

[Home](#)
BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE
(July 2019)



South Atlantic on the S. A. Agulhas (see 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 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>

(306) “This and That” - 28 July 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (6)

Chris King informs me that the “Moon Hole” I talked of in the last diary entry is more correctly termed a “Moon Pool”. Derived, he suggests, from still and tranquil pools to which, on moonlit nights, lovers repair to enjoy reflections and a romantic dip. Chris, an experienced captain of tug boats large and small around our shores, knows what he’s talking about. On the smaller vessels he’s familiar with they provide relatively calm water for the lowering of equipment, divers or both.

Sun 9 September 2012 on S A Agulhas

Ships’ doctors are always interesting. Why ignore the not inconsiderable rewards and varied clientele of land-lubber doctoring, in favour of the narrow, isolating and surely less lucrative medical expertise called for on ships? To choose to doctor at sea indicates an interesting and unusual personality, or one unable or unwilling to cope with conventional life and doctoring. Perhaps to flee scandal, a failed career, a failed marriage, or a weakness for alcohol.

The doctor on the Agulhas is certainly interesting, but with no apparent failings, weaknesses or bizarre idiosyncrasies. A good deal younger than I she is no ancient mariner, with a piercing but twinkling eye and like me Rhodesian educated. She went to Highlands Junior, Oriel and Roosevelt Schools, all in Harare where, she declares, she received a superb education. The first two of these schools were in my father’s last parish of seventeen years. He taught R.E in them. Her husband died when their second daughter was only four. She brought up the two girls on her own. She is now studying tropical medicine because having been brought up in Africa she’s fascinated by it. An idealist she intends working for an NGO somewhere in Africa. She’s served both on Tristan and St Helena. One of her daughters is a vet in Australia, though probably not permanently.

A fellow passenger is Simon, an inveterate smoker. His father is presently an educational adviser and teacher on Tristan and loves the island, where he worked for eight years when Simon was a small boy. He has returned after many years to work there again. So Simon’s trip to visit his father on the island of his youth is not dissimilar to mine. A nostalgic desire for reacquaintance.

A fanatical conservationist

Because the ship travels to Antarctica frequently the steps on deck have an electric element beneath them to stop them freezing treacherously. After breakfast Diana and I had our customary brisk walk ten times round the helicopter deck on a grey and wild day. We then went up to the observation cubicle for a while before an obligatory briefing on the helicopter flight we’re to make from ship to island on arrival. After this we listened to a fascinating talk by a single-minded, fanatical conservationist, John Cooper.

On Gough Island the greatest threat to nesting seabirds, especially albatrosses, is mice. With no serious predators they have grown much bigger than their ancestor ship stowaways. They greedily burrow into the warm bodies of albatross chicks when the parents are away looking for food. Skuas then spot the blood and finish the chicks off. John Cooper is an advocate for a drastic plan to drench the mountainous island with poison to eradicate every mouse.

Wednesday 12 September, 2012 Arrival day

It’s 5.30am. I tap away at my small laptop. Diana, sensibly, is still in bed, relaxed and unhurried. Invisible in the dark outside is an island on this side of the horizon.

Last night there was a fancy dress party to which Diana persuaded me to go as the second half of the French comic strip hero Tintin. She carried a big tin, I carried an identical one. Both of us affixed to our foreheads a piece of teased out and fluffed up red nylon fishing rope to represent Tintin’s ginger hair. It worked. We were judged winners, our prize a block of chocolate. It was a rowdy party in the upstairs lounge and fun.

We departed the merriment at about ten, having put back our clocks another hour. Tristan is one hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time. Before bed I wrote and sent off, with a photograph, a little piece for the Diocesan Paper in Cape Town, now six days behind us.

(305) “This and That” - 21 July 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (5)

On holiday I read more than I ever find time to at home. On the Agulhas voyage to Tristan I enjoyed A N Wilson’s “The Elizabethans” and Philip Larkin’s “Letters to Monica”. There are more cheerful reads than Larkin:

*“Ring a ring of roses, coronary thrombosis
A seizure, a seizure, we all fall down.”*

The edited diary: S A Agulhas....

One of the spots on the ship we most frequent is the observation deck. It’s a glass enclosed space high up above the bridge. There’s a bench to lean against, rest your books, pads and binoculars upon and about six or seven seats. Facing forward over the bow it offers a splendid view of the great waves spuming over the lower front deck. ‘

Its purpose is to allow specialists to spot and record birds, marine life and activity, weather phenomena and anything else that interests or baffles boffins. The professional ornithologists spot birds with the naked eye, then observe them closely through high quality binoculars, identify them (usually with ease) and list them in a notebook to be put to some statistical use. It’s interesting to rub shoulders with specialists Most on the Agulhas are all to ready to share their knowledge and to answer questions.

We were invited to observe the oceanographers drop a great circle of monitoring devices down the “Moon Hole”, a name no one is able to explain. It’s an aperture in the bottom of the ship which, when open, reveals a circle of turbulent, welling and falling sea at the level of the waves outside. The circle of instruments and canisters to collect samples of sea water at different levels down to a thousand fathoms is lowered into the well and disappears. To perform this action the boat is required to be stationary.

Teeth and the Monarchy

After dinner I had a long chat about religion and politics with Bob and John. Bob is a dental technician from Dundee. He’s been visiting Tristan for a good number of years to do dental work. He’s loved it and seems highly regarded by the islanders. This is his last visit. Past retirement age he regretfully acknowledges enough to be enough.

John is an articulate, amusing and sceptical English Labourite. He’s married to Debbie, a lovely Tristanite. It was his sceptical comments on the monarchy that drew me into conversation. He’s proudly working class with a strong distrust and dislike of the Establishment. He treasures a comment made to him once by a priest, I think on Tristan, who told him always to remember that Jesus was “working class”. He and Debbie live in Weymouth, but have a house on Tristan which they doubt they’ll ever retire to.

A churchy double-cross

I enjoy sceptics like John, if they have a sense of fun. I am one myself. It’s something of a miracle that I believe in God at all, when so devoid of certainty and so questioning of everything else. Certainly I’m sceptical of any attempt to hijack Jesus into the “working class”, “intelligentsia”, “middle class” or whatever. The Catholic Church declared May Day to be St Joseph The Worker’s Day in 1955, thereby attempting to baptize May Day, so precious to Socialists and Communists, into Mother Church. As a less than brilliant versifier called A. Neaum once wrote, to do this was just:

*..... nasty deviousness, a Churchy double-cross.
Joseph owned his wood-work shop, so Joseph was a boss.*

Going home

Later we watched a 1966 film on Tristan in the upstairs lounge. Black and white it was all to do with the volcanic eruption on the island in 1961, the evacuation of the islanders to the UK that this induced, and their subsequent return to Tristan in 1963. Comfortably housed at Calshot,

it was assumed the islanders were here to stay. Not so. A lack of immunity to flu epidemics, a foul winter, the mugging of a pensioner and nostalgia for their wild and beautiful island persuaded nearly all to clamour to return.

Because the DVD was black and white it gave an unfairly drab impression of the island. How distant the 1960s appear. Those years that were my salad days.

(304) “This and That” - 14 July 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha (4)

The greatest biography in the English language is James Boswell’s of Samuel Johnson. Part of its uniqueness lies in Boswell’s propensity and ability to recall and reconstruct conversation, first in his journals, then in the biography. Johnson was the best of conversationalists in a circle of brilliant and witty thinkers, gossips and littérateurs.

Sadly my own journals display none of Boswell’s gifts. Interesting conversations with scientists and fellow travellers on the S A Agulhas went largely unreported.

The edited diary: S A Agulhas

There are two young Frenchmen on board. Their role on Tristan has to do with monitoring seismic and possibly even atomic activity in these remote southern climes. They are employed by the United Nations in conjunction with a French company. One is on his way to the island for the first time, to take over. The other has just completed a year there and has been to Cape Town for a short break. He will shoe-horn in his replacement and then leave. He told me of his desire to write and publish. At school his first love was the humanities not the sciences, but at university he opted for the latter in hope of a well paid job.

He has enjoyed his year on the island and is positive about the place, while hinting at social problems like heavy alcohol consumption. I asked how he had avoided romantic entanglements, suggesting that a personable young foreigner would have been assailed by every eligible young woman on the island. A population of only 260 cruelly limits marital options. Sensibly, he was reticent on this subject.

Another conversation was with an islander who has lived in England many years and though retired has no desire to return to Tristan permanently. He visits frequently to see his family, especially his old mother. He told me that the sea pool in which, as a child, I learned to swim, down the cliff in front of the vicarage, is no more. It has been swallowed up by a small, stormy-sea vulnerable, boat harbour.

We walk round the ship outside, several times each day. Wrapped up for a cold wind. Last night, after dark, the wind was much diminished, the headwind possibly now a tailwind. We travel at 14 knots (16.1109 mph)

Table talk

For lunch we sat with the parents of the Captain. They are travelling not to Tristan, but to Gough Island, as a surprise for their daughter who is the paramedic and team leader of the group of scientists about to be relieved. We enjoyed her parents’ company. They are Afrikaans and touchingly devout. Before we ate they covertly joined hands briefly and muttered a little grace. Lovely to observe. They’ve spent years in Namibia and we discussed that country’s politics and prospects. He maintains Namibia to be doing better than South Africa, there being less bitterness and hatred between black and white than in South Africa.

At dinner we sat with the Chaplain appointed to the Gough Island team of eight. They’re to be deposited on that isolated, uninhabited island 250 miles south east of Tristan for 13 months. He’s with them only for the voyage and won’t stay on the island. Also at table was a Norwegian returning to Tristan for nostalgic reasons. Born there he’s due to stay for three weeks with his nanny of days gone by.

The Chaplain is of the Dutch Reformed Church, amiable and keen to share his experiences. Both men were interesting, but the clergy tend to be voluble and egotistic, so the Chaplain had the greater say. He told of his time in Burundi with a contingent of the South African army, doing apparently excellent work in that benighted country. A seemingly wise and admirable forces chaplain.

Geodesy

During the day we attended lectures in the auditorium. One on seals, one on Nightingale Island buntings, one on oceanography and one on geodesy. The last was by a brilliant fellow from whom we learned that sea level is not constant, even allowing for tidal variations. It can vary up to 140 metres in height from one part of the globe to another. Nor is the level of the earth's crust constant. To measure them, therefore, you need something constant and for this they select one of the furthest quasars in space.

(303) "This and That" - 7 July 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha (3)

Of twelve long sea voyages I've made over the years, seven have been on working rather than passenger ships. Among them a Royal Navy frigate, a BP tanker, a converted munitions carrier, a container ship and a general cargo vessel. Best of all was the SA Agulhas, a polar research ship.

Working ships grant you the privilege of irrelevance. You are a close, interested observer of an enclosed, fascinating working community. Tolerated everywhere, essential nowhere. Best of all, little is done to entertain passengers. On the S A Agulhas, even the bar was open for only three hours a day.

The edited diary: Thurs 7 Sept 2012: S A Agulhas

The vessel heaves-to for an hour each day to allow sea water samples and other observations to be taken. The one hundred passengers are mostly working scientists or essential island personnel. Even we, strictly speaking, are not tourists. We are going to live in the Island's empty vicarage and look after the church during our stay.

The ship's dining room is not large and so there are two sittings. We are allocated to the second at 7.00pm, a mere half hour after the first. Lingering table talk over coffee and port isn't encouraged it seems.

We were served a good, four course meal by unfussy waiters who double up as stewards, deckhands and more. We sat with a bright, young African oceanographer and female intern. He was very forthcoming about his work and love of it. She said hardly a word, probably through shyness.

There appears to be no easy internet availability on board. I might, though, be able to access emails on my small travelling laptop if I can get a cable to attach my machine to our cabin's network plug. The harassed, lugubrious purser tells me he should be able to obtain me one.

Friday 7 Sept, 2012 11.42am: S A Agulhas

We had a good early night's sleep. Some time after nine I looked out of the window and seeing no lights from Cape Town realised that we were on the move. We got up at around seven, had a welcome scalding hot shower and went for a brisk walk round the ship, wearing beanies and waterproof jackets. There was a stiff breeze, partly from the ship's speed, but we must too be heading into the wind. As is so often the case at sea, there is little sign of life and the ocean is morosely indifferent, blank and scentless. Only when land and sea meet is there a thrilling, therapeutic explosion of scents.

At the top of the ship, above the bridge, there's a splendid viewing cockpit with half a dozen seats behind great glass windows. It offers wide views ahead and to the sides. Two serious and professional birdwatchers were there with note pads and binoculars watching out for anything

interesting. They reported sighting so far but one petrel. We ourselves spotted what appeared to be a tern. A whale was announced later over the intercom.

I asked a Tristanite about the frequency of whales around the island. He said they do still arrive, but not often these days. When I was a boy on the island in the 1950s whales came to breed in good numbers during spring. The sound of their trumpeting and blowing and of their tail flukes clapping the sea surface was a thrilling commonplace of island life.

We were told later that when the Island was deserted, after the volcanic eruption in 1961, until the return of the islanders in 1963, Japanese whalers (others claimed them to have been Russian or Norwegian) visited the islands and slaughtered every whale in sight. They have never returned in any significant number.

Pickled

We have had a life boat drill. There are two large, bright orange and completely enclosed life boats. Each seats seventy five people, all sitting in four, tight rows having first donned special weather and water-proof orange suits. In these one has to relieve oneself until rescued, an unpleasant thought. On reflection, though, what else could possibly be the case? The ship is designed for Antarctic waters and so bright, well-sealed and totally weatherproof gear is essential. To be pickled in your own urine and dung for a few days, is a small price to pay for survival.

Home