In the cause of God's vagabond

John Bradbourne, the murdered missionary, is the most prolific poet in the English language. Sharing his work online has been a rollercoaster.

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You've been hacked." It's the message no internet user wants to hear. In my case, the message came at the end of February this year from French spiritual writer Didier Rance, who wanted to check a reference on the John Bradbourne poetry website. He typed in www.johnbradbournepoems.com, as I've done thousands of times over the past decade, but instead of the familiar screen appearing, he found himself being offered extreme weather clothing from Canada Goose.

I checked. He was right. Instead of a galaxy of poems about the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the birds and beasts of Africa, and, above all, the lepers in the settlement of Mtemwa in Zimbabwe where John worked and died - in the 1970s, I got an array of parkas, jackets, pants, gloves, mittens and hats. I thought it was a disaster. It had taken me nearly 20 years to edit all of John's poetry and make it accessible online. And it had disappeared.

Why did the editing take so long? Because John Bradbourne is the most prolific poet the English language has ever had. Think of the major poets you've read. Wordsworth wrote about 50,000 lines; Shakespeare 80,000. Bradbourne wrote nearly 170,000 lines - well over 5,000 poems - an achievement accepted last year by Guinness World Records. The John Bradbourne Memorial Society celebrates it as one side of the work of this remarkable man, who refused to leave the lepers he cared for in the middle of the Rhodesian civil war, and was abducted and killed by one of the factions.

Mtemwa has since become a place of pilgrimage, and every September 5 - the anniversary of his death - the settlement, and the nearby hill where John often prayed, is filled with thousands of visitors. Signs of sanctity have steadily grown, faithfully recorded by the society in its newsletters, and a movement for his canonisation is gaining increasing recognition.

A lot is happening. In 2012, Didier Rance published an award-winning biography of John Bradbourne in French, called Le Vagabond de Dieu - God's vagabond. This year, an English translation is being completed. The Memorial Society continues to fund-raise to support the Mtemwa settlement. And there is increasing interest abroad. A group in Italy is planning a translation of some of John's poems into Italian, and is thinking of a big anniversary event in 2017, possibly at Assisi. More and more people had been going to the poetry website as a consequence. And suddenly it was down.

I got in touch with Canada Goose, but they could do nothing. The hack wasn't anything to do with them, they said, but a rogue competitor. "Not our problem." I got in touch with the site's service-provider, but they couldn't do anything either.

Security was a matter for individual site owners, it seems. "Not our problem."" So it was my problem. I sent an urgent email to the brilliant team that had designed the original site, back in 2008. Could the database be retrieved, from behind the hack?

I had a nervous 24 hours before the answer came back: yes. But - there's always a but - we had better improve our security. And while we're at it, the 2008 site looks awfully dated. How about a complete refurb? A fresh, clean look? And wouldn't I like to have an easier way of editing the poems?

Would I! The old site had been a devil to maintain: an intricate and tedious access system which involved logging on to the service provider and then working in...
computer code. We could avoid all that. I thought about it for, oh, all of 10 seconds, and asked him to go ahead. It would cost, but it would be worth every penny.

One needs ease of access. New poems keep being discovered. John wrote to everyone he knew in verse, even to his mother. He hated writing in prose. You can see dozens of examples on the website, now fully restored. And every now and then one of his correspondents finds an old verse-letter in a drawer, and sends it in. So I’m still adding new material. And editorial notes always have to be kept up to date. When someone writes so much on such a wide range of topics, from theology to leprosy, there’s a need for commentary. It’s a never-ending process, and it needs to be managed quickly.

The reworking took a few months, but the job is done now. The new site is beautiful — fast, clear and secure. It now takes me a fraction of the time it used to take to edit a poem. Users tell me they love the new look. And it will be a boon to the Vaticanisti who process canonisation causes. The hacking, I now see, was a blessing in disguise.

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