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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (June 2020)



St John's, Boldre

*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 **June 2020** 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>

(354) “This and That” - 28 June 2020

Most of us are mixtures of good and bad. Wheat and tares grow in the same field.

Purring appreciation

This makes pointing the finger, be it at virtue or sin, a vexed business. Canonising saints is as fraught as vilifying sinners. Putting up statues as dubious as pulling them down.

If I was silly enough to want to erect a statue, and had the wherewithal to do so, whom would I choose to honour? Possibly Dr Samuel Johnson. To my mind as admirable a figure as any in English history. Physically grotesque and decidedly eccentric, he was also humane, witty, perceptive, courageous, trenchant, deeply moral and a profound if troubled Christian. Inevitably, too, a man of his age with many of its prejudices, biases and assumptions.

He already has at least two statues. If they were knocked down by iconoclasts I'd want to knock down the knockers down. One of the statues is near St Clement Dane's Church in London, Diana and I have visited it. Another is in his home town, Lichfield. Outside his one time London house, now a museum, is a statue of his beloved cat Hodge. This too I've visited to purr my appreciation.

A den of tyrants

The past is best delved into and explored in order to understand it, not judge it. Which doesn't mean that manifest and horrifying practices like slavery, shouldn't be fully acknowledged as such and called out.

One of the most admirable and remarkable things about Dr Johnson is how prescient and morally far-sighted on this issue he was. His life coincided with the worst of the transatlantic slave trade, of which he was an uncompromising opponent. Jamaica, the most profitable of Britain's colonies at that time, he termed “*a place of great wealth and dreadful wickedness, a den of tyrants, and a dungeon of slaves.*” At an Oxford dinner he proffered a toast “*to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies.*” Of the founders of America he asked: “*How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?*”

Unlike far too many merely theoretical ideologues, Johnson, the staunchest of Tories, employed as his valet Francis Barber, a freed black Jamaican slave, paid for his education, welcomed him as a member of his household, developed a relationship of genuine friendship with him, supported and encouraged his marriage to an English woman and eventually made him his residual heir with an annuity of £70 a year, an appreciable sum in those days.

The bastard

If you are in to toppling statues there's one of a right royal bastard to pull down in Falaise, Normandy. Cast in bronze, on a socking great stone pedestal, it depicts the illegitimate son of Robert Duke of Normandy. He is astride a rearing horse, brandishing triumphantly a five-flagged spear:

*See him ride the roaring air
In an iron moustache and emerald hair,
Furious with flowers on a foundry cob
The bastard son of the late Lord Bob.*

It's William the Conqueror, that brutal colonialist and destroyer of Anglo Saxon culture and language. It's a fine statue though. Only a virtue-signalling, self-righteous twerp would ever contemplate destroying it.

Artificial insemination

Like Samuel Johnson, and *the bastard son of the late Lord Bob*, we are all children of our time and generation. This means that to me the acronym AI stands not for artificial intelligence, but for artificial insemination.

It's the time of year I enjoy dabbling in it. My gem squash vines have begun to flower. The male flowers, to begin with, don't coincide with the female, and so the tiny fruit, beneath the female flowers comes to naught. At last though, with summer fully upon us, the male flowers of one of our plants have started to coincide with the female flowers of another. So each morning, after our daily walk, I pluck male flowers, peel off their garish petals to lay bare the stamen and then pollinate with its anther the

stigmas of female flowers. I did this in Australia so often did the bees there let me down. Even here I take no risks.

Well-buttered gem squash in a week's time.

(353) "This and That" - 21 June 2020

To expostulate exhilaration and dance delight happens. It did last Tuesday morning.

A rainbow in the sky

The sun, warm outside my study's window, both lit up and shaded down the great feathery congregations of still tender-green oak leaves. A sleek upside down nuthatch stabbed fiercely at peanuts two inches from the window pane. Melodious Mozart's early piano concertos rendered nihilism, atheism, cosmic disorder and chaos unthinkable. William Wordsworth came to mind:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky,
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die.....

No need to die then. An old fellow I am, but my heart still leaps at beauty, dances delight, expostulates exhilaration and joy.

Zithering zephyrs

As when, after daily matins last week, we read, reread, reread and reread, Causley's early ballad, *Cowboy Song*:

I come from Salem County
Where the silver melons grow,
Where the wheat is sweet as an angel's feet
And the zithering zephyrs blow.
I walk the blue bone-orchard
In the apple-blossom snow,
When the teasy bees take their honeyed ease
And the marmalade moon hangs low.....

It's the music of the poem that dazzles and delights. The alliteration, the rhyme, the rhythm. The dazzling, daring images are a bountiful bonus. *Wheat as sweet as an angel's feet. Teasy bees taking honeyed ease, a marmalade moon hanging low.* Joy, joy, joy, joy!

A refreshingly barbaric world

To leave the familiar and plunge into the strange and unfamiliar is travel's chief delight. When first we settled in Boldre, all the way from Australia, how ecstatically different, strange and magical everything was. We walked on air.

Seven years later all that has worn off. It's now sweet familiarity that imparts delight.

Every day though, Diana and I do take a trip into a strange and unfamiliar land. We enter the world of the psalms. It's a barbaric, parochial world, almost totally ignorant of life beyond the local village, town or, in the case of the royal psalms, the nation. So it's a world not bombarded with news, comment, analysis and statistics as is ours, but one precarious, with high infant mortality and deaths in childbirth. No NHS or welfare state. A world of drought, flood, famine, plague, pestilence, arbitrary justice, sudden warfare and tyrannical rulers.

Yet for all that, as well as psalms of lament and complaint are glorious examples of praise and thanksgiving. Even more remarkable and refreshing, there is an insistent, all but ubiquitous belief in a God who against all obvious evidence is just and righteous and good. How footling then, from our comfortable world and existence, seem the reasons proffered for abandoning the Almighty.

News averse

There's a ready remedy to an aversion to the news. Watch and listen to it from a distance. News of Europe, America and the United Kingdom is best observed from Australia. To scan the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's news website every morning reveals more than enough of what's going on in our country and hemisphere. It's so much more in proportion. Well down in prominence compared to local Australian events and concerns.

Australian news likewise is best viewed from 7000 miles away in Boldre. As an Australian citizen I like to keep lightly in touch with what is going on there. From this distance it is easily seen to be, for the most part, parochial and hardly worth noting. A few minutes suffice and then back to what really matters: *Wheat as sweet as an angel's feet. Teasy bees taking honeyed ease, and a marmalade moon hanging low..... Joy, joy, joy, joy!*

(352) "This and That" - 14 June 2020

Tripe is unacceptable. Either on a plate or from the pulpit. I've been dealt dollops and dollops from pulpits. Only once, at a barbecue in Zimbabwe, on a plate.

Noisome juices

To celebrate the completion and consecration of a new church we'd built, a whole ox was roasted on a spit for a large congregation. An African friend offered to share the beast's juicy, unwashed tripe with me. I declined with a shudder. Surprised, he sank his teeth into a great chunk. Noisome juices oozed out to irrigate his chin. Its spongy, khaki green colour, as I recall it, still raises a shudder.

It all came back to mind as I prepared last Wednesday's evening meal. Three fillets of fine white fish to be crumbed. We don't batter fish fillets at the Vicarage. We flour, egg and soft-breadcrumb them thickly. Conventionally fried, rather than deep-fried, they soak up enough fat to crisp up as crustily delicious and unhealthy as any piece of battered fish.

An impulsive and experimental cook, I can rarely leave well alone. On Wednesday I added great swags of parsley and chives from the garden to the bread, as I zapped it into crumbs. The delicious, crisp, crustily-crumbed fish fillets I served up were khaki green in colour. Disturbingly similar to that tripe remembered from forty years ago.

Cooking and writing are dear to me. My life's two, regular invitations to creativity. As with all creativity, other than God's, it is not entirely gratuitous. Mine is engendered, called forth and dependent upon an appreciative audience. For my cooking, Diana's discriminating, daring and catholic palate. For my writing, a coterie of parishioners with that distinctive Church of England taste for light-heartedness freighted gently with seriousness, doubt shadow-boxing with conviction, irreverence undergirded by reverence, transience tickled by eternity, and despair marinated in joy. To hanker for a larger audience, remuneration or notoriety would debase it all into dull, portentous pontification.

Bread sauce and a bantam hen

My culinary creativity's most memorable moment occurred one hot Christmas in Australia. It's a busy time for a priest. I made the bread sauce early, tasted it, smacked my lips at exactly the right suspicion of cloves and perfectly judged seasoning and set it aside to mature to perfection.

On Christmas day a cursory glance revealed its surface tranquillity faintly troubled. A light stir with a spoon inspired it to wink and gently belch. It was quietly fermenting. Undaunted I took swift, remedial action, cooking it up and adding more breadcrumbs and salt. A quick taste revealed it to pass muster, though perhaps with a faint, bitter aftertaste. I suggested to my daughter Rachel, without informing her of any problem, that she should taste it. She sampled a spoonful, only to dash for the sink to spit it out. No bread sauce that Christmas.

My journalistic creativity's most memorable moment occurred when I edited the Ballarat Diocese's monthly *Church Chronicle*. In a piece of light verse which I naively assumed to be obviously tongue in cheek, I described a persistent "letters to the editor" complainant as "a cockerel tyrannised bantam hen" To avoid legal action I was taken by my bishop to apologise to the offended party. Phew.

Pilley Bailey pond

Is an all but total aversion to world and national news a sign of world-weariness? Does it suggest that it's time to step off and out? Into a six foot box, six feet under?

I hope not. Life is still exceedingly tolerable. Almost idyllic. So long, that is, as the world and national news are kept at bay, switched off and ignored. To be different, question orthodoxies, a practising Christian and determined to stand out from the mob guarantees a degree of alienation. For the mob, now so digitally dexterous, has found it's voice. Amplified by a doom-hungry, mischief-fomenting press, it is a loud, dispiriting and intimidating voice.

I'd hoped on leaving St John's, in my late 90s, that a statue in my honour would be erected on the corner of May Lane and Pilley Street. If quickly and appropriately dumped in Pilley Bailey pond, it would at least be visible in droughts.

(351) "This and That" - 7 June 2020

People have been dancing on the grave of God for a century or two now. But he's still around. Unsurprisingly. The tomb danced upon being untenanted, vacated.

More the heart than the head

I've been considering the "death of God" from two angles this week. First, with a laugh, in a witty piece of light verse by an American poet who has featured before in this column. And then in a review of a book I found interesting enough to order: *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt*.

The book is by a highly regarded historian, Professor Alec Ryrie. He's a specialist in the history of Protestant Christianity and a Fellow of the British Academy. He claims a soft spot for atheists having been one himself. He's a Christian now though, a licensed Lay Reader in the Church of England.

His beautifully written book, its reviewer informs us, is a history of atheism from an unusual perspective. It traces its origins way, way back to the feelings and emotions of ordinary men and women, long before the assumed cool, detached rationalism of the philosophers and scientists of the enlightenment. Back to ordinary people's anger at corrupt priests, boredom with blather and their existential anxiety and despair that a flimsily propounded faith failed to alleviate. "Intellectuals and philosophers may think they make the weather," observes Ryrie, "but they are more often driven by it". Atheism, like Faith itself, derives more from the heart than the head. We're closer to each other than ever we're prepared to admit.

A ten Cadillac affair

The verse to do with the death of God that set me laughing with delight is too long to quote in its entirety. It also has a couple of stanzas that might offend those of a delicate disposition. So there follows a selection of stanzas. It is written by the American X J Kennedy, born in 1929. He's an attractive personality, poet and author of children's books. The X in his initials he assumed to distinguish him from the far less interesting but, once upon a time, more famous Joe Kennedy. To be read out loud, as always.

God's Obsequies

So I went to the funeral of God,
A ten-Cadillac affair,
And sat in a stun. It seemed everyone
Who had helped do Him in was there:

Karl Marx had a wide smirk on his face;
Friedrich Engels, a simpering smile,
And Friedrich Nietzsche, worm-holed and leechy,
Kept tittering all the while.

There was Sigmund Freud whose couch had destroyed
The soul, that was Edward Gibbon,

And that earth-shaking cuss Copernicus
Sent a wreath with a sun-gold ribbon.

There were Bertrand Russell and a noisy bustle
Of founders of homemade churches,
And Jean-Paul Sartre bawling “Down with Montmartre!”
There were prayer cards a dime could purchase,

Declared Martin Luther, ablaze with rancour,
“Why mourn ye, O hypocrites?
May the guilty be gored with Michael’s sword!
It’s the work of Jesuits!”

Mused the Pope on the folding chair next to me
As he mopped his expiring brow,
“Whatever will become of the See of Rome?
Ah, who’ll hire an old man now?”

I had a quick word with Jesus
In Aramaic and Greek.
“Yes,” he said, “it’s sad. And so sudden---why, Dad
Looked uncommonly well last week..... etc, etc...

Magic

I love rollicking and well rhymed and rhythmmed wit. Words mere words that take wing to soar,
fly, plummet and glide. The ploddingly prosy turned into poesy. Magic.

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