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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (May 2016)



ST JOHN THE BAPTIST BOLDRE ABOVE A BLUEBELL HAZE

*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 **May 2016** 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>

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“This and That” - 29 May 2016

Bishops are suspicious of eccentric clergymen. I love them. One such was Fr James Woodrow CR, a monk. He was on the staff of Salisbury Cathedral in Rhodesia when I was a curate there. Thin, grey and ascetic he had been a teacher of science at the great Anglican Mission Station in the west of Rhodesia called St Augustine's. There, it was said, an unknown assailant had bashed him on the head. A risky way to achieve a quirky and eccentric sanctity.

Boiled egg, a rogue mouse and underpants

He loped down to the Cathedral in Salisbury early every morning in a white cassock, grey scapular, sandals and odd socks, to say a couple of extra offices before anyone else got there. He lived to celebrate the Eucharist. When he did so the congregation was irrelevant to him. At significant moments he would become inaudible as he whispered quietly to God. This annoyed the Dean. Not so the congregation. They appreciated a priest who lost himself in God, even at the cost of losing them as well.

He snatched small meals between bouts of prayer. A plate bearing a half eaten piece of bread, or half an apple with a couple of bites taken from it, would be found on a stained glass window ledge, forgotten in his rush to be off to pray. If he was reading a book from the cathedral library he would pencil in it, *in usum J.W. CR*. I half expected to find a part-eaten boiled egg on a pew inscribed *in usum J.W. CR*.

Once I encountered him with a mouse trap in hand and murder in his eye. He had fallen asleep the previous night while eating a biscuit. He awoke at two in the morning to find a mouse sitting on his chest nibbling the leavings.

Outside his office was a large wooden crucifix. One wet day, needing somewhere sheltered to dry the only articles of clothing he owned, other than his cassock, vest and underpants, he was other-worldly enough to see nothing incongruous or inappropriate about hanging them to dry on the crucifix. Our Lord smiled. The Dean did not.

I once watched him take a small wedding in the Lady Chapel. All went well until he asked the bride to pass her bouquet to her bridesmaid. She was a simple African lass and did not understand. He asked again, louder. No response. Then even louder. No response. He snatched the bouquet from her and threw it down the chapel.

Courage in the Confessional

He was my confessor. I was once blathering on about my stormy relationship with the Dean, a remarkably gifted priest, but something of a bully-boy. Before absolving me Fr James spoke for a few moments about the necessity for courage in the ordinary affairs and relationships of daily life. At the next staff meeting he provided me with an example of what he meant. The Dean asked the five of us on the staff what we thought of canned music in the Cathedral during the day. We were less than enthusiastic collectively, so he asked for an opinion one by one. “Andrew, what do you think?” “It seems not an unreasonable idea,” I replied tactfully, as similarly did the rest of my colleagues. Not Fr Woodrow. He had his nose in his office book. “What do you think James?” asked the Dean with some venom. Fr James looked the Dean in the eye and said, “Ghastly, Father, absolutely ghastly!” That was courage. The Dean was an insecure man. He eventually got rid of Fr James. He couldn't stand resistance from so frail a priest and man.

It was wonderful to have such an irascible mixture of saint and curmudgeon, so devoted to the sacraments and to God, flitting eccentrically about that lovely cathedral. My most lasting memory of him is, appropriately, as *alter Christus*. The Cathedral had a fine choir. On Palm Sunday we sang the Passion Narrative. The Narrator stood at the back of the Cathedral in the

gallery. Fr James took the part of Christ from the pulpit. In the spotlight he appeared grey, frail and almost ethereal. What a tremulous, quavering Christ he is going to be I thought. Not at all. He filled his lungs and the voice of Christ boomed strong, true and tuneful down the cathedral. As it has from a mere cross down through the ages. Strength perfect in weakness.

(142) “This and That” - 22 May 2016

At the end of last week’s HMS Hood service, our organist launched jubilantly into a joyful Bach Prelude. It made me want to roar like a bull of Bashan with pleasure. Beauty does that. In the garden on a sunny evening, when the prodigal whistling of a blackbird distils the visual loveliness of the evening into aural perfection it likewise invites a great roar of appreciation and joy.

The poet Roy Campbell, driving cattle near Toledo, allowed that most beautiful of birds, the European Roller, perched on a telegraph wire above him, to prompt him into just such an expression of joy and gratitude:

Driving Cattle To Casas Buenas

The roller perched upon the wire,
Telegrams running through his toes,
At my approach would not retire
But croaked a greeting as he rose,
A telegraph of solar fire.
Girth-high the poppies and the daisies
To brush the belly of my mule:
The thyme was smoking up God's praises.
The sun was warm, the wind was cool,
The white sierra was the icy
Refrigerator of that noon
And in the air so fresh, so spicy,
So steep, so pale, Toledo's June,
The sun seemed smaller than the moon.
Wading through seas of fire and blood
(I never saw such flowers before)
I said to Apis, “What a cud
To make the bulls of Bashan roar!”
The church, with storks upon the steeple,
And scarcely could my cross be signed,
When round me came those Christian people
So hospitably clean, and kind.
Beans and Alfalfa in the manger -
Alfalfa, there was never such!
And rice and rabbit for the stranger.
Thank you very much!

I particularly love the last line. Ordinary, commonplace, banal even, yet of the essence. Simple gratitude. It’s what being a Christian is all about. “Thank you very much”.

Too fertile

The bleak lanes of our daily walk are now leafy tunnels. Hawthorns blaze bright bridal white, hazels are leafed up, the verges thick with vigorous nettles and a haze of Queen Anne's Lace blossom.

This is not altogether a good thing. Nettles and Queen Anne's Lace crowd out less robust wildflowers. Road-side verges are too fertile these days. They are not immune to the heavy fertilizing of adjacent fields and mown verbiage is not removed, adding nutrients to the soil. Vehicle exhaust enriches roadside growth in the form of oxides of nitrogen.

Many of the more modest wild flowers require infertile soils to thrive. Too fertile verges encourage dominant plants to crowd out all others. Not quite along our lanes though. We delight in ragged-robin, celandine, buttercups, dandelion and stitchwort as well as Queen Anne's Lace.

An embarrassing fact

On Tuesday morning John Humphrys informed us, with some embarrassment, that a 16 year study of nearly 75,000 women reveals that those who went to Church at least once a week were 33% less likely to die prematurely than those who didn't. 27% were less likely to die from cardiovascular disease and 21% less likely to die from cancer.

"Religious attendance is a relatively good determinant of health" says the Harvard professor of epidemiology and author of the report. "It is perhaps an under-appreciated health resource..... Church attendance didn't prevent the incidence of cancer or cardiovascular disease, but once you had it, you fared better."

This is no motive for coming to church, but it might well say something about the authenticity of what we are about. It might also remind us that just as we are not punished for our sins but by them, so too are we not rewarded for our virtues but by them.

(141) "This and That" - 15 May 2016

We eat breakfast perched on stools facing our kitchen window. Yoghurt, banana, pineapple, citrus, homemade quince butter, a selection of nuts and any other fruit or vegetable to hand are all blended into a pleasing slurry.

Cucurbita pepo var. pepo

As we slurp we delight in a pair of blue tits flying in and out of their nesting box. Their voracious chicks breakfast on a nutritious, crop-regurgitated slurry as tasty to them as ours to us. Inside, on the window ledge, are gem squash seedlings. We have watched them painstakingly shoulder their way through a crust of moist soil, extend their yellow cotyledons, begin to photosynthesize green and then sprout tiny, Australia-shaped leaves. Today I intend planting the first of them out in the garden. Of all the vegetables we grew last year, gem squash gave us the most pleasure.

A good deal of the pleasure comes from that most seductive of sauces, nostalgia. Gem squash are a favourite South African vegetable. I grew up on them. They are best eaten young, almost full sized (a little larger than a cricket ball) but well before they have grown orange and tough skinned. When the seeds are soft and the skin dark green, boiled for fifteen minutes, salted, peppered and served with a good blob of butter they are the tastiest of all cucurbits. I love them.

They are slowly becoming more available in England. Street stalls in London sometimes stock them, as too, now and then, does Waitrose.

Last Sunday, at Malcolm and Carol Edge's, we enjoyed a splendid farewell lunch to Wim and Bertha Schoonbee. Far more than mere South Africans, they are Afrikaans. I revelled in their accent, and in their love of and commitment to Africa, and to its people, especially its poor people. They have served as medical missionaries for many years in Ruanda, and although now retired from full time mission work, will continue to advise, visit and train folk in remote parts of the continent from their base in the Cape. Our Benefice has supported their work for many years. It is good to have done so. They are a remarkable and inspiring couple.

The Parson's accent

Diana and I love South Africa. I spent nearly three years training for the priesthood there. My sister and her family reside there. My first wife, Margaret, was a South African, born in the Transkei. I have holidayed there many, many times. Cape Town I consider the most beautiful city in the world. The gateway to personal paradises: Tristan da Cunha, Rhodesia and St Helena.

In all my years abroad: three and a half on Tristan da Cunha, twenty two in Rhodesia, three in South Africa, two and a half on St Helena, twenty six in Australia, I appear never to have picked up an accent. My conversation at home or among close and long-suffering friends, however, does contain a smattering of poorly pronounced Afrikaans words and phrases. This is because I went to a boarding school with a fair number of Afrikaner boys. From them I picked up a selection of insults and mild swear words.

To offset this, while studying theology in Grahamstown, Morning Prayer, the Eucharist and Evening Prayer were all said in Afrikaans on Tuesdays. As a Rhodesian I was exempted from officiating though not from enduring this. So my macaronic conversation at home is a mixture of both sacred and profane patter. Wim Schoonbee was able to enlighten me as to the acceptability or otherwise of some to the schoolboy insults.

Macaronic frivolity

Here is an example of macaronic verse by N. E. Soret published in the Spectator Competition of 29 July 1989:

*Last night I'm afraid I indulged ad lib.
My Frau dit, 'Man, you're drunk
And the vicar is coming to dine mit us,
Oh Heaven, mein Gott, quid nunc?'
"I'll prove I'm as sober as you, ma chere,"
I said, nil desperandum.
Und I touched my toes with the tip of my nose:
Quod erat demonstrandum.*

(140) "This and That" - 8 May 2016

It is petty slights that most annoy. A car suddenly pulling out and causing us to slow down a little. A well loved hymn set to an unfamiliar tune. Queue jumping in the supermarket. Grrrr.

Last week I noticed that an article I had written in the Bridge had been edited. The compound adjective 'lily-livered' had been censored. It's a favourite term. I love it. My use of it was considered and deliberate. Its removal took the spice out of a sentence, rendering it bland and commonplace. I dislike bland writing. I was pettily annoyed.

My delightful bishop on the Island of St Helena was sadly just a tad prissy. While I was there he was writing a history of the Church on St Helena. His researches, he told me, were uncovering all sorts of scandals and skulduggery. "Good", I said, "it will make for an interesting history." He tut tutted and said, "I am not going to include that sort of stuff." The book is too bland and anodyne to enjoy.

Cocksure and offensive

For several interesting, tumultuous years in Australia I edited a diocesan paper. Still relatively young, fiery and cocksure, I was sometimes offensive but never bland.

My far from prissy bishop delighted in controversy and I provided it. So much so he once felt obliged to take me along with him to visit an offended correspondent who was threatening legal action. He wanted to ensure that I apologised abjectly enough to change her mind. I duly and successfully did so. I had been unnecessarily offensive.

One of my fellow priests disliked my ecclesial politics so much he dumped every edition of the paper into the rubbish bin, unwilling to inflict such inflammatory journalism upon his parishioners. They were exciting years. They ended with the appointment of a new and dull bishop from England. A good thing too. I had become arrogant and insufferable, intoxicated by the power of the printed word.

After a while I was offered a weekly column in Australia's only national Anglican paper. There, for a couple of years, I continued attempting to avoid blandness without being unreasonably inflammatory or offensive. The second line of a Hilaire Belloc couplet was my motto: *His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.*

The term 'lily-livered' was coined by Shakespeare. Macbeth derides the cowardliness of a young servant reporting a military attack thus: *Go prick thy face, and over-red thy fear, thou lily-liver'd boy.....*

The liver, in the Middle Ages, was thought to control our emotions and to be the organ that created blood. A poorly functioning liver was perceived to be bloodlessly pale and the cause of mental or physical weakness.

Frustrate their knavish tricks

In my brief Bridge article I was commending a Music and Verse evening to honour the Queen's official birthday. I wrote: "We shall be singing 'Jerusalem', 'Land of Hope and Glory', and all three verses of the standard version of the 'National Anthem'. The second of these is usually omitted by the lily-livered compilers of modern hymnals:

*O Lord our God arise, scatter her enemies,
And make them fall: confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks,
On Thee our hopes we fix: God save us all."*

All modern hymn books omit that verse. I can see nothing wrong with it. Surely we want enemies of the likes of 'ISIS' to fall, their politics to be confounded and their knavish tricks to be frustrated? I certainly do. I will be singing the verse with fervent gusto. I consider its demise to be pusillanimous, hypocritical and lily-livered. Disagree by all means, argue the toss, but to omit the verse from modern hymnbooks is indeed lily-livered.

The topmost pinnacle of tosh

The best denunciation of bad writing I have come across is H.L. Mencken on the prose of Warren G. Harding: *He writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It reminds me of*

a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it. It drags itself out of the dark abyss of pish, and crawls insanely up the topmost pinnacle of tosh. It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash.”

(139) “This and That” - 1 May 2016

The proliferation of acronyms blights our lives. There are so many in the piles of bumpf provided for school governors that a glossary is required to interpret them. So why use them? It takes more time to read a document with your finger in a glossary than to read it with all its words and titles fully spelt out.

STD

Acronyms are not a modern phenomenon. The Church has used them from the earliest of days. Although IHS for Jesus is more an abbreviation than an acronym, ICTHUS is certainly an acronym in Greek for *Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Saviour*. INRI is a Latin one for *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum (Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews)*.

I received a letter recently that used the acronym STD in a context that didn’t immediately reveal its meaning. So I looked it up in the Acronym Finder. There were ninety one different meanings for STD. They ranged from the well known: *Sexually Transmitted Disease*, to *Subcutaneous Tissue Disorder* and *Savings Tax Directive*. My daughter commented: “It goes to show that acronyms, like sexually transmitted diseases, are indeed rampantly contagious.”

Eloquent Obama

How admirable is the eloquence of Barack Obama. He speaks like an angel. It is hard to believe that he uses speech-writers. Any speech writer so eloquent would surely prefer to dazzle the world in his own right rather than second-hand on the lips of someone else. To my surprise I learn that Obama does employ a speech-writer. When he assumed office in 2009 a young man called Jon Favreau was appointed *Director of Speech-writing*, on a salary of \$172,200 a year. George Bush’s speech writer must have been a punch drunk orangutan.

Animal welfare

I learn from the Radio Four early morning farming program that it will soon be possible to determine the sex of a baby chicken before it hatches. Scientists at the University of Leipzig predict that by the end of 2016 prototypes of a device that determines the sex of chicken embryos at just three days of incubation will be available. It will then sort the eggs automatically by gender. This will do away with the need for commercial hatcheries, after the fashion of King Herod, to kill male chicks en masse. It will also put skilled day-old chick sexers out of work. They earn about £40,000 a year and it takes three years to train them.

Apparently chickens eggs, shortly before hens lay them, turn from being pointed-end first to blunt-end first. Heinrich Wickmann discovered this strange fact. He marked the eggs of exceedingly tame and docile hens with a pencil up their behinds shortly before they laid. I learned this from a review in the Spectator of two interesting sounding books to do with birds. The first, by Tim Birkhead, is called: *The most Perfect Thing: Inside (and Outside) a Bird’s Egg*.

Hills alive with the sound of music

The second book, by Jennifer Ackerman, is called *The Genius of Birds*. The reviewer, Horatio Clare, concludes:

I was particularly taken with the possibility that a bird's ear pulses with a music to which we are deaf. Deep, low-frequency infrasounds generated by storms and the sea, travel and reflect off the topography of the land. So hills really do sing, and nowhere sounds like anywhere else. Birds may be able to hear landscapes which we can only see.

The happiest moment in one's whole life

An old friend of Virginia Woolf, remembers a conversation with her as follows:

“What do you think is probably the happiest moment in one's whole life?” While I was wondering how I should answer this sudden question, she went on, with a strange but very quiet radiance in her voice: “I think it's the moment when one is walking in one's garden, perhaps picking off a few dead flowers, and suddenly one thinks: My husband lives in that house - and he loves me.” Her face shone as I had never seen it.

Home