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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (October 2014)



*Rockhopper Penguins - Tristan da Cunha 2012
(See article 57 below)*

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **July 2014** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website: <http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>*

(60) “This and That” - 26 October, 2014

I regularly visited two gaols in my second Australian parish. One was for the criminally insane, the other for more conventional rogues, rascals, scallywags and perverts.

When I first visited the latter I was all but overcome with nostalgia. The atmosphere of the place reminded me of boarding school. It was not so much the lack of freedom, as the uncomplicated macho philistinism of an all-male society. Simple masculine values and predilections were very much in evidence: beautiful women and muscular men. The walls of the cells were plastered with pictures of gleaming pectorals and bulging, bulbous bosoms. Dominant inmates swaggered around in minuscule shorts

that showed off beefy calves and monstrous hams. I felt at home. It was boarding school all over again.

Perhaps one of the reasons for there being fewer men in church than women is the Church's failure to recognise that to most males God, to be God, needs muscle and machismo. That many young, "macho" men prefer Islam to Christianity might partly be for just this reason. Where in the Church does a red-blooded male find muscle?

I am not immune to the appeal of "muscular Christianity". Aware of the Church's less than virile image I often find myself over compensating. *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild* rarely features in my preaching, writing or conversation.

Light on a dark horse

One of my favourite autobiographies is by possibly the twentieth century's most virile of Christian poets, Roy Campbell. He was a hunter, fisherman, bull-fighter and the scourge and satirist of effeminate, left-wing poets. He converted to Roman Catholicism, was one of the very few intellectuals and poets who fought on Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War and was a very fine poet. His autobiography, *Light On A Dark Horse* is an excellent read. His translations of the poems of St John of the Cross are still considered incomparable.

The following two samples of his lovely lyrics are not necessarily his best, they are simply favourites of mine:

Fishing Boats in Martigues

*Around the quays, kicked off in twos
The Four Winds dry their wooden shoes.*

Mass at Dawn

*I dropped my sail and dried my dripping seines
Where the white quay is chequered by cool planes
In whose great branches, always out of sight,
The nightingales are singing day and night.
Though all was grey beneath the moon's grey beam,
My boat in her new paint shone like a bride,
And silver in my basket shone the bream:
My arms were tired and I was heavy-eyed,
But when with food and drink, at morning-light,
The children met me at the water-side,
Never was wine so red or bread so white.*

Bogus

This most attractive, swash-buckling, brawling, bull-fighting, fishing, soldiering, virile man's man, Roy Campbell, is at least three quarters bogus, I gather. The subject of his enjoyable autobiography is largely a self-invented myth. Wider reading reveals him to me as nowhere near the virile dare-devil he paints himself, or appears to be from his poetry. This adds an ironic authenticity to his attractiveness. Virility is always largely an act is it not? It is a male's dream or fantasy. The decapitating, swaggering, misogynistic barbarians who flock to the black banner of "Isis" are also, surely, just as fundamentally bogus.

(59)

“This and That” - 19 October, 2014



When I awake in the night, I send my hand out into the dark and cold to fumble for my Kindle. On its return it opens the device's cover to form an A-frame on the mattress, close to my pillowed head, the backlit screen five inches from my blurred, myopic eyes. I begin to read. My mind, freed from footling worries, dwells instead upon the escapades of Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* and his pet raven Grip. Pages are “turned” by the gentlest of finger taps. Ten minutes later, at most, sleep settles down over me. The screen soon goes to sleep in sympathy. The A-frame collapses beside me as I twitch in slumber. All is well.

Barnaby and the Raven

Barnaby Rudge is one of Dickens' most neglected works and yet is the favourite of both my brother and me. About the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780 it is one of only two historical novels by Dickens, the other being *A Tale of Two Cities*. Its eponymous central character, Barnaby, is a simpleton. His pet raven Grip, the inspiration for Edgar Allan Poe's poem “The Raven”, is modelled on a pet raven that Dickens himself kept when young. Less discursive and more tightly structured than most of Dickens' novels it is a gripping read, even if it does bring on slumber so readily.

All Souls' Day

All Souls' Day (November the second) falls this year on a Sunday. So we will allow it to displace the usual Sunday readings and liturgy, and commemorate our departed.

On a sheet by the church entrance we are all invited to put the names of anyone we love who has died. They will be remembered, by name, during the Eucharist at 8.00am in St Nicholas' and at 10.30am at St John's on *All Souls' Day*. As too will all whose funerals or interments we have taken this past year.

On this day there will be vases available at the front of each church for the use of anyone who brings a flower to honour their commemorated loved ones. Everyone who comes to church will be given a candle. At an appropriate time they will be invited forward to place their candle, lit from the great Easter candle, in a sand tray. These actions are gestures of love for our departed and a symbol of our resurrection hope. The intercessions will include the names of those listed on the sheets, as well as those recorded in our burial register.

My sermon for the day is likely to conclude with the following remarkable poem by the poet and parson Andrew Young. It relies for its effect upon the biological fact that after every seven years of our existence there is hardly a cell in our body that has not died and been replaced:

Passing The Graveyard

I see you did not try to save
The bouquet of white flowers I gave;
So fast they wither on your grave.

Why does it hurt the heart to think
Of that most bitter abrupt brink
Where the low-shouldered coffins sink?
These living bodies that we wear
So change by every seventh year
That in a new dress we appear;
Limbs, spongy brain and slogging heart,
No part remains the selfsame part;
Like streams they stay and still depart.
You slipped slow bodies in the past;
Then why should we be so aghast
You flung off the whole flesh at last?
Let him who loves you think instead
That like a woman who has wed
You undressed first and went to bed.

(58) “This and That” - 12 October, 2014

I write on Monday morning. The sky is grey and wind seethes through and swirls the oak trees. Rain beads my study windows. How beautiful the gloom and cold when viewed from a bright, warm study. I shall venture out to inspect the rain gauge soon to rejoice in its bounty.

Porridge for breakfast, hearty soup for lunch. Home as hibernation. Welcome autumn, roll on winter.

Exuberance

If you have decent loudspeakers attached to your computer, listen to and watch played what is possibly the most exuberant and glorious of Bach Cantatas:

<http://allofbach.com/en/bwv/bwv-50/detail/> It is a single movement cantata for double choir and has been a favourite of mine for years. To both see and listen to it well performed is bliss beyond telling. It turns my faith (albeit temporarily) into certitude. How I love, revere and honour Johann Sebastian Bach and music's salvific grace.

Two horses, forty three dogs and a cat

In St John's the view from the chancel step down to an open west door is lovely. Brides usually grace the door's open space, but last Sunday it was the most handsome of horses. At the beginning of the Pet Service its quizzical, interested face regarded me intently. Looking for St Francis, it saw only me and so soon turned away disappointed. It seemed happy to be with us though, as too its companion horse, forty three dogs and Magnificat the cat. All were blessed and blessed us in return by their presence.

I talked in the last pew sheet of some of the paradoxes of our relations with animals. Wendy Cope touches on these in the following little verse from her collection "*Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*". The poem was apparently commissioned for an anthology in benefit of the "*World Wide Fund for Nature*" but was rejected as unsuitable!

Kindness to Animals

If I were a vegetarian.
And didn't eat lambs for dinner,
I think I'd be a better person
And also thinner.

But the lamb is not endangered
And at least I can truthfully say
I have never, ever eaten a barn owl,
So perhaps I am OK.

The Wind in the Willows was read to me by my father when I was a child. His love of the book and its chief protagonist, Mole jumped very readily from him to me. So I have had to develop a loving and creative way of coping with the large hills of soil that moles push up, day by day to disfigure the Vicarage front lawn. Each morning I rake them over the lawn as topsoil to enrich the grass once washed in by rain. If rained on as hills they become a clogging, claggy mess.

In Africa there is a creature called the *Naked Mole Rat*. To human eyes it is exceedingly ugly, pallidly hairless, blind and toothy. It is a remarkable creature though. With its relative, the *Damaraland Mole Rat* it is the only known eusocial mammal. They organise themselves in colonies like ants, bees and wasps. In such groupings there is only one female (the queen) and one to three males who reproduce with her. The rest of the members of the colony function as workers and are sterile. Smaller ones focus on gathering food and maintaining the nest, larger workers defend the colony. They are also remarkably long-lived for rodents (up to 31 years), have a lack of pain sensation in their skin, very low metabolic and respiratory rates and are remarkably resistant to cancer. Fascinating.

(57) "This and That" - 5 October, 2014

By no means a saint, let alone one as attractive as St Francis, I do love animals, birds, reptiles and insects. I can't walk through a paddock of cows without mooing companionably to them, or baaing my best wishes to sheep. If a blackbird whistles, I whistle back.

Penguins, mole snakes and crows

In my time I have had a pet penguin, on the island of Tristan da Cunha, a pet mole snake and a pet pied crow at my bush school in Africa, as well as budgies, and a succession of dogs and cats at home. I have kept chameleon eggs in damp soil in a little tub in my office until they hatched into exquisite, tiny, baby chameleon's and were released.

As a boy much of my school holidays were spent walking the African bush with binoculars, bird watching. I have been to some of the world's best game parks and seen lion, elephant, leopard, cheetah, and once on horseback almost bumped into a great rhinoceros.

Why do we love nature so? Why do we love animals, either wild or as pets? We humans use them and abuse them. They are made to work for us. They are killed to feed us. Yet we love them, are inspired and awed by them, consider cruelty to them a most heinous crime.

This paradox in our relations to animals mirrors one within ourselves, perhaps. We are all of us materialists. Our lives are busied, muddled, cluttered with activities to do with earning a living, with acquiring sufficient money and possessions to ensure our own and our family's security and well being. We cannot be otherwise, but too easily it becomes obsessive. We are so busy, busy, busy that we lose sight of more important complementary values.

Profligate beauty

The natural world, in its disinterested, uncontrived, unselfconscious and profligate beauty, with its *lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin* and its *birds of the air that neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns*, reminds us that there is more to life than security and comfort. There is beauty and innocence. There is simply being.

Why do we love a daft little dog, or a bull finch, or even a house sparrow? Simply for being who or what they are. To acknowledge and respond to their beauty and to a creature's right simply to be, is the beginning of reverence and awe and so too of the impulse to worship.

Worship, reverence, deference, paying someone his or her worth, are not characteristics of our day and age. Folk more readily debunk, deprecate and decry. They cut down tall poppies, devalue the sublime and cock a leg against what is good and lovely and traditional.

Church-goers should be different. If only because we practice worship and reverence Sunday by Sunday. We learn to bow the knee and respond to what is "other".

Those who are not church-goers often turn to nature or to art to learn a little of what we are on about in our reverence, awe and worship. It is no wonder that environmentalists and "greens" sometimes appear quasi-religious, not infrequently with a touch even of the fanaticism that can make religion so ugly.

We are blessed

In bringing our pets to be blessed we acknowledge their worth, the important part they play in our lives, and simply our delight in their being, that they are. We acknowledge too what a blessing they are to us, in that they take us out of ourselves and point us to reverence and worship, like the lilies of the field.

Thank God for nature, for animals, for our pets, and for St Francis, the loveliest of saints, so healthy a reminder of the importance of sweet simplicity and joy in what is natural, given and free.

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