

## Home

### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (April 2016)**



### **The milk of human kindness - Burnt House Lane**

(Article 135 below)

*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 **April 2016** 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>

(138)

## “This and That” - 24 April 2016

Last Tuesday Diana woke to hear me sniffing and snuffling beside her, on my side of the bed. I was in tears. I had just finished a new biography of Charles Williams. He had died and I was undone.

I love biographies. I like happy endings. Biographies end with the death of their subject. A dilemma. Reading them ends in misery.

### The unlikely Inkling

Charles Williams (1886-1945) was a poet, novelist, playwright, theologian and literary critic. He was also odd. Far and away the most eccentric member of that informal and brilliant Oxford group, centred around C S Lewis and J R Tolkien, known as the Inklings.

Williams was no Oxford don though. Of humble origins, with a strong Cockney accent, he had been unable to finish his degree at London University for want of money to pay the fees. After a stint in a Methodist bookshop, he joined the London branch of the Oxford University Press. There he became “*a worldly-wise publisher . . . more at home with a cigarette and a sandwich in a Ludgate Hill wine bar than with the pipe-smoke and claret of an Oxford common room.*” It was only because the London OUP moved to Oxford for the duration of the War that he became a friend of dons, and a brilliant, eccentric lecturer at the University. He was always short of money. The OUP still doesn’t pay well. My clever daughter worked there for a year or two for meagre returns.

### Spiritual thrillers

I read Williams’ strange novels when at university and loved them, though they are sometimes difficult to work out. Like Tolkien and Lewis, he was a fantasist, but set his ‘spiritual thrillers’ in the contemporary, everyday world, not in imaginary ones. This makes them all the more eerie and powerful. His book *The Descent of the Dove, A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*, is an exhilarating, sometimes puzzling read.

I love him for being a steadfast, brilliant, recondite and articulate member of the Church of England, though tolerant of scepticism and of the doubting.

He blended his strong Anglicanism with membership of an occult secret society, the *Fellowship of the Rosy Cross*. He rose high in its ranks and practised alchemy, astrology, Cabalism, conjuration and divination with tarot cards. His relationships with women were decidedly odd.

### Brought to tears

Be that as it may, last Tuesday, early in the morning, in bed, I read of his death on my Kindle and was undone. Of his death, John Wain, who many years later became Professor of Poetry at Oxford wrote:

*I was walking from Longwall Street, where I lodged, towards St. John’s, and had just reached the Clarendon Building when a girl I knew by sight came pedalling fast and agitatedly on her bicycle round the corner from New College Lane. ‘John,’ she called out, ‘Charles Williams is dead.’ She had never spoken to me before, and normally would have avoided using my Christian name. But this was a general disaster, like an air-raid, and a touch of comradeship was right. I asked her for details, but she knew nothing except that he was dead. In any case, she could not talk; she was only just not crying. I walked on towards St. John’s. The war with Germany was over. Charles Williams was dead. And suddenly Oxford was a different place.*

### Rushlights and bluebells

The poet, David Scott, referred Diana and myself last week to rushlights. For centuries these were poor peoples’ candles and in rural parts still in use at the end of the nineteenth century.

To make them the green rind of a mature rush stalk is peeled off except for a thin strip to stop the pith from bending. After drying, the peeled rush is soaked in bacon grease or mutton fat with sometimes a little beeswax to make the ‘candle’ lasts longer.

A burning rushlight is held at an angle of about 45 degrees. If held vertically it tends to have a dimmer flame, horizontally it burns too quickly. Antique rushlight holders are collectors' items. They were never mass-produced being individually made by local craftsmen and blacksmiths.

Bluebells are back. They gleam beneath the oaks and holly as we bicycle in spring sunshine to St John's. *Shade*, says the Australian poet Les Murray, *makes colours loom and be thoughtful*.

## (137) "This and That" - 17 April 2016

The most useful starting point in wrestling with the relationship between God, sin and punishment is the aphorism: *We are not punished for our sins*, but by them.

### **A health and safety warning**

This came to mind when, in the *New Statesman*, I read the following in a laudatory review by Salley Vickers of Adam Phillips' new book *Unforbidden Pleasures*:

Why did God forbid His human creations to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Surely, in His omniscience, He was aware that by forbidding it He was prompting the disobedience that led to "all our woe". But what if all God was doing was describing a consequence – if you do this, then that follows? Maybe the real sin of our "first parents" was in hearing a forbidden in what was only, after all, a health-and-safety warning.....

That interesting take on the myth prompted me to find out who wrote the aphorism that I have found so useful in thinking about punishment and sin. It turns out to have been Elbert Hubbard. (1856–1915). He was an American writer, publisher, artist, philosopher and influential exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America.

He described himself as an anarchist and socialist and claimed Jesus to have been an anarchist. His credentials as a socialist seem dubious in the light of another of his sayings: *Prison is a Socialist's Paradise, where equality prevails, everything is supplied and competition is eliminated*.

### **Bravery on the Titanic**

Hubbard was interested in the sinking of the Titanic. On that ill-fated ship were Isidor Straus (Co-owner of Macy's Department Store) and his wife Ida. As the vessel sank they were observed near Lifeboat No. 8 with Ida's maid, Ellen Bird.

The officer in charge of the lifeboat offered the elderly couple and maid a place. Isidor refused to take it as there were women and children still remaining on the ship. He urged his wife and maid to board, but Ida refused, saying, "We have lived together for many years. Where you go, I go." They were last seen standing arm in arm on the deck. Of their bravery Hubbard wrote:

*Mr. and Mrs. Straus, I envy you that legacy of love and loyalty left to your children and grandchildren. The calm courage that was yours all your long and useful career was your possession in death. You knew how to do three great things—you knew how to live, how to love and how to die. One thing is sure, there are just two respectable ways to die. One is of old age, and the other is by accident. All disease is indecent. Suicide is atrocious. But to pass out as did Mr. and Mrs. Isador Straus is glorious. Few have such a privilege. Happy lovers, both. In life they were never separated and in death they are not divided.*

## Bravery on the Lusitania

Ironically, three years later, Hubbard and his wife boarded the RMS Lusitania for the voyage upon which it was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat. A survivor wrote to their son as follows:

*I cannot say specifically where your father and Mrs. Hubbard were when the torpedoes hit, but I can tell you just what happened after that. They emerged from their room..... and came on to the boat-deck. Neither appeared perturbed in the least. Your father and Mrs. Hubbard linked arms—the fashion in which they always walked the deck—and stood apparently wondering what to do. I passed him with a baby which I was taking to a lifeboat when he said, ‘Well, Jack, they have got us. They are a damn sight worse than I ever thought they were.’ .... As I moved to the other side of the ship, in preparation for a jump when the right moment came, I called to him, ‘What are you going to do?’ and he just shook his head, while Mrs. Hubbard smiled and said, ‘There does not seem to be anything to do.’ The expression seemed to produce action on the part of your father, for then he did one of the most dramatic things I ever saw done. He simply turned with Mrs. Hubbard and entered a room on the top deck, the door of which was open, and closed it behind him. It was apparent that his idea was that they should die together, and not risk being parted on going into the water.*

## (136) “This and That” - 10 April 2016

In the parish of Wodonga, on the River Murray, I used to visit an old lady with a neurotic budgerigar. It plucked out every breast feather it could reach with its beak. A budgie’s bare, mottled bosom is not a pretty sight.

### A useful doorbell

In that parish my study door was usually wide open and visible from the busy road’s pavement. This invited passing neurotics and oddities to drop in for a chat. I valued them. The study’s greatest asset, however, was the proximity of its phone to the outside door. I would end a tiresome phone call by leaning out to press my own doorbell. Callers would clearly hear it, and so know that I was being truthful in saying, *Someone’s just rung the door bell. I must be off.*

### An Imposter Jesus

“Jesus Christ” walked in to see me there one day. He had wild eyes and a strangely secretive manner. He wouldn’t say where he lived, but denounced our pleasing, bustling town as Sodom and Gomorrah. He also smoked. More characteristic of Satan than Jesus I thought.

He let me into the secret of his Messiahship only gradually. His first question was to find out whether or not I believed in Satan. I gave a characteristically careful Anglican answer, for although a firm believer in God, I am more doubtful of the devil. I like to think that my serious doubts pain his less than Royal Lowness enormously.

After a twenty minute chat “Jesus” asked if he could have a look round the church, so we went across. He gave a maniacal cackle as we passed through the door and then adopted a proprietorial manner. He walked up to the front, stood gazing at the altar, and then turned and said, *most people bow to the altar don’t they?* I admitted this to be so. He said, *I didn’t.* I asked him why, but he wouldn’t say. I then mildly suggested that he only considered himself to be Jesus Christ. He replied, in a distinctly Johannine style, *I don’t consider myself to be so, I am.* I was unable to persuade him otherwise. We parted friends, disagreeing as to his identity.

### **An organ-grinder's monkey**

In the last of my Australian parishes I opened the Church at about 5.30am. This meant that in winter, once inside, I had to find my way to the lovely Lady Chapel in the dark. There I would say my prayers and listen to a Bach Cantata before daily Matins and the Eucharist. Once, as I fumbled my way to the Chapel to switch on its lights, I became aware of a dark shape looming towards me in the gloom. It was heart-stopping. It turned out to be John. Another unkempt, lost soul. He had hidden in the church before lock-up and had spent the night there.

He claimed to be a priest, with a God-given right to use the Rectory shower on request, and to celebrate Holy Communion. When I was behind the altar celebrating the Eucharist, he would stand in his pew copying every gesture I made. When the priest and choir processed in, he tagged along behind, gesticulating like an organ grinder's monkey.

### **The real thing**

My favourite oddity was Geoff. For a long time I used to let him sleep in one of the rooms leading off from the church. This annoyed some of my more boring parishioners, but he was scrupulously clean and totally honest. He had some sort of schizophrenia and was the hardest working, most generous oddity I have ever known. He did, though, have a prickly personality. In season he picked fruit in the local orchards. If he earned \$200 in a day I would find \$20 on the altar next morning. He was a daily communicant who knew the service almost by heart and was given to prostrating himself before the altar for long periods. For a homeless person he was astonishingly right wing and refused ever to claim the dole, on principle. When out of work he would gather litter from road verges. A bit of a misogynist, he could be abrupt and rude.

He had arrived in the parish at the same time as I did and was my age. We had a few bust ups over the years and once or twice he deserted us for the Roman Catholics for a while. His returns always gladdened my heart. In his own distinctive way he really was a Jesus Christ figure to me.

### **(135) "This and That" - 3 April 2016**

Few of us are immune to rage. Even in church. When a favourite hymn is sung to a tune I don't know, apoplexy strikes. The hymn book is slammed down in disgust, I fold my arms and fume.

#### **Frequent bedfellows**

My favourite hymn is *The Duteous Day Now Closeth* to the tune 'Innsbruck'. Its fine words are by the greatest of Lutheran hymn writers, saintly Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676):

*.....Now all the heavenly splendour  
breaks forth in starlight tender  
from myriad worlds unknown;  
and man, the marvel seeing,  
forgets his selfish being,  
for joy of beauty not his own .....*

The hymn reminds me of my mother, she loved it. It also brings to mind Bach's *St Matthew's Passion*, in which its divine melody occurs three times set to different words. The tune, possibly by Heinrich Isaac (1450-1527), was attached originally to a secular lament about leaving *Innsbruck*, the capital of the Tyrol, a region noted for lovely melodies

Exquisite beauty and poignancy go together. The hymn's beauty elates me, but also saddens me. My mother is long dead and Bach's rendering of Matthew's version of the Passion is the most heart-rending music ever written.



## **Blood and sucking**

Not all hymns resonate beauty and profundity. A particularly bloody example is by William Cowper. Its opening verse conjures up an image of a great hypodermic syringe:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains....*

The most laughably bad hymn can't be authentic, must be a parody. Though George Lyttelton in a letter to Rupert Hart-Davis insists that it was in use in the 1880's:

*Milk of the breast that cannot cloy  
He, like a nurse, will bring;  
And when we see His promise nigh,  
Oh how we'll suck and sing!*

## **Lenin and music**

When I returned to England three years ago, I turned on Radio 4 every morning to enjoy fine coverage of world affairs. The joy has departed. So much horror dwelt upon and lingered over. I frequently turn the radio off. Is this deplorable escapism? Am I lacking in compassion if my articles and sermons are not burdened with the world's misery?

I don't think so. The diet of information fed to us these days is unbalanced and skewed. Too much misery, too little joy. We should all turn frequently from evil to beauty, goodness and joy. Theodore Dalrymple in an article comparing beauty in the paintings of Joshua Reynolds to ugliness in those of Marlene Dumas says:

*Lenin abjured music, to which he was sensitive, because it made him feel well-disposed to the people around him, and he thought it would be necessary to kill so many of them. Theodor Adorno said that there could be no more poetry after Auschwitz. Our view of the world has become so politicized that we think that the unembarrassed celebration of beauty is a sign of insensibility to suffering and that exclusively to focus on the world's deformations, its horrors, is in itself a sign of compassion. Reynolds was not tortured by such considerations.....*

## **The milk of human kindness on Burnt House Lane**

We took our early morning walk on Easter Monday with grandson Thomas. Debris from the previous night's gale littered the lanes. We picked up a dozen eggs from Warborne farm and then turned up Burnt House Lane. There we encountered two great tractors blocking our way. The road was awash with wheel-churned mud from their frequent collection of silage bails from the adjacent field.

Two genial farmers, jawing by the tractors, noticed us, came over, apologised for the mess, lifted Thomas in his buggy over the river of mud and past their machines, all the while cheerfully answering our queries as to the composition of silage, and assuring us that they would be back to clean up the road later. A delightful pair. The milk of human kindness is as much a part of life as misery and disaster.

[Home](#)