

Home

BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE

(December 2020)



Autumn in 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 **December 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>

(380) "This and That" - 27 December 2020

In 1991 I became Rector of Ararat in Australia, about 125 miles west north west of Melbourne. Originally a gold mining settlement it is now the commercial centre for a region of wheat and grape cultivation and also livestock farming. It lies on the main Adelaide to Melbourne railway line and highway. Surrounded by hills and not far from the lovely Grampians mountains it was a good place to be.

Its church is built of dark, local bluestone which in winter is icy cold. I loved it. Every morning, well before dawn, I made my way over to say my prayers, write verse, cogitate, scheme, think and dream. This culminated in the recitation of matins and the celebration of a daily Eucharist. The following piece of verse was my attempt to capture those winter mornings in the church.

LATE WINTER EARLY MORNINGS IN HOLY TRINITY CHURCH ARARAT, AUSTRALIA

*On bitter cold and wintry mornings,
under Mary's eye,
Black-becassocked, hunched and cloaked,
a priest at prayer am I.*

*Outside the bluestone sweats cold rain,
the wind through tiles sifts
And inside, round the empty church,
coldly curls and drifts.*

*Within a pool of brash bulb-light,
brutal in its starkness,
I hunch befuddled, gloomy, black,
in league with outer darkness.*

*The brightness of the little chapel
is challenged by my night.
A fragment of the dark am I
that's strayed into the light.*

*Can even light divine light up
a dark and doleful soul
That in a chapel's universe
appears a dense black hole?*

*But from a sodden bush outside,
in arrogant disdain,
A lusty blackbird bursts to song
for all the wind and rain.*

*A rumour, hint at, hope of dawn,
beyond the distant hill,
Is all that's been required to open
wide its golden bill.*

*Luscious, lustrous, limpid notes
tremble on the air,
Cascade and shower all over me
darkly sitting there*

*To permeate and penetrate
the blackness in my heart
Which slowly warms, responds and melts.
Sadness breaks apart.*

*Lips begin to murmur praise,
almost loving, fond,
God within begins to sing
to God outside, beyond.*

*Behind me, through the great east windows,
dawn explodes its light,
Stains the church an ambient red,
To halo my delight.*

*Black-becassocked priest and blackbird
Accede to God's good light.
Two wrongs, maybe, have made a right,
Two blacks perhaps a white.*

(379) "This and That" - 20 December 2020

Pieces of verse and snatches of song stick in the mind never to be dislodged. They pop up unannounced. Many of them frivolous, some not.

When I was young in sin

Whenever I look in a mirror, the beginning of John Betjeman's compelling, horrifying poem "Late Flowering Lust" comes to mind:

*My head is bald, my breath is bad,
Unshaven is my chin,
I have not now the joys I had
When I was young in sin.....*

Rarely do I repress such fragments. I articulate them. This can become tediously predictable. My children used to amuse themselves by providing the trigger for the most common or annoying of them. They'd snort with delight at their easy success. They had only to say the word "water" for me to respond immediately:

*Jailer, bring me water
Jailer, bring me water
Jailer, bring me water
My throat is kinda dry...*

To look out of the window on a grey and murky day rarely fails to elicit:

*Fair is foul and foul is fair
Hover through the fog and filthy air.*

It's not only the weather that brings Macbeth's witches to mind though. The subversion today of so much of what I consider fair, lovely and good brings the cackling hags to mind too. Fair is indeed called foul and foul fair.

The fragile contingency of history

I read last week an essay by Sam Leith to do with the changing face of city life in London thanks to Covid. It is not at all impossible, he opines, that he'll be an old man before London resembles the city he knew as a young man. One sentence particularly really struck me:

One of the most enduring human follies is the sense that what you're used

to is a fact of nature rather than a fragile contingency of history.

“Yes,” I thought. “How quickly, easily and unexpectedly did secure, cultured, civilized, Jewish, middle class life in Germany come to an appalling, horrifying and total end with the advent of Nazism. Lost, gone, done with.

Then there popped to mind a lovely, sad and haunting stanza by George McDonald. Four lines that have been lodged in my mind for fifty years and often aired.

This time, however, I looked them up and discovered to my surprise that what I’d taken to be an isolated quatrain was but the first stanza of a four verse poem of which the last two verses subvert the sentiments of the first:

Sweet Peril

*Alas, how easily things go wrong!
A sigh too much, a kiss too long,
And there follows a mist and weeping rain,
And life is never the same again.*

*Alas, how hardly things go right!
Tis hard to watch in the summer night,
For the sigh will come, and the kiss will stay,
And the summer night is a winter day.*

*And yet how easily things go right,
If the sigh and a kiss of a summer's night
Come deep from the soul in the stronger ray
That is born in the light of a winter's day.*

*And things can never go badly wrong
If the heart be true and the love be strong.
For the mist, if it comes, or the weeping rain
Will be changed by the love into sunshine again.*

George Macdonald (1824-1905) was a visionary Congregationalist minister who fell out with his congregation over the content of his sermons. He gained a considerable reputation as a spiritual poet and a novelist, wrote fine fairy stories and made friends with the likes of Browning, Carlyle, Morris, Tennyson and Arnold. C S Lewis greatly admired him.

(378) "This and That" - 13 December 2020

On a dead cold, grey, December morning last week we visited sunny Alice Springs. A good decision.

The fat drunk dances

Every morning we walk up Rodlease Lane to St John’s, through the churchyard and home again down Church Lane. There we settle down with a hot drink to say matins, before taking another stroll for which the route varies, but at present is through the *Collected Poems* of Charles Causley, who happens at this point to be in Australia.

It was especially good to accompany him last week to Alice Springs. His evocation of that fondly remembered town, is rather different from our memories of it:

*A high May sky, pale blue and faintly brushed
With strokes of cloud. The river-line a gash
Of beer-cans, gums; a froth of broken glass.
A fun-fair grinds the empty afternoon*

*To months of Sundays, and the fat drunk dances
Silently by the children's carousel.....*

Scooped scallops of overripe avocado

We dropped down into the town from the plateau to its north as twilight gathered, in September 2016. Travelling the continent from north to south, by car, we had failed to book accommodation ahead. Our favoured motels were full and so we ended up for two nights in a B&B. I prefer the anonymity and privacy of motels and hotels.

Our houseproud husband and wife hosts were effusively hospitable. We deposited our suitcases in the pristine guest bedroom of their spotless home and were introduced, with pride, to a luxurious bathroom containing a full spa bath, spacious shower, wall to ceiling mirrors, shiny chrome fittings and exotic potted plants galore. Though travel-weary, there was no suggestion of, or opportunity to dine in private. Instead we were treated to a glass of wine and invited to consume our own evening meal while they ate theirs.

So we sat at the sparkling bench of an immaculate kitchen as they appreciatively devoured a fine steak, mushrooms and vegetables, and we shamefacedly hot-watered two packets of dried laksa soup into a semblance of nourishment and unwrapped and spread tablets of purloined motel butter on to travelworn, shapeless bread rolls, adding scooped scallops of overripe avocado and cherry tomatoes.

We escaped, with difficulty, to our bedroom after ordering a full breakfast to fortify us for a day exploring the nearby and truly beautiful MacDonnell Ranges.

Desiccated dingo scats

Diana and I love of sausages. I've a sermon devoted to them, but we'd forgotten how nasty cheap supermarket sausages can be. Those served at breakfast in Alice were of this sort. Lashings of mustard helped me to cope. Diana resorted to the discreet secretion of large chunks of her generous portion about her person, whereupon she forgot them. Later she couldn't find them. They were probably discovered months later beneath a car seat, mistaken by my son, the car's owner, for desiccated dingo turds.

For our final breakfast we settled for the safety of a boiled egg each. These were remarkable for being cooked in a little plastic device to which different amounts of added water guaranteed the desired degree of yolk softness.

Boerewors for the ostriches

Sausages have caused us similar distress before. In 2010 we returned to Zimbabwe. While staying with a priest friend we enjoyed a traditional and merry African meal, of chicken wings, goat cutlets and sausages with sadza, kale and pumpkin. Diana disdained the sausages. I did not. They were vile. I gagged over them and had to resort, like Diana, to discrete secretion and a trip to the lavatory. There was no running water in the house to flush them away, so through the window to the dogs they went.

Later, travelling from Lesotho to Cape Town, we stopped for a night at a beautifully situated B&B overlooking the ocean at Mossel Bay. Our hosts were religious fanatics which required of me a degree of ingenious verbal and theological evasiveness to avoid conflict. Breakfast's sausages this time were the famed South African *boerewors*. Diana pocketed hers to feed later to ostriches and a nog or two to her not totally *boerewors* averse husband.

(377) "This and That" - 6 December 2020

Words pop into the mind unbidden. Early one morning last week I met a fellow scurrying from his house to his car. Though we smiled at each other and swapped a greeting, the first word that had popped into my mind on seeing him was "frowsty".

Ruin, decay and rancidity

It's a good word that originally meant to have an unpleasant smell, in all likelihood from the Old

French “*frouste*” meaning “ruinous” or “decayed”. It could though come from the Old English “*broh*”, meaning “rancid”.

One of the reasons for enjoying words is that the dust of original or possible meanings remains lingering suggestively about them. The word “frowsty” these days is applied almost solely to a room or house that is warm, stale and stuffy of atmosphere. Yet to a wordsmith there is an intriguing penumbra of ruin, decay and rancidity that begs for more personal applications.

Be that as it may, the word “frowsty” seems far too judgemental to spring to the mind of a merry old parson walking his parish. Yet it came unbidden. It leapt from the depths of his subconscious. He was not being wilfully judgemental and so can’t be held accountable.

Was the word appropriate? Yes indeed. To my early morning, wideawake gaze the fellow seemed blurred, glazed ill-defined and dishevelled, as if straight from his bed into yesterday’s clothes and out from an overheated home to his car. One of those strange pommies who bath or shower in the evening, not the morning. Who go to bed, not to breakfast, fragrant and as crisp as an iceberg lettuce leaf.

Turbid grey gravy

My first memories of having a bath come from our years on Tristan da Cunha. It was a once a week, evening routine that involved the onerous task of lighting a copper “chip-boiler”. Once alight and burning fiercely these were remarkably speedy and effective heaters of water, but wood was scarce and we had to be economical with it. The bath water, though hot, was never deep and was shared. The child who bathed last did so in a turbid, grey gravy.

An evening bath, rather than a shower, continued throughout my years in Africa. There, in our first home, hot water came from a forty four gallon drum outside the house, nestled on its side in a brick kiln, well stoked with logs. The supply of hot water from a large drum was more bountiful than from a chip boiler and so bathing a little more luxurious. In our second house, built on a new mission station by my father, with the assistance of his two sons and a fine African builder, he installed an aga. Plentiful hot water for baths then, though still always in the evening and no shower.

We were reacquainted with the dread “chip boiler” on moving to the island of St Helena. Diana and her family suffered one in their vicarage too. They lived in the island’s only town, which is squeezed into a hot, bare, steep-sided, rocky valley that runs down to the island’s north facing coast. My vicarage was 1700 feet above sea level in lush, cool, green and mistier parts. In hot Jamestown, spartan Diana had a daily cold shower from a makeshift contraption that delivered its modest, chilling deluge through nail holes knocked in an old tin can. In my vicarage it was back to weekly baths of shared hot water from the chip boiler.

Shrinking in terror

Australia converted and civilised me into a daily, morning shower. No more crumpled, frowsty, eye encrusted, bleary morning appearances. Instead an everyday baptism into crisp, clear-thinking clarity and cleanliness. As I am being deluged each morning my mind bursts to life, fizzles, pops and seethes with ideas. This little article was conceived in the shower: “Frowsty” I chuckled, “what a word. I must look it up and into.” As you see, I did.

Finally, a quatrain from the Oz poet Les Murray:

The Knockdown Question

Why does God not spare the innocent?

The answer to that is not in
the same world as the question
so you would shrink from me
in terror if I could answer it.

Home