shop.php>>. There is also a biography written by John Dove, and a CD of Bradburne reading some of his poems (into a tape recorder - oh for such a facility for Hopkins!). I think we are going to hear a great deal more of John Bradburne, especially as his cause proceeds. And I have no doubt that, as his work is probed more deeply than a simple linguist can do, from literary and religious perspectives, we will discover further illuminating continuities between him and Hopkins.