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

**ONGOING DIARY COLUMN (No. 8)**

**To Boldre, England from Melbourne, Australia by Freighter**

*Andrew Neaum*



*Manhattan from the Staten Island Ferry*

### **Sunday 21 July, 2013**

It is eight past seven in the morning in our Brooklyn apartment with another hot day in prospect, though not quite so hot as yesterday apparently. We have still to get breakfast and go to church. Then we will make our way home to Princeton. We finished off the day before yesterday with a visit to Times Square. Whether it is always as crowded as this we cannot tell, but there was indeed a huge crowd of people enjoying themselves mightily, a great buzz and hum of leisurely pleasure. There were street performers making their pitch mostly at children, dressed up as movie and cartoon characters or the Statue of Liberty. We arrived as full darkness descended and the garishness of the lights and advertisements on display lit up the scene as if it were daylight. The great screens showed mostly advertisements of one sort or another with beautiful clarity, but occasionally relented to show scenic shots of natural beauty to contrast with the City's undoubted but more questionable beauty. We found a chair to sit and enjoy the festive atmosphere and be a part of it all, before making our way back to the subway and home for a very good night's sleep. As we left at about 9.00pm we noticed that it was 91 degrees Fahrenheit.

### **Monday 22 July, 2013**

The next morning, the day before yesterday (and as I recall this I sit on the *Rickmers Seoul* in Philadelphia harbour, of which more later) we made our way to Central Park on a day that at first seemed slightly cooler, though as it progressed proved to be only marginally so. The Park is huge and magnificent, but we only flirted with it, making our way to several other destinations by way of it. What we saw was beautifully green and even breezy. There seemed less lawn than in most London Parks and it is more varied, it would have been good to explore it more thoroughly. The part of the city adjacent to it, at least along "Museum Mile", has rather wider streets than

downtown Manhattan and in its quiet affluence and greater greenery is a little more reminiscent of London around Kensington Gardens, the only part of NY that in any way at all resembled London to us.

We looked first for the Guggenheim, which in its time had caused great interest for its innovative architecture. To our mind, unlike the Sydney Opera House, which has stood the test of time, this building appears not to have done so, being faintly reminiscent of a typical city car park, from our vantage point. We have since been assured that we ourselves by this judgement have been judged and found wanting. We then noticed a large Episcopal church which as always we duly entered. Its unlikely dedication is *The Church of the Heavenly Rest*, a name more appropriate to a crematorium chapel than to what is obviously a lively and well endowed church. It is a lovely building with beautifully coloured windows and austere lines. It provided us not so much with heavenly rest as heavenly relief, for there were toilets for us to use and toilets are notoriously difficult to find in New York.

From there we crossed into Central Park again to walk along what seemed to be a reservoir. Along with dog walkers and joggers galore we drifted down to the famous “*Met*” which we duly entered, along with thousands of other people. It is a huge and imposing building and both its size and the crowds daunted us. After a long chat with an excellent guide about the possibility of viewing American Art and the complications of finding all of it in so huge a building, we decided to give it a miss and instead to visit the “*Whitney*” which devotes itself to American modern artists, me with some reservations. It proved to be a good decision, because for the price of the tickets, discounted for ancients like ourselves, we were able to opt for the earphones and commentary to enable a far more focussed appreciation of what we viewed.

We began at the top on the fifth floor, viewing American abstract artists, many of them thankfully rather less than totally abstract. We concentrated on those for which there was a brief but very well done description of a painting’s context and make up as well as a biographical account of the artist. We viewed, and for the most part very appreciatively, paintings by Bluemner, Marin, Birchfield, Lawrence and Stella, most of them early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most interesting of all was an exhibition of works by Edward Hopper with an amazing number of sketches he made for each of them prior to getting to work on the final painting. Obviously he didn’t simply scratch his head in front of a blank canvas and then get on with it. He pondered long and hard, changed his ideas, as well as the expressions, positions and emotions of his subjects.

By this time we had almost had our fill, but the next floor down could be taken in pretty well one gulp so we granted it our attention. The whole floor was devoted to an installation by Robert Irwin. It consisted of a whole, large room, its floor black, its walls white, but with a four or five inch wide black line painted on the walls all the way round the room, it was at about eye level for a man of my height. Down the middle of the room from left to right as you faced into it, was another black band at the same height above the floor. Attached to it, up to the ceiling, was a stretched piece of white “scrim” through which you could see, though the black honeycombed roof seen through it appeared white. For me the middle black line was exactly level with the wall’s black line behind it and so to discover as you walked across the room that in fact you had to duck half way across to pass under a black beam with a white gauze sheet above it was strangely disorienting, for the black beam was assumed to be on the

far wall not in the middle of the room. The object of it all, apparently, was “to perceive yourself perceiving”. Not an un-clever trick to the likes of me, but anything more than that no.

After filling our bottles with water we went back for another flirtation with Central Park. We indulged in a hot dog each, very good indeed due to our hunger more than to any worthiness in itself. We then sat down in the Park for a while to view the passers by, noting that the bicycle rickshaws cost \$2 - \$3 a minute. We then drifted down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, both with and against great crowds of people as we passed and noted the famous stores, enjoying the gentle amble. We had a look in St Thomas’ Church, having decided to go to Mass there the next day, a church that again appeared well cared for. With no lights on inside the lovely, deep-blue stained glass windows were impressive. We footled around the Rockefeller Building and then made our way home, encountering between DeKalb subway station and our apartment enough of a thunder storm to put on briefly the plastic bags taken with us by Diana for just such an eventuality. We then bought some food for dinner, with an eye on the possibility of Connor joining us adding to tomato, avocado and roast-garlic flavoured humus, a nog of delicious Stilton. In the end Connor was unable to join us so we enjoyed a good feed on our own.



*Brooklyn Bridge by night: Photo: Jason Hochman (fineartamerica.com)*

Our last adventure of the day was a walk in the dark to Brooklyn Bridge, something advised as worth doing by Rachel who lived in Brooklyn as a girl and remembered doing this walk with her father. It was it dark, and rain threatened as well, but we had our plastic bags. The remarkable thing about Brooklyn Bridge, which is a spectacular suspension bridge built over a seven year period in the mid nineteenth century, is a central raised walk and cycleway above the road. We found our way onto this with little difficulty. We had noticed a sign before we got there saying that the lanes of the bridge in the Brooklyn to Manhattan direction were closed. This it turned out was because of ongoing maintenance and repair work, a project lasting four years. As we passed this work we noticed a great hole jack-hammered in the roadway so that you could see right through to the river beneath. On the way back watched a crane lift a huge and major section of iron girder from the bridge, its size in length and depth

that of a very large container. The closure of that side of the bridge was only over the weekend, by Monday a new section would be in place and the hole in the road repaired.

As we approached a quarter of the way across, the black precipice of Manhattan's skyscrapers, studded with thousands of lights to each building, was a glorious sight, and the Statue of Liberty was visible in the distance to the left and slightly behind us as rain began to fall. It was fairly heavy with attendant lightning, so once more we donned our plastic bags, and were fine. We walked right across this huge and old suspension bridge, its towers when it was built were far higher than any building in Manhattan. It was a refreshing as well as a beautiful experience for the the rain cleansed and cooled the night, the temperature was only 75 degrees Fahrenheit when we left. So back along the bridge and home to bed, tired out, with one little adventure on the way back which is not for public recounting, but very funny.

Another good night's sleep in hot weather, then breakfast on remainders: avocado and Stilton, what better? We then headed off and out for church, the service chosen being a 9.30am said Eucharist with hymns. The subway is more difficult to negotiate than the London Underground, not least because trains change names and routes, seemingly arbitrarily. However, with the help of a kind fellow passenger we arrived at the Rockefeller Centre station to make it to St Thomas' just as the sermon began, not a memorable one, but not bad. The service itself, surprisingly, was in traditional language and it was good to encounter the Holy Ghost again. I learned later that all services on Sundays are according to the same traditional rite. It was beautifully done with three sacred ministers, holy smoke and no fuss. There were about seventy present.

We accepted the invitation to a cup of tea afterwards and I engaged in conversation an old fellow of eighty in a white and blue striped suit, an ex University Administrator. He was a pleasant fellow who informed me that the Rector, at 68, was retiring soon and so they were already on the lookout for a successor to what is obviously a prestigious church. They have their own well endowed Choir School, and a great musical tradition with an all male choir. At the main choral service on Sunday there are generally 400 or more present. On this our second visit, this time with the lights on inside, a really beautiful and intricate stone reredos was revealed. The old boy told me that the nick name for the *Church of the Heavenly Rest*, is the "*Church of the heavenly Snooze*".

We decided to walk rather than take the subway to Penn Station, the weather being somewhat cooler and so we enjoyed a lovely last stroll in vibrant, crowded New York. We remarked upon just how many taxis there are, the streets swarm with their bright yellow. As we were approaching the station we noticed an interesting little church crammed in between larger buildings and dedicated to St Francis. We decided to cross the road and have a closer look. There was a service in process so we went in and sat down in a pew, we then stood for the Gospel, which was about Mary and Martha, as it had been at St Thomas' earlier and then sat for the sermon. It was a truly splendid one, a little gift from God. It starting off with a comment or two about possible sibling rivalry between Mary and Martha, moving on to the tension between "service" and "presence", suggesting that it was not what Martha was doing that was

questionable, but rather the way she was doing it. Service, be it contemplation or action needs to be done in a particular way and both are necessary, different parts of a whole. These ruminations were then linked to devotion and service in the life of the new Pope Francis, and there was a clever end.... “To serve or not to serve..... that is not the question”. It was a brightly decorated church with a good number of people of every nationality race and age in the congregation. We left immediately the sermon ended, much blessed by it.



*On the subway New York*

So to Penn Station, the ugly replacement of a splendid edifice destroyed in the sixties by the forces of mindless modernism, an act of vandalism which galvanised opposition to such forces thereafter. We bought a ticket with our travel card at the pensioners' rate and wandered around the station shopping mall for the three quarters of an hour before our train left. We ate lunch on the train, the last of our fruit, bread, humus and cheese and made it back to Princeton with no trouble, arriving at about half past two.

After settling in we took a walk with David to get a bottle of wine for our farewell repast and followed this up by queueing for a superb ice cream each, one of the scoops in my cone being a very lovely avocado and lemon. We then did some final packing, had a couple of pink gins on the verandah, and a meal of salad and pasta with wine. This was followed by excellent homemade ice cream all accompanied by much hilarity. Then to bed and sleep, without the air conditioner, but it was too hot for me to sleep well. I awoke at about three to read some Clive James essays and Auden poems.

We got up finally at five o' clock, were showered by six and had the car packed by half past. We left the house by ten past seven and were at the Trioga Terminal in Philadelphia by eight. Being on the north side of the city it was far quicker and easier to access than the one at which we arrived. It was also much more casual and old fashioned than any dock we had yet been to. At the gate they directed us to a nearby car park where a tall, slightly grizzled Afro American security fellow, with an incredible accent that sounded deep South, but wasn't, looked after us. He was a really

lovely fellow and opened up a battered old car for us to load up with our stuff and selves to take us to the ship which was visible over a shed, the only vessel there. We squeezed everything into his car, said goodbye to David and Rachel after a couple of photographs and the car nosed its way right up to a somewhat more scruffy looking ship than the Bahia. However the welcome was really warm, the Filipino fellows who took our bags were most jaunty, promising us a party on Saturday night with a band that played Beatles songs.

The Rickmers Seoul, although it has facilities for the transport of a few containers, is not primarily a container ship. It takes general cargo and the vessel's own and mighty cranes were at work as we boarded, though seemingly without any urgency. The ship was lower in the water than the Bahia and so the gangplank was a shorter journey. Once on deck things appeared darker and scruffier than the Bahia, more to do with colour than anything else, dark green instead of bright orange-red and a yellow superstructure is gloomier than a white. Even the inside corridors are darker. However the cabin is preferable except for the conventional sized single beds. There is a computer desk each, one in the lounge and one in the bedroom which is bigger. The settee is a corner one upon which Diana at this moment catches up on sleep lost last night. We have a delightful Filipino steward called Benjie. The officers appear to be Rumanian, Lithuanian and Filipino, the Captain being the first of these. He tells me there is no email access for passengers. It appears we are to stop at a place called Norfolk close to the mouth of Chesapeake Bay before we head across the Atlantic.

***Later: 7.07pm:***

We have now met our fellow passengers, one is Patty Marx, a journalist for a New York Magazine, I have yet to establish which one. She is in her fifties I would guess. She says that she was asked by her editor to take a journey by cargo ship to make an article from. She appears almost totally ignorant of what a ship journey such as this is like and disconcertingly jots shorthand notes into a notebook as you talk to her. I thought she might be humourless, but at supper tonight she became animated in conversation and a chuckle or two indicated a dry and possibly rich sense of humour. Certainly there is more to her than meets the eye. She has a "boyfriend" who has wished lots of books and DVDs upon her as well as a satellite phone, she is very slim and petite. She and her boyfriend live next to Central Park in New York, but she was born in Philadelphia.

The other passenger, Roland Gueffroy, is also a journalist, but free lance and Swiss, from the German part of that country. His English is good, though he occasionally has to ask for a repeat. He too is most interesting and widely travelled. The reason for this trip he told us is that in Switzerland to travel from one to the other of the two main cities, Zurich and Berne takes about an hour. He decided to make the trip the other way and so by train he travelled to Moscow, then east on the trans-Siberian railway, then south through Mongolia and China to Hong Kong. He then caught a container ship across to Los Angeles. There he travelled by train to Chicago and down to Philadelphia and on to our present ship from which he will disembark at Antwerp to take a prearranged lift in a car-transporter truck back home. He appears to be something of an adventurer. Journalism is only a part of his life, for he runs his own small advertising business. There appear to be few places in the world he hasn't been and some years ago he travelled Route 66 on a mo-ped. Already we begin to talk well

over meals and we lingered long after a dinner of rice and beef pieces last night, a meal not at all bad.

We have also had a familiarisation tour with the Roumanian Third Mate, a pleasing young fellow with a pony tail. We passengers sit on a table of our own, the Captain sits on the other table with the officers. He seems a fairly crusty individual on first acquaintance. We said Evensong before dinner. Diana spent a lot of the afternoon sleeping, she had done most of the packing and neither of us had much sleep during our last night in the United States.



*A warm welcome to the Rickmers Seoul*

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