

Home

**“DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS.....
TO THE HAVEN WHERE THEY WOULD BE”**

ONGOING DIARY COLUMN (No. 7)

To Boldre, England from Melbourne, Australia by Freighter

Andrew Neaum



Proctor House - Princeton

Wednesday 16 July 2013

I lie at peace on the bed of a third floor bedroom in *Proctor House*, the lovely residence of the Anglican Chaplain to Princeton University. Princeton is a lovely and leafy town. The house is a wooden one like so many in this part of the world, they are called clapboard houses I think and this one dates, I guess, from around 1860. Painted pale yellow outside it is elegant in a casual, unpretentious way, tastefully furnished and spacious. I like it. It is wonderful to be in the US for the first time and in this part of it, so civilized and affluent. A house once inhabited by Scott Fitzgerald is nearby.

It was deeply refreshing to enjoy a couple of beers with delicious snacks on a warm verandah, overlooking a leafy street and the lovely stonework of the University. Cicadas called in a different and less frenzied register than in Australia. Then there was a glass of wine with a meal that had nothing whatsoever to do with Poland or to with a ship's galley presided over by an untrained cook. The company was quick witted, fluent and very humorous. Peter and Robyn French amiable hosts to two Neaum clergymen and their talented spouses.

How hot and humid it is though. Almost unbearably so. We walked around the very lovely University Campus yesterday afternoon. It must have dehydrated me more

than I realised because during the night I had what I call a “scalper”, a headache that attacks me in waves, rather than constantly, and is associated with dehydration. I was also very tired, having had only about four hours sleep the night before. Then as well I had enjoyed my first alcohol in over a month, though only two small beers and a glass of wine. No matter, I am now recovered.

We were in dock at Philadelphia when I awoke at about four in the morning and by five I was showered and dressed. We had been told that Customs and Immigration officials would be after us by about that time and we expected them to be intrusive, nit-picking and all too thorough. However we didn't go searching them out until 6am when we went down to the ship's office. It proved to be just the right moment. The Captain and the first of the Customs and Immigration officials were present, we each filled in a brief form given to us by the Captain and handed them over with our passports. They were duly scrutinised with a friendly comment or two and that was that, we were free to step foot in the Land of the Free.

We had emailed Peter French to pick us up only between nine and ten and urged him not to hurry to make it even by then. So we had our last breakfast on board, said Mattins and had a read in our cabin until almost half past eight. We then surprised ourselves by getting all our luggage (still far too much of it) into the lift as well as ourselves, including the big picture for Peter French in its wooden case and we made our way down to the main deck. There were fond farewells to Piotr and Karolina, and one more formal than fond to Volker the Captain, we then headed down the gangplank, me first with the picture and then crew members and a friendly stevedore with the luggage. Diana was last to leave, to ensure that no bag was left behind. So on to a bus almost immediately and a short trip to the security gate where we sat in the shade of the small gatehouse, shielded from an intense sun in humid warmth awaiting pick up.

We discovered my phone was not responding to inward or outward calls. So much for “International Roaming”. On arrival in England I look forward to buying a new sim card and cutting for good all connection with Telstra. Unable to ring Peter French we got one of the security fellows to lend us his phone, but we only got an answering machine. One delightful security man passing by in a car gave us each a bottle of ice-cold water. Eventually Peter turned up, hardly changed since we worked together at St John's Wodonga at the turn of the millennium. We got all our stuff into the borrowed station waggon with ease and then headed thirty miles north to Princeton on the wrong side of the road all the way, talking non stop.

What a rich, green and fertile land it is in these parts. It is hugely built up between Philadelphia and Princeton, but along the highway and lesser roads are glorious trees, many of them dense with creepers, and the road verges are vivid green, lush and more coarsely vibrant than in England. Green fields of maize are to be spotted here and there, and the cobs we tasted later were not too sweet, succulent and delicious. Princeton and its environs are prosperous, great mansions of wood or stone grace the roadsides.

Peter and Robyn French appear to prosper and flourish. A large, lively and lovely black retriever called Rupert has replaced the Emma we knew in Wodonga, whose remains rest under a Magnolia in the garden. My son David and Rachel Greene his wife are staying with the French's as well. They are doing some academic work before moving to Cambridge in late August, David to become Chaplain to St

Catherine's College. So good and often sparkling company indeed, though we were careful not to break up the study timetables of the four of them.



Princeton

In the garden at dusk were lovely fireflies, emitting erratic flashes, rather than a constant beam as did those I was acquainted with in Africa. Also in the garden were twelve foot high and healthy cherry tomatoes, as well as squirrels abundant who are not at all averse to the taste of green tomatoes, which are guarded from them, but not entirely effectively.

Princeton University is built nearly all of stone, mostly neo-Gothic and imitative of Oxbridge, though more open rather than divided into individual Colleges. The French's house is over the road from the University and a mere one or two stone throw's from the town centre in one direction and from the station in the other, from where hopefully we will catch a train on our way to New York over the weekend.

We have established that we are most likely to leave on Monday the twenty second of July and that our ship, the *Rickmers Seoul* is older, smaller and slower than the *Bahia*. It apparently will take fourteen days to get to Antwerp and there are two other passengers with us. I might be able to have a crack at typing some of my own old diaries while afloat, though we arrive rather later than we had hoped and might have to extend our insurance by a day or two.

Thursday, Friday 18 and 19 July 2013

The lavatories in America hold a large amount of water in their basin. This means that it is impossible to stand and piddle without sounding like a waterfall. Charitable gentlemen faced with more conventional receptacles are able to manifest their gentlemanliness by aiming modestly for the porcelain should anyone be within earshot. Such charitable behaviour is impossible here.

More even than in England do people here seem to own dogs. We found this the case in Princeton but more especially so in New York. For the two days and nights we spent in Brooklyn it seemed that nearly everyone was walking their dog or dogs. With only one exception they picked up any turds dropped. On Sunday morning, in a park nearby our apartment, there was a great meeting of dogs and their owners, hundreds of cherished pets of all sizes and shapes, the nastiest being a pair of hairless brutes that looked like skinned rabbits.



Dogs in Fort Green Park, Brooklyn on Sunday Morning

With David we visited the best spice shop I have ever experienced. The place smelt divine and there were jars of spices of every sort. Next to most of them was a smaller jar for sampling spices. After a sniff or taste we were urged to scatter the remains on the wooden floor, hence the divine smell. I was able to sniff for the first time ever asafoetida, upon which I once had based an article. It is a “concreted resinous gum, with a strong alliaceous odour procured from the *narthex asafoetida* used in cookery and as an anti-spasmodic in medicine”.

We took some splendid walks about Princeton, in spite of the heat. One long one we made in the relative cool of the night. The place felt safe and young girls wandered around quite happily well into the night. The beautiful residencies of the University are used during the long vacation for all sorts of summer schools, so there were a lot of young people wandering around. Summer schools appear to be a feature of young middle class people’s lives.

We treated the French’s and Dave and Rachel to an Indian Meal one night and very good it was too, though the one enjoyed in Auckland remains in our memory as best of all. After this meal David and Peter took me along to a small and unusual tobacconist’s where, after much rumination and banter, they bought themselves a cigar each. They must frequent the place fairly regularly because they knew and were on good terms with the owner and one at least of his clientele. It was a kind of de facto men’s club or pub, with arm chairs to sit in while savouring the delights of tobacco, and there were about a dozen fellows enjoying conversation and a cigar together, one of them with a monstrous, black Great Dane. The customer that Peter and David were on familiar terms with is an ex Air Force pilot and now financier. He kept a bottle or two of rye whisky in a cupboard there and we all were given a generous tot to have with our cigar, though these days I do not indulge in smoking even cigars. There was good conversation and banter and the place seemed to me to be quintessentially American, though quite why I am not sure. It was very masculine, with a mixture of backgrounds and types all drawn together by sweet, if now widely frowned upon, tobacco. The last of us were gently turned out by the owner when finally he wished to close.

After a walk with Peter and Rupert on an extremely hot Friday morning which included a visit to a lovely formal garden, we plunged with relief into the cool of the University Art Gallery. There we determined to look only at the American paintings and enjoyed doing so. I was particularly taken by a painting by Winslow Homer of a woman in mourning sitting beside an open window that looked out to brightness and gaiety. There was much more of interest though and even a couple of examples of Warhol including one of his Marilyn Monroe screen prints from 1962: *Blue Marilyn*



To sleep on most nights we needed the air conditioner on in our room it was so hot and humid. During the day a couple of air conditioners were kept going on the ground floor which, with two floors above as insulation and the help of a fan, did keep downstairs relatively cool. During one afternoon David read the first three chapters of his thesis to me while I followed it on my computer. To my surprise not only was I able to grasp much of what it was about, I also could genuinely approve of and enjoy it. I was even able to make a few useful suggestions. It is salutary, though not unpleasingly so, to be excelled by your offspring. He has a better brain than mine. His first degree has given him a roadmap to the philosophical world which now bears interesting fruit.

The University is very beautiful and all the more so for being so shamelessly derivative of Oxbridge. There are even two replicas of Magdelene Tower.

Saturday 20 July, 2013 7.30am

I sit in an apartment on a leafy street of Brooklyn. The air conditioner is going full blast. Even at half past seven in the morning the temperature is well into the eighties and the air humid. We had an excellent day yesterday to spite the heat.

We awoke early in Princeton, for once showered before Dave and Rachel, and then after breakfast made our way to the little branch line railway station. We had no difficulty in negotiating a trip to New York with a machine, the cost \$7.50 each, half price for seniors. Machines, unlike the women in the booths on the New York subway, cannot ask for the proof of identity that reveals a mere tourist.

Before we left we had a little good email news. A friend of Diana's in Brussels is going to pick us up at Antwerp docks and drive us to Calais and Diana's Permanent Residence Visa for Australian has been granted. To validate and authenticate the visa she will have to visit Australia before this time next year, which is daft, but possible.

The train ride to Princeton Junction was short and easy and we were able almost immediately to board a train to New York. The views from trains in any country tend to show the nasty backsides of cities they pass through. There was little of beauty to see on this trip, for the country between Princeton and New York is built up and includes two cities, New Brunswick and Newark. We viewed thousands of derelict buildings, signs of the great decline in manufacturing, as well as plenty of leafy trees and a couple of fine rivers, but little or no farmland.

The rail line stops at Penn station and on our arrival we had to decide what to do until we met Connor at Grand Central at 1.00pm under the clock. He is a friend of the Peter who is kindly allowing us to use his apartment for a couple of days.

We wandered past the Empire State Building, enjoying the bustle and vibrancy of the city, until we found the Morgan Pierrepont Library and Museum. A quick inspection made us realise that this would be well worth returning to. We learned from a friendly Jamaican guide that every Friday between 7pm and 9pm it is open to the public for nothing. We determined to return at that time, if possible, it being Friday.

After this we entered what we thought was the National Library because in a modest way it declared itself to be so. We had been told that it was somewhere worth looking over. In fact, however, we had entered but a branch of the main Library, one soon to be unified with the great and main building which is undergoing huge and costly renovation. We found the real thing later and were duly awed by its huge reading room with its magnificent wooden and painted ceiling.

How fascinating to be treading the streets of a city which somehow has managed to imprint itself upon the mind and imagination of even someone like me, a non-film watching, Europe biased, non participator in and even disparager of American culture. The names of the skyscraper-canyoned streets we walked along or crossed, as we made our way to renowned Grand Central, resonated and delighted: Madison Avenue, Broadway and Fifth Avenue.

We popped into several shops, none of them famous, relishing the airconditioning. Once outside again we tried always to walk on the shady side of each street. We came across a fine Episcopalian church, The Church of the Resurrection, lovely and quintessentially Anglican, whatever that means, other than it felt like home. It had interesting stained glass windows which we looked at in some detail, one of them was by Burne Jones, easily picked out, and another from the William Morris school. We were informed too that it was where Eleanor Roosevelt was confirmed.

So we found our way to our rendezvous beneath the Clock at Grand Central, a four-faced clock sitting on top of a booth in the centre of a great open gathering hall. Connor turned out to be a soft-spoken and delightful young man, who went to all the trouble of travelling with us on the subway to Brooklyn, after helping us purchase a subway card upon which we put twenty dollars. This was usable by us both because the first through the turnstile then passes it back to the second. Since then we have already had to put on another twenty dollars, and there are no concessions for foreign oldies in this hard-bitten city. The subway and its trains are noisy and more rickety seeming than the London Underground. It is also as hot as hell itself on the platforms, though mercifully the trains themselves are air-conditioned. We witnessed two examples of busking, the first was a very loud brass and drums jazz quintet, most pleasing, especially the wild drumming. Then on the train a group of three or four black lads with a portable disk player turned on some music and then each of them in turn performed skilful acrobatics using the stainless steel poles and rails of the carriage, before handing a hat round. This again was well done, though probably against regulations and certainly only possible on trains not overfull.

We disembarked at DeKalb Street Station and walked along an unremarkable street until we came to a small, well treed and pleasing park called Fort Green, across which we walked, but were advised by Connor not to at night. After less than twenty minutes we came to our Adelphi Street apartment, on the third floor, compact and most comfortable. It has a bedroom, kitchen and fair sized lounge, dining and office space in one. After showing us how to get in and out and turn things on and off, Connor left us and we settled in before venturing out.

A mere three minutes away is a far better than average deli that is also a small supermarket and we went and treated ourselves to raspberries, blueberries and grapes, as well as a fine avocado, tomatoes, roasted garlic humus and a fresh baguette. We enjoyed a late lunch of this at about 3.00pm and then departed to find and join the Staten Island ferry. This ferry trip is free and enables a camera shot or two of the Statue of Liberty for us to send to Meg and Susan, but without making too close an acquaintance with a bitch at least to the French donors who honours and celebrates bloody revolution as much as liberty! It was a pleasant trip and it felt good to be in a breeze and on water again.

On the completion of our ferry ride we made our way back to the J P Morgan Museum by about 7.20pm. This was a visit well worth making for the museum preserves the unutterably beautiful library of the acquisitive financier, whose name remains an important one in the world of banking and high finance.

Just beyond the foyer area of the museum there were tables where folk were sitting eating and drinking as a pair of violinists played lovely baroque duets. We paused for a while to listen before wandering leisurely through the beautiful study, its ceiling acquired in and transported from Florence and its walls adorned by Renaissance paintings. We then entered and sat down in the Library, which is a very lovely room full of precious books, not least of them a Gutenberg Bible on display, one of three in the collection. The bookshelves, three stories of them with landings for the upper two reached by way of concealed stairwells, were full of remarkable examples of mostly ancient books. Some of these were displayed open in cabinets with short and interesting write ups several of them well over a thousand years old. The room itself is exquisite in its own right with a great tapestry over a large fireplace and yet again a very beautiful wooden ceiling set into which are lovely paintings.



[Home](#)