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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (August 2019)



Approaching Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic

*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 **August 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>

(310) "This and That" - 25 August 2019 Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (10)

Sat 15 Sept 2012: To get online on Tristan you visit its "Internet Café". Some café! There's a notice forbidding eating and drinking. It's a small, cold room with a row of monitors on a narrow desk, perfunctorily cubicled. I am not complaining. The pleasure of three weeks on an interesting island is enhanced by almost no internet. We managed to send an email to members of the family. That was that.

Kikuyu grass and clinker

Lars, a lay-reader who helps keep the church going when there is no priest on the island, called to go through Sunday's service. We decided to keep things as close to normal as possible. He'll take all the first part of the service except the greeting, absolution and sermon. I will then take over from the offertory right through to the end. He's a modest, delightful and accommodating fellow.

In the afternoon we walked east from the rectory over wet, spongy paddocks of kikuyu grass. Introduced by an agriculturalist some years ago kikuyu is now as much a curse as a blessing. It's an aggressive grower., insinuating itself into walls, gardens and everywhere. It thrives on the high rainfall, and no frosts, but is not notably nutritious.

Along the western edge of the 1961 lava plateau runs a rivulet that ends in a fair sized pool, barred from the sea by a natural dam of large beach stones. I wonder why this pool was not dredged and opened to the ocean to make a safer small harbour than the one actually built. It would be far less likely to be washed away by frequent wild seas. We passed a memorial to fifty souls lost in the shipwreck of the "HMS Julia" in 1806 and then walked carefully up unforgiving, jagged rocks and clinker to the summit of the 1961 volcano. It yielded splendid views of the village. Cold rain and wind prevented us from pressing on to the easternmost point of the settlement plateau. Potato cakes, fried onions and baked beans warmed us up once back home.

Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism

The visiting Roman Catholic priest called. He's an "Apostolic Prefect" which is a senior priest in charge of an ecclesiastical district unable to be, or not yet a diocese. Although not a bishop he wears a mitre on occasions, can perform confirmations and has a crosier. He told us at length of the 'heroic Catholicism' of the devout woman who brought religious division to Tristan in the form of the Roman Catholic faith. I restrained myself from pointing out how idiotic and scandalous it is that there should be two religious communities and priests on so small an island.

When I suggested that the shortage of RC priests in the western world meant that it would be unlikely for there ever to be a permanent RC priest on the island, he claimed there to be no shortage, talking of the thousand upon thousand present in Rome at the culmination of "the year of the priest", and citing percentages as the necessary criterion for priestly ministry not numbers. Oh dear, oh dear. We moved on to an interesting conversation about philosophy in which he is interested and pursuing further study.

The two denominations do at least get on well together. We have been invited by a family we met on the ship to the baptism into the RC Church of their little boy.

A.N. Wilson's book *The Elizabethans* continues to absorb me. He quotes an amazing sonnet on the Church by John Donne with a prose translation by Helen Gardiner which helps in understanding it.

Queen Elizabeth, on being questioned by her Roman Catholic sister about her beliefs on the Eucharist, responded with what Wilson calls *a theologically impeccable, but brilliantly ambivalent quatrain...*

*Christ was the Word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it,
And what His words did make it,
That I believe and take it.*

Wilson maintains that only the word 'did' would worry a transubstantiation believing Roman Catholic. For it implies Protestantism by its possible questioning of the priest's power to summon Christ to the altar with each and every offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice. Interesting.

(309) "This and That" - 18 August 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (9)

Two British Forces television stations are accessible on Tristan. Both, for the most part, dire. So off to bed last night at 8 o' clock. The wind whistled over and about the low rectory. Bursts of rain on its iron roof lulled us happily to sleep. It being still cold, grey and wet this morning, we walked to matins well toggled up, our beanies under hoods.

Makeshift and make do

I type looking out over a tempestuous ocean that stretches north, unimpeded by land, for thousands of miles.

It's an odd island. Not poverty stricken or down at heel, but a trifle makeshift and make do. Ordering and shipping spare parts for repairs takes ages. Ingenuity, derring-do and the services of Heath-Robinson have often to suffice.

Saturday 15 September, 2012 9.00am

Today dawned sunny and still, but has turned grey again. The sea, though, is tranquil and the mountain completely clear of cloud.

I awoke early to darker and more negative thoughts about the island. Possibly the result of a walk yesterday up the 1961 volcano mound, and then on to a partly bulldozed mess of clinker, ash-dust and jagged black rocks that is the island rubbish dump. It is littered with wrecked cars, rusting tanks and machinery, including moulds for the concrete dolosses that protect the harbour from a wild sea. Rubbish dumps rarely lift the spirits. My dark thoughts meandered here and there, as follows.

The Garden of Eden

The Tristan da Cunha of my boyhood, before the 1961 volcanic eruption, was a prelapsarian Garden of Eden. The eruption was the "Fall". The clinker so deeply black!

Exiled from Eden to England, to the real, fallen world of weeds, materialism and relentless competition, the islanders longed to return to Tristan. "*In England*", said one of the old timers, "*I can no longer hear the voice of God*". Adam and Eve too had heard God's voice in their Eden

But on their return, Eden was no more. "The Fall" had occurred on the Island itself, symbolised by that great, black scar of dried lava and clinker. As an expression of contempt and disillusion, the scar was made their midden, their dump.

"The Fall" spread its tentacles out into the community, symbolised by the black volcanic rock walls now everywhere. Worst of all, from my prelapsarian perspective, the eruption, in destroying the factory and boat beaches, forced the commercial centre of the island west. So my Edenic *Garden Gate Beach* where I learned to swim in crystal clear water pools, among klip fish, baby crayfish and small octopuses, was blasted and ruined into a small harbour. Around it the iron sheds, rusting detritus and oil patches, so characteristic of commerce, industry and profit outside of Eden.

Ichabod

As I type these fanciful thoughts I look out to a glorious ocean and clear horizon, but no longer down a pristine gully of naturally scattered rocks and wandering donkeys. The view now is over a narrow road, lined with rock walls, then two more walls, a heap of tattered plastic sacks and an ugly shed. A machine of some sort peeps above the cliff. They're distant, not too ruinous of the natural beauty, but unpleasing. To the west lie the administration buildings, the small supermarket and workshops. There used to be a lane past modest flax lined houses and on to the geese and cattle grazed turf of my prelapsarian youth. Ichabod!

Proverbial wisdom

We called on churchwarden Eddie. He offered us a cup of tea in that husbandly way that indicates he expects his wife to provide it. She did so with a fine proverb put-down: "*He only offered with one hand.*" It's lovely to be here among such good folk, even if so much has changed. The "station" (the expatriates' compound), at the bottom of which, nearest the sea, was the rectory, has gone. Happily the modest replacement rectory is in exactly the same spot. A lovely narrow lane behind it meanders through thick flax where my brother and I smoked our first cigarettes.

(308) "This and That" - 11 August 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (8)

After dumping our cases in the small vicarage we made a preliminary reconnaissance of the world's remotest village: *Edinburgh of the Seven Seas*.

Pohutukawa trees

Low houses nestle snugly into New Zealand flax wind breaks. Regrettably today's method of building the cottages is by way of wooden shutters filled with reinforced concrete. It makes for less attractive dwellings than when large blocks of soft, volcanic rock, shaped by axe, formed the gable ends. All is not lost though. Many new houses are brightly painted and although all the flax-thatched roofs have gone, the corrugated iron that's replaced them is brightly and attractively colour-bonded.

In my youth, due to the wind, there were no trees in the village at all. We used to walk to picnic under the only reasonably substantial tree on the settlement plateau. A conifer in the shelter of a gulch. There are now quite a few New Zealand pohutukawa trees around the village. They readily spread threatening to displace the endemic diminutive trees and shrubs on the mountain. Zealous, purist botanists urge their eradication.

The 1961 volcano has made available an unlimited supply of jagged black rocks ideal for dry stone walling. Stone walls are more a feature of the settlement than I remember from sixty years ago.

Each house appears to be minded by a silent, wary black and white collie-like dog. The pleasing call of cockerels brings back memories of Africa as well as the Tristan of old. A map left for us in the rectory usefully numbers and lists every cottage and names all 270 householders.

Mountains melt like wax

The church is much changed. Affixed to its east end is a good sized vestry of unsightly, unpainted concrete. The building has been widened doing away with its pillars rendering it less cosy and intimate than I remember. We said matins there this morning at 8.00am. By the window looking out over flax to the ocean, thoroughly at home and deeply blessed. Neaum vocal chords set moist South Atlantic molecules of air vibrating with the sweet cadences of Anglicanism once more. The psalms for the day, 96 and 97, were particularly appropriate: *Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad: let the sea roar and all that fills it..... The Lord is king let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of the islands be glad..... His lightnings light the world: the earth sees it and quakes. The mountains melt like wax before his face:....*

The oak altar rails I helped to sand as my father made them in the 1950s have gone. Of necessity they were replaced with the widening of the church. A portion of them remains as a handrail outside the church gate, weathering into decay. I fingered them fondly as I passed by.

Hottentot Gulch

After lunch we walked to the west of the settlement. The track is now narrowly tarred into a meandering lane. The island is riven by deep gulches, the first on the way west being Hottentot Gulch, no longer the formidable obstacle I remember it to have been. There is a little bus stop there, to transport elderly folk in particular to the island's fertile *Potato Patches*. Less than two miles away. We walked as far as the *Hill Piece*, a green hill being slowly and spectacularly

eroded by wild seas. We resisted the walk to its summit and instead made our way up a small foot hill for a lovely view of the patchwork quilt of walled potato gardens, a glittering sea and Inaccessible Island.

The mighty 2000 foot base mountain that hides the 6,760 foot peak from view dominates the whole narrow plateau, looming closely wherever you happen to be. Its great water courses and gulches are spectacular, some falling in great steps which, after heavy rain, form brief impressive waterfalls. Sheep graze high up its extensive lower slopes.

The mossy turf of the hill we had climbed was soft enough for me to walk barefoot. The cattle are less emaciated than in the 1950s and we observed several pens for ducks in the shelter of a *watron* along the way. The wind had all but died for our walk back.

(307) “This and That” - 4 August 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (7)

Thursday 13 Sept, 2012 10.00am

I sit at the study desk looking out over the garden wall of the small Rectory on Tristan da Cunha. The garden's shape is as remembered from 60 years ago. So too the sea, which appears to lap the cliff top a couple of hundred yards away. Not much else is the same from this view. The gully below the house is now crossed by a narrow, infrequently traversed road and there are two dry-stone, jagged, black volcanic rock walls across it, forming a pair of paddocks out of what used to be common ground running down the gully to the beach. In the nearest graze two cows.

The 1961 volcano destroyed the old crayfish canning factory and the two main beaches. This resulted in a shift westward of what industry there is on the island. The black-sand beach we used to play and sunbathe on, and from which we learned to swim, is now the island's essential small boat harbour, with all the detritus associated with such places. Above it is the crayfish processing and freezing factory, supermarket and so on. The view, as I sit typing, while rain pours down and wind blows, is still pleasing. It's just that west of the rectory is now the tiny industrial and commercial hub of the 260 resident community. This was not so when we left nearly sixty years ago.

We anchored at 8am yesterday, as scheduled. Early dawn had thrilled us with a view of the island in its entirety. It gradually emerged from darkness into the light of dawn's delighting definition. The island's peak, streaked sparsely with snow, was clear although most of the sky was cloudy. Mere wisps of cloud wreathed it. For a while the 6,765 foot peak was brightened by early morning sunlight. Nightingale Island, 25 miles from Tristan, was faintly visible to the left of the island. As we drew really close it was replaced to be right by Inaccessible Island. A cold wind numbed us as we stood on the observation deck, though milder and less fierce than for the last few days. The waves had lost their white caps.

Albatrosses and stinkers but no whales

Much of the ship's deck space had been roped off. Fore, to allow the crane to unload the hold, aft for the emergence of one of the helicopters to ferry us ashore.

Save for the plateau upon which the village is sited the island appears formidably inhospitable. The 1961 lava extrusion into the sea is deeply black and as yet hardly weather-soften. It's low cliffs are pounded by the sea. Vegetation on the 2000 foot base mountain appears scant and a great white scar on the mountain's face, above the new lava plateau and behind the village tells of a monster landslide.

A few more albatrosses than usual were flying around, as well as the dark petrel known as a “stinker”. None of the fondly remembered “kingbirds” (the graceful Antarctic tern) are in evidence, and no whales.

We were allocated to helicopter flight number seven of nine. The machine in use takes only five passengers at a time and so there was a fair wait to be resented or enjoyed. All the more so due

to a deal of dithering before even the first exploratory flight took place to test the machine and deposit two of the crew on the island to assist passengers disembarking there.

Our cases, with everyone else's, were enclosed in a great rope net and lifted by the crane on to a pontoon. A crude, uncompromisingly functional, square platform on floats, powered by two outboard motors.

Crayfish mayonnaise

After a briefing on helicopter etiquette we enjoyed the short flight to a field not far from the Rectory. A gathering of folk were waiting to greet loved ones and friends. We were met by Churchwarden Eddie, an exact contemporary of mine. We were in the same class at school sixty years ago. He introduced us to Sean, the English Administrator of the Island and his wife Marina. We then headed for the Rectory, a small, simple bungalow where a loaf of homemade bread, several cakes, one large and three small eggs and a bowl of crayfish mayonnaise welcomed us.

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