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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (November 2016)



**ANMATJERE MAN, WIFE AND CHILD
AILERON, NORTH OF ALICE**

*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 **November 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>

(169) “This and That” - 27 November 2016 (Crossing Australia 6)

Erdlunda is 166 miles from *Uluru/Ayers Rock*. We set out on a cool, sunny morning. From time immemorial the local aborigines have called the great rock *Uluru*. It is a proper noun having no meaning other than itself.

In 1873 the surveyor William Gosse sighted the monolith and called it *Ayers Rock* after a South Australian government official. Since when it was called either name, depending upon whether or not you were a local aboriginal.

Aboriginal sensitivities

In 1993 it was renamed *Ayers Rock/Uluru*, the first official dual-named feature in Australia’s Northern Territory. The order of the two names was reversed to *Uluru/Ayers* in 2002. Presumably a gesture to aboriginal sensitivities.

Our journey there took us over a flat, semi-desert landscape that gives way eventually to rolling dunes of lovely red sand, well covered with a variety of vegetation, including sizeable trees. Most of them a rather lovely species of casuarina known as Desert Oaks. They are the only member of the family fully to have adapted to desert conditions. Their foliage is soft, drooping, lengthy needles, not leaves. Young trees are tall and narrow, like bottle brushes. Mature trees appear almost a different species with wide spreading crowns. This is a survival mechanism for the young trees. A narrow spread of foliage up a telegraph pole of a trunk ensures that the drooping needles direct any moisture down to the base of the trunk and so to the roots. Once a questing tap root gets down to the water table, the tree is free to develop a full crown and more conventional shape. Its wood is hard and heavy, useful for the tools and weapons of primitive peoples but thankfully, because it does not hold its shape on drying, it was not much harvested by settlers.

The only notable settlement along the way was *Curtin Springs* where we stopped for petrol. Only 62 miles from *Uluru*, it would be a good place to stay in preference to *Erdlunda*. The journey back after watching the sun set on the great rock would be less daunting. *Curtin* was crowded with people when we arrived. A bus had disgorged a great and merry crowd of girls who stormed the shop. There were aviaries full of interesting parrots, as well as reasonably priced accommodation. Unpowered camp sites are free.

A million acres of cattle station

Curtin Springs is the public face of a cattle station of a million acres. Notable for ecologically sensitive ranching, its cattle subsist entirely upon native grasses and vegetation. There being no surface water the liquid is pumped from underground into cattle in troughs. This enables ‘water-trapping’ for mustering. The troughs are situated in great cattle yards, in and out of which cattle are free to wander at will. Whenever they need to be gathered they can be confined around the troughs. So no horses, motorbikes or helicopters are needed for mustering.

The first notable geological feature on our route was *Mount Connor*. An impressive flat topped mountain rising 1000 feet above the plain. Such isolated mountains rising from plains are called inselbergs (island mountains). We then caught our first glimpse of *Uluru*, pink in morning light. We stopped several times to climb dunes and admire it.

Kata Tjuta

Instead of stopping first at *Uluru* we pressed on to The *Olgas (Kata Tjuta)* 25 miles further on. They stand out of the flat desert plain just as strikingly as *Uluru*, though not as a single monolith. They are a jostling jumble of several rounded, boulder mountains, a sort of bum fest.

We discovered, on walking up to a lookout there that although as beautifully coloured as *Uluru*, they are not composed of the same sandstone, but of a complex conglomerate. The similarity in colour to *Uluru* is due to a patina of iron oxide. Our walk was not onerous but fascinating, the great stone faces were pock marked with holes, many appearing to be caves,

though too shallow fully to qualify. There were small patches of green in crevices and on ledges and lower down small areas of wild flowers.

We returned to *Uluru* to watch it light up and glow in the setting sun. Australia's pearl of great price gleamed and glowed deeper and deeper to a mysterious dimness and then into the darkness of a desert night.

(168) “This and That” - 20 November 2016 (Crossing Australia 5)

142 million years ago a thumping great asteroid plummeted into the centre of Australia. It left a crater 14 miles across. The rim has long since eroded away, but there remains a crater-like feature only 3 miles across with a rim that reaches as high as 600 feet. This is called *Gosse Bluff*. The whys and wherefores of its geology are so complex it is a relief to turn to the aboriginal explanation of the event. Perceptively this too ascribes the feature to a cosmic impact.

A celestial dance

In the Dreamtime a band of celestial women were dancing as stars in the Milky Way. One of them placed her baby in a wooden basket. As they continued to dance the basket fell and plunged into the earth. The baby's fall forced the rocks upward forming the circular mountain range. The baby's parents, as the evening and morning star, endlessly search for their baby to this day. The basket is the constellation Corona Australis.

We approached the Bluff late in the afternoon. It rises out of the surrounding plain like the Island of St Helena from the South Atlantic ocean. Access is by way of a rough, four-wheel-drive only road. We twisted, turned and rattled our way through a narrow, serpentine gap in the rim until we found ourselves at the centre of a mysterious and haunting amphitheatre. Forbidden to walk widely because it is a 'sacred site' of the local aborigines, it was very still and beautiful in the late afternoon sun. A carpet of yellow flowers were beginning to seed, like dandelion clocks. Prior to opening fully they formed perfect, soft, fairy paint brushes of delicate, silken hair.

A good part of the 200 kilometres back to Alice was along a dirt road. Much of it was under construction and dangerously sandy. The bush grass and scrub were green and full of flowers. Lightning flashed and thrilled as a great bank of dark rain clouds gathered behind us. The deluge caught us up as we sat waiting for a worse than mediocre meal at a restaurant recommended to us by our hostess.

Erlunda

The next morning we left for Erlunda, 200 kilometres south of Alice. It is strategically sited at the turn off to Uluru (Ayers Rock), 267 kilometres to the west. It consists of a petrol station, motel, camping and caravan site, backpackers accommodation and a pub and restaurant. Accommodation at Ayers Rock is expensive, Erlunda is a convenient alternative. We watched the sun set from a viewing platform overlooking a small paddock of kangaroos and another of emus. A cool breeze chilled me in my shorts and sandals. The ground was the deep, rich red of the centre, still damp from the previous night's rain. Petrol was as expensive as anywhere on our trip. A small bottle of stout cost \$8.

Rainbow Valley

We had stopped at a couple of places on the way there. The first was Rainbow Valley, at the end of twenty kilometres of teeth chattering corrugated road. It was well worth it. All sorts of interesting wild flowers were relishing the sun after life-giving rain. The stark, sandstone cliff was dazzling in bright sunshine. Its many shades of colour ranged from deep red to pure white, hence 'rainbow'. We strolled the modest, sign-posted walks, delighting in jagged and pock-marked cliffs,

wild flowers galore and fairy martins nests on the roof of a hollowed out rock pedestal called ‘the mushroom’. It was satisfying to be driving on roads of the sort that I had learned to drive on in Rhodesia, whipping across corrugations at a good speed. We then pressed on to Henbury Meteorite craters, much, much smaller than Gosse Bluff. We were the only folk there with a hundred thousand bush flies. We enjoyed lunch, walked the three main craters, and had a nap with gauze over our faces to foil the flies.

It is the small bush fly (*musca vetustissima*), not the large blow fly, that is the horror of the Australian bush. The famous ‘Aussie salute’ is a defence against their persistence. They are a dung fly attracted to large animals like us for fluid nourishment, and to faeces to deposit their eggs. Female flies are the worst. They need protein to develop their ovaries and particularly relish the tears, saliva, snot and blood of mammals. They also sup on sweat, but that is less favoured for its lack of protein. As a priest in Australia I found them particularly bothersome at graveside funerals.

(167) “This and That” - 13 November 2016 (Crossing Australia 4)

The closest I ever came to living in a desert was on the island of St Helena. There, in a lovely vicarage surrounded by trees, grass, flax and wild ginger, the annual rainfall was about thirty inches. But on the coast, a mere 2½ miles away, 1700 feet down, it was 8 inches. Diana and her family lived there, in Jamestown’s arid valley of volcanic clinker and dust. She considered it paradisaical. In its own way it was.

In Alice Springs

In 1961 an American geographer, Peveril Meigs, divided the desert regions of the world into three categories. The first two are considered deserts. Extremely arid lands with at least 12 consecutive months without precipitation. Arid lands with less than 250mm (10in) a year. Alice Springs has an annual average of 11.3 inches. Almost a desert then. To us it seemed lovely, well treed and colourfully gardened.

We arrived at dusk. Our stops on the longest single day of our trip had been brief. The last was to observe the unobservable tropic of Capricorn. Alice is just outside the tropics, its population about 28,000. Surprisingly it is not the second but the third largest city in Australia’s Northern Territory. Darwin’s fast growing satellite, Palmerston, is larger.

Thanks to an all but useless Vodafone sim card, we were unable to phone ahead to book a motel. So we ended up in a B & B. After Katherine’s mediocre motel it was luxury. The bathroom in particular was extravagantly opulent. Potted plants, glittering chrome fittings, mirrors and gleaming tiles provided the setting for a monster, triangular spa bath. The most superfluous of 21st century fads.

Our hosts were lovely and obliging, but voluble and a tad effusive. I had a glass of wine with them, Diana a hot chocolate, and then, almost shamefacedly, we sat at a shining, stone-topped kitchen bench to tackle our squashed and elderly bread rolls, a battered avocado, a cup of laksa dried soup and cherry tomatoes, as they relished steak and mushrooms. Before being talked all the way back to our bedroom and a good night’s sleep, we ordered a sausage, bacon and egg breakfast for seven in the morning.

The Australian supermarket sausage

How lovely to be drawn to the kitchen by the scent of sausages and bacon gently crisping. But I had forgotten how vile is that Australian barbecue-staple, the supermarket sausage. It is bland, gelatinously rubbery and unidentifiable as beef, mutton, pork, kangaroo or mouse. Diana reverted to childhood subterfuge. She secreted a portion of her two brutes somewhere about her person to be disposed of later.

The day's excursion, however, was all but perfect. We set out to explore the MacDonnell Ranges, stopping at whim anywhere that appealed. The weather was sunny and crisp. Before quite leaving the town we stopped at the memorial of a Presbyterian minister, John Flynn, who had started the Flying Doctor service in 1928. The excellent, brief information boards showed him to have been a farsighted, sympathetic and heroic church worker among aboriginal people. A refreshing relief from the simplistic orthodoxy of today's commentators, who consistently claim that Christianity ruined the culture and paradisaical existence of primitive peoples. Wilfully unaware, it seems, that the hearts of all mankind, even the primitive, are deceitful and wicked.

Coiffed and quiffed

Ghost gums, a profusion of wild flowers, skeletal bushes extravagantly coiffed and quiffed by the sudden uprushing immolation of long past bush fires, the call of the butcher bird and the rich ochre and bright-orange mountain cliffs in crisp morning sunlight, gladdened our hearts. We rejoiced in the fascinating geographical features of an ancient landscape unlike anything we had imagined. A needle eye's gap in precipitous cliffs. A deep and permanent waterhole beneath great and colourful bluffs, where we noted how difficult it is, in reflections on a pool's surface, to see colours as they actually present themselves, rather than automatically interpreting them into what, more dully, they are.

We visited some ancient ochre pits, where for centuries colourful rock stratas have been mined for body painting and rock art. On penalty of a \$5000 fine we were forbidden to take specimens, but down the river and in another place, we wrote, in white and red, family names on a river-bed rock. A prayer to be washed off in a single wet season.

(166) "This and That" - 6 November 2016 (Crossing Australia 3)

An Australian priest and friend served many years in the dry outback. In the sort of places, he said, "*where the crows fly backwards and the barmaids devour their young*".

Where the crows fly backwards

The crows fly backwards to keep the dust out of their eyes, an Australian ballad tells us. As for the sheilas behind outback bars, they would need to be rough and tough to survive. Some we encountered certainly looked it.

As the crow flies (be it backwards or forwards) the distance from Katherine to Alice Springs is 45 miles longer than from Lands End to John o'Groats. By car it's the other way round, the Australian journey is 139 miles shorter.

We started the 735 mile trip from Katherine to Alice at dawn and finishing just before dusk. Night driving is ill advised. Kangaroos and wallabies have no road sense at all.

Termite mounds

The country was fresh and green from the recent rain. Our first brief stop was to inspect and photograph the innumerable brown stalagmites that are termite mounds. Unfamiliar bird calls in milky early morning heat, with the air washed clear of dust, were lovely. The knocked off top of a termite mound revealed a frenzied horde of pallid worker termites with their stored harvest of tiny grass cuttings. These were spinifex termites. There are over 2,800 species in the world and about 263 in Australia.

Although sometimes called ants termites are more closely related to cockroaches. Ants, bees and wasps all undergo the sudden and dramatic change from grub-like larva to fully developed adult by way of a pupal stage. Termites, on the other hand, like cockroaches grow gradually,

through a succession of moults. They look and remain much the same all through the process, except in size. Where conditions permit termites are mind-bogglingly abundant. Savanna land covered in large spinifex termite mounds supports a few hundred tonnes of termite per square kilometre. This is far greater than the weight of cattle supported per square kilometre on similar soils.

Along the Stuart Highway a fad for clothing roadside termite mounds has developed. A surprising number have been dressed in gear ranging from lingerie to rugby clobber. As the clothes weather they grow shabby and nasty.

Meat pies and road trains

The speed limit for most of the way was 130 kilometres an hour. For several hundred miles there was no limit at all. Except when passing other vehicles we kept to 120 kilometres an hour to avoid guzzling too much petrol. Even so we filled up at almost every opportunity. At one stop we ordered and enjoyed our first authentic Aussie meat pie. These consist of a scalding, tasty minced-meat slurry. We ate them sitting on a low log fence enjoying the beginning of cooler, though mercifully sunny, weather. A great pool of rainwater in the muddy driveway gave great pleasure to a pair of mud larks. Interestingly there was no sign as yet of the ubiquitous and melodious Australian magpie.

A feature of outback Australia is the road trains. Huge lorries pull equally huge trailers. Sometimes three, occasionally more. On uncrowded roads they are easy enough to pass. Only once or twice were we held up behind one for a minute or two.

A matter of perspective

The loveliness of rural England is concentrated. You are surprised by beauty round nearly every corner. A bike ride to Norley Wood or Sway, especially in autumn, reveals a hundred delights. Not so outback Australia. There is mile after mile of sameness. Yet therein lies a distinctive beauty in its own right. The beauty of vastness and the significance of one's own insignificance in the face of such vastness, can be moving and overwhelming. Then stop to focus upon sameness and it dissipates. Beauty begins to be perceived in similarity or in minute difference. Minor geographical oddities set in a vast sameness are all the more pleasing for that. Large granite boulders known as the Devils Marbles, great mesas, a flowering shrub, even the invisible Tropic of Capricorn or a particular cloud formation, become marvellous. Like religion it is all a matter of perspective.

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