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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (March 2019)



CARTMELL PRIORY - CUMBRIA

*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 **March 2019** 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>

(289) “This and That” - 31 March 2019

John Ruskin (1819-1900), a great and prescient man, described the English Constitution thus:

The rottenest mixture of Simony, bribery, sneaking tyranny, shameless cowardice and accomplished lying, that ever the Devil chewed small to spit into God's Paradise.

Elsewhere he described the Houses of Parliament as *The most effeminate and effectless heap of stones ever raised by man*. The word *effectless* resonates, as Brexit wrangling dribbles ever on and on.

Santa Maria and the Three Musketeers

Brantwood, John Ruskin's beautiful home, overlooks Conistan Water in the Lake District. We visited it a couple of years ago. Last Saturday, with my daughter Rachel, I visited a Ruskin Exhibition at *Two Temple Place* on the Embankment. Diana had visited it a week or so earlier.

The premises are as stunning as the exhibition. *Two Temple Place* was built in 1895 by William Waldorf Astor, at that time possibly the wealthiest man in the world. He wanted a home away from America. One where his children were less likely to be kidnapped.

Astor House, as for a time it came to be known, built of Portland stone, with delicately mullioned windows, is decorated with fine carvings. Riding high above its castellated parapets is a striking gilded weather vane representing the caravel *Santa Maria* in which Columbus sailed to discover America.

Inside, certainly in the rooms hosting the exhibition, it is beautifully and opulently wood panelled from floor, to ceiling. The staircase hallway is particularly magnificent. On the newel posts of the three flights of stairs are fine mahogany carvings of characters from *The Three Musketeers*, Astor's favourite book.

Boggling baboon-blooded stuff

The exhibition itself is well worth viewing. Ruskin's life corresponds almost exactly with that of Queen Victoria and he is a towering Victorian figure: a particularly perceptive art critic and art patron, and himself a skilled draughtsman, and fine watercolourist. He was also a prominent social thinker and philanthropist, writing extensively and penetratingly on geology, architecture, myth, ornithology, literature, education, botany and political economy. To be able to appreciate him in such a setting was wonderful.

Ruskin did not appreciate the music of Wagner. Nor do I. In a letter to Mrs Burne Jones in 1883, he described a performance of *The Meistersingers* thus:

Of all the bête, clumsy, blundering, boggling, baboon-blooded stuff I ever saw on a human stage, that thing last night beat — as far as the acting and story went — and of all the affected, sapless, soulless, beginningless, endless, topless, bottomless, topsiturviest, tuneless and scrannelpipest — tongs and boniest — doggerel of sounds I ever endured the deadliness of, that eternity of nothing was the deadliest, so far as the sound went. I never was so relieved, so far as I can remember in my life, by the stopping of any sound — not excepting railway whistles — as I was by the cessation of the cobbler's bellowing.....

Gentrification

Our front garden's pair of blue tits are titivating up their shabby little house outside our kitchen window. We watch them with delight as we eat breakfast and lunch and every time we make a cup of coffee. Their weather-warped and tiny dwelling indicates a pair of proletarians.

At the back of the house, however, as in so much of the New Forest, gentrification is underway. A thatched-roofed and highly varnished bird-box has been fixed to a tree. It has a hinged floor to allow human servants to clean it at season's end. In a leafy, more secluded and exclusive spot it's residents are likely to look down on those in the old and shabby box. The vicar and wife won't. As in the church, so in the vicarage garden. All are welcome, all equal.

A wise choice

In 16th-century India, Tenali Rama, the court jester of Prince Krishnadevaraya, grew so impertinent that he was sentenced to death. He was graciously allowed to select the method of his execution. His choice: old age.

(288) “This and That” - 24 March 2019

Justin Beiber, about whom I know nothing, has over a hundred million followers on Twitter. I have none.

Pleased to be ignorant

Kate Perry tops the list. She has more than anyone else in the world. I didn't know who she was either, until I looked her up. I learn that she was briefly married to Russell Brand. That was sufficient. I need know no more.

Tweets reported in the press reveal little other than the egotism of those who send them. To publish them is close to being a crime against humanity. Yet such is my ignorance of tweeting, who am I to judge?

Jack Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, defined a tweet as “a short burst of inconsequential information”. That's complimentary. The only positive comment I can make is that for poets tweets seem a suitable medium for haikus. But then I've never much appreciated haikus.

Not letting go

When I passed retirement age in Australia, but didn't retire, I was asked by a contentedly retired priest why I remained in harness. Did I not yearn for, and had I not earned, a life of relaxation and leisure? The question deserved an answer. So, as is my wont, I thought it through in a paragraph or two of my Australian parish pew sheet.....

That I remain a priest in harness, has nothing to do with a sense of duty, or delusions as to the indispensability of such talents, experience and wisdom that I possess. It is more selfish than that. It's merely my good fortune in having found parish priesting stimulating, rewarding and congenial. All alternatives seem less attractive.

There is so much more to parsoning than enduring the evasions and excuses of residual Christians, or excusing and forgiving the unkept promises of parents and godparents at baptisms. Or beating one's head against a wall of indifference. Or despairing at the inexorable retreat of faith in the western world. It's about being gifted with a temperament able to live and commend with joy and gusto a faith and God you love.

What it's all about

It's visiting Glenda, Lucy, Eileen and Noel, stoically courageous, humorous people who manage still to love and smile in great tribulation. It's sitting in a dark chapel early in the morning reading George Herbert's or Elizabeth Jennings' verse and Rowan Williams sermons, followed by listening to a Bach cantata, while following the text, and then celebrating Love in the daily Eucharist.

It's listening to the bereaved tell of their love for a lost one with affection and joy around a kitchen table. It's attempting to articulate their love and joy in a brief, bespoke funeral homily.

It's composing irreverent articles, pieces of verse and nonsense for the pew sheet, the radio or whatever. It's wrestling with scripture, truth and difficult questions, attempting to shape and make sense of the Christian Faith in sermons or conversation around a dinner table.

It's visiting or being entertained by the loveliest of people, Christian's, be they fervent of faith or faint. It's encouraging Emily and Jenny as they tackle a duet or, with a game and irrepressible choir, struggling over a new and challenging anthem. It's attempting to impart the faith to lively confirmation kids who are so often funny, reverent in irreverence.

It's sitting on the chancel step surrounded by children at a well attended family service, or saying a prayer and lighting a candle for little Hannah's mouse or Freddy's grandparents. It's being responsible for a lovely church building and living in an excellent house with a leafy garden.

It's being custodian of a tradition and an articulator and interpreter of a narrative and truths that makes sense of human existence. That are worth throwing for swine to trample, because no trampling can destroy them, and the gleam of a pearl in muck sometimes changes the outlook and life of materialistic, muck-and-money-grubbing swine.

Self indulgence

That six years later I remain an active, albeit ancient, parson in Boldre is a joy. I indulge myself by being here.

(287) "This and That" - 17 March 2019

I stand on one leg writing this. Like a stork. My lower back is painful, and standing is kinder to it than sitting. Now and then, though, there's an irresistible compulsion to lift one leg up onto the desk, leaving the other to bear my weight alone. After awhile the leg resting on the desk, with its knee all but tickling my chin, is directed to swap roles to give its partner a break.

Rete mirabile

Why do storks and many other birds so often stand on one leg? It's all to do with managing heat loss. The unfeathered parts of a bird's anatomy all too readily lose heat, especially the feet of wading birds. To help counter this there's a physiological phenomenon known as *rete mirabile* (wonderful net). The arteries that transport warm blood to the legs lie in close contact with the network of veins that return colder blood to the bird's heart. The arteries warm the veins. The veins cool the arteries. This brings the bird's feet and legs closer to the environmental temperature, ensuring that they don't lose as much heat as they would if they were at body temperature. Wonderful. Then standing on one leg reduces by half any heat still being lost.

Women's Hour

When driving long distances, Radio 4 is a great boon. With the help of lemon sherbets bought from *Pilley Community Shop*, it keeps me awake. Unless it is *Woman's Hour*. Whereupon I immediately turn off. Hell for me would be having to listen to Jane Garvey and *Woman's Hour* every day. Almost all her enthusiasms are my *bête noires*, her orthodoxies my heresies.

The heresies that raise blood pressure and genuine persecution in 21st century England are secular, not religious. Are all to do with race, gender, the environment and sexual orientation. Deviation today from these secular orthodoxies, as with the religious heresies of the unenlightened past, invites the heavy hand of the law. Mere jokes to do with race, gender or sexual orientation are risky.

John Heath Stubbs, in an amusing six stanza self-epitaph, described his youthful, late nineteen thirties self *as orthodox in beliefs as following the English Church, barring some heresies he would have for recreation...* Even back then deviation from orthodoxy in the Church of England could be seen more as recreational fun than worthy of persecution or punishment. There's

a breadth of tolerance, freedom and acceptance in the Church of England that is increasingly difficult to find outside of it.

Wimps and simps

Before the fairly innocent insult *wimp* became common currency in my family, which it did in the late sixties, we used the word *simp* if we wished to describe someone as soft or sissy. This is another fairly innocent insult, by today's standards, but one from my father's generation.

You rarely hear either these days and neither appears in my very old, two volume *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*. A little research reveals an isolated instance of the word *wimp* in 1920, but no further attestation until the 1960s. This concords with my own observations. It is suggested that the word is a "clipped form of whimper", possibly influenced by *J. Wellington Wimpy*, a comparatively unaggressive character in *Popeye* comics. Its appearance seems to have been short-lived. It's far too innocuous a word for today.

The word *simp* originates in 1903 as circus slang for "simpleton". Its meaning, when used in my childhood family, had closer affinity to the word "simper".

Astrophysical wimps and simps

Both words happen to occur in astrophysics as acronyms. *Wimps* being *weakly interacting massive particles* and *Simps*, *strongly interacting massive particles*.

In the eyes of wimps and simps I shouldn't, in a church pew sheet article, be leading folk up the rambling, happy garden-paths of inconsequentiality with talk of *wimps* and *simps*. I should be preachifying or teachifying.

So enough. It's time to stop. Even if robust Christianity converts mere *wimps* and *simps* into attractive human beings and so no such cavilling, critical twerps are likely to be reading this article!

(286) "This and That" - 10 March 2019

The choir processed into church to the beat of African drums last Sunday. Expertly played by *Kwame Bakoji-Hume* and his son. We loved it, and them. Their drums accompanied the hymns too. It was our annual Africa Sunday.

Creative syntheses

Cultures can clash catastrophically, co-exist uneasily or synthesize creatively. On the mission stations of my youth, sepia-tinted by nostalgia, there was creative synthesis.

Anglican Victorian hymns, sung acapella in rich harmony to beating drums and the shrill descanting ululations of ecstatic women were thrilling. Ethereal, refined, high culture Anglican worship had taken root in tropical soil, hybridised, burgeoned and thoroughly indigenised.

During our service last Sunday, those with a connection to Africa were invited to declare it. Jill Bulkley as a child lived for a time in Ethiopia, where her father had set up and ran a Staff College for army officers. Haile Selassie visited them frequently and loved children. He'd line them up to count to him in *Amharic*. This is the official working language of Ethiopia and after Arabic the most commonly spoken Semitic language in the world. Jill counted to 10 for us in church. Probably the first and only time since its founding in 1087 that *Amharic* has been heard in St John's.

Children present were given a turn on the drums. *Kwame* teaches percussion in schools and has a smiling personality sure to bring out the best in any pupil. In a minute or two he had the children making a passable sound.

Sally James gave a moving account of her work in Rwanda, having returned only three days previously. She thanked the St John's family and local folk generally for the generosity, support

and prayers that have enabled so much to be achieved. A little cash goes a long way in Rwanda. Sally gives far, far more than cash though. Her qualities as an educator, her faith, wisdom, experience, sense of humour and love work wonders.

Dr Syntax

In Cumbria a few weeks ago we kept coming across references to William Gilpin. He was Vicar of Boldre from 1777 until his death in 1804. The beauties of Cumbria lie behind his theories of the Picturesque, influential in the art world of the late 18th century.

The desire to capture and frame natural beauty on canvas, and if deemed necessary to enhance it, is not dissimilar to today's frenzied mobile phone photography and subsequent photoshopping. Instead of appreciating nature for what it is, we appreciate it for its photographic potential. The camera's retina becomes more important than our own.

William Gilpin said, infamously, of the ruined gable of Tintern Abbey that *a mallet judiciously used might render it more picturesque*. Such comments gave rise to a long, clever, verse satire of him by William Combe, illustrated by Thomas Rowlandson and called *The Tour of Dr Syntax*.

A picturesque post

In the verse Gilpin, as Dr Syntax, a curate, sets off on his donkey Grizzle in search of the ideal picturesque landscape. He is continually thwarted by farcical inconveniences. He's robbed and tied to a tree and stumbles into a lake searching for the perfect site from which to sketch a ruined castle. He's chased by a bull, and driven to distraction by the incessant bleating of sheep and so on and so on.

In accomplished rhyming couplets it's a good read. Early on he comes to an unreadable, defaced signpost. At a loss as to which way to go he decides to paint the post:

..... *Tho' a flimsy taste may flout it
There's something picturesque about it*

He adds donkeys, a stream, a rugged ridge and a bridge to his picture saying:

*He ne'er will as an artist shine,
Who copies nature line by line;
Whoe'er from Nature takes a view,
Must copy and improve her too.
To heighten every work of art,
Fancy should take an active part:
Thus I (which few I think can boast)
Have made a landscape of a post.*

(285) "This and That" - 3 March 2019

To walk into the kitchen of my childhood's vicarages was to risk an encounter with a pig's head. I can still see them in my mind's eye. Vacant, small-eyed and pallid. Donald Trump without the hair.

As fat as brawn

My jack-of-all-trades and parish priest of a father liked to keep pigs, was an accomplished butcher and loved meat. Filial loyalty discourages me as much from embracing vegetarianism as it does atheism.

I was reminded of this by reading at matins on Monday a portion of Psalm 119. Speaking of the proud the psalmist says: *their heart is as fat as brawn*..... It was into brawn that my father turned

his pigs heads, ears and trotters. I remember it fondly. A shining dome of rich meat fragments, bonded into firm cohesiveness by natural meat jelly and served in generous slices. It was rich and delicious.

I feel no compulsion to purchase a pig's head myself, though. I am more a child of this age than his. It's difficult not to succumb to the less than laudable, largely un-acknowledged squeamishness that is a part of much current foodie self-righteousness.

Lenten Fare

At the Vicarage we'll be giving up meat on weekdays during Lent. Merely as a discipline and to heighten appreciation of our omnivorous heritage, rather than from high principle or squeamishness. Alcohol is to be abjured as well. Even on Sundays.

More positively we will be reading through Malcolm Guite's *The Word in the Wilderness*, along with others who have signed up for our Lenten discussion group. The book offers a poem to be read every day with a short and excellent exposition of each.

There are people who can't abide poetry. There's lots of it that I can't either, though far more that I love deeply. Poetry, like Faith, offers an alternative and often oblique way of apprehending reality and truth. It deals far less with certitude than with surprising sidelong glimpses of truth, flashes of insight, suggestions, hints, allusions and epiphanies. It's awash with irony, paradox, double and triple entendre, symbol and metaphor. When perfectly combined with music it transports me to the very threshold of heaven. In not dealing with certitude it floods me certitude.

I came across this comment on cold versions of Calvinism by the Welsh poet Idris Davies recently.

Capel Calvin

*There's holy holy people
They are in capel bach -
They don't like surpliced choirs
They don't like Sospan Fach,*

They don't like Sunday concerts
Or women playing ball
They don't like William Parry much
Or Shakespeare at all.

They don't like beer or bishops,
Or pictures without texts,
They don't like any other
Of the nonconformist sects.

And when they go to Heaven,
They won't like that too well,
For the music will be sweeter
Than the music played in Hell.*

* *Sospan Fach* (Little Saucepan) is a Welsh folk song.

Jewish wit

The scrap of verse by the English journalist W. N. Ewer:

*How odd of God
To choose the Jews*

has over the years received many witty Jewish answers:

*Not odd, you Sod
We Jews chose God*

And:

*What's so Odd
His son was one*

And:

*This surely was no mere whim,
For all the goyim annoy 'im.*

Home