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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (March 2018)



**THE SMALLEST BRITISH BIRD, THE GOLDCREST
(See 233 below)**

Photo: 'Garden Bird' Quality bird food supplier

*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 **March 2017** 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>

(236) “This and That” - 25 March 2018

Secular poems at funerals and weddings are usually dire. Grief dulls critical faculties. So too can joy. I blame web sites. But one man’s meat is another man’s *poisson*.

T S Eliot’s friend

I chanced recently upon a poem I am surprised not to have heard at a funeral. By the American poet Conrad Aiken (1889-1973), it is far from dire and well enough known to have been set to music by several composers, including Leonard Bernstein.

Music I Heard

*Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.*

*Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved,
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.*

*For it was in my heart that you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always —
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.*

An interesting man Aiken. At the age of eleven he experienced a life-warping, shattering tragedy. His father shot his mother and then himself. He records the event in his autobiography: *After the desultory early-morning quarrel, came the half stifled scream, and the sound of his father’s voice counting three, and the two loud pistol shots and he tiptoed into the dark room where the bodies lay motionless, and apart, and, finding them dead found himself possessed of them for ever.*

Inclined to insanity

He was fascinated by psychology for the rest of his life. His short story, “Silent Snow, Secret Snow”, is a psychological study of a disturbed boy. He claimed it to be “a projection of my own inclination to insanity.”

He produced most of his important work in the 1920s and early 1930s. A time of personal upheaval during which he divorced his first wife and attempted suicide. He was a friend of T S Eliot, much influenced by him.

He had wit and a sense of humour. He directed that his tombstone be fashioned as a bench. An invitation to visitors to stop and enjoy a martini at his grave. I love this clever, punning trifle:

*It's time to make love, douse the glim;
The fireflies twinkle and dim;
The stars lean together
Like birds of a feather,
And the loin lies down with the limb.*

The Curate’s Egg

The lowly ‘curate’ has become fashionable. Once he was just the humblest of clergymen. At the bottom of the hierarchical ladder. A mere assistant priest, assumed to be absurdly naïve. Most useful as the butt of clerical jokes.

No longer. Advertisers and spin doctors have taken up and snobbified the word. As a noun not a verb. No more do booksellers present a selection of books to entice us to buy, they ‘curate’

them. Music festivals are curated, so too news programs. Even fashionable curates like myself need no longer select Sunday's, hymns we can curate them.

The most famous of all curate jokes comes from a 1895 cartoon in *Punch* by George du Maurier. A curate is sitting at table with his bishop and family. The bishop says: *I'm afraid you've got a bad egg, Mr Jones*; Over anxious not to offend, the curate replies, *Oh, no, my Lord, I assure you that parts of it are excellent.*

An obscene death for Punch

Times have changed and coarsened. Subtlety, nuance, deference and decorum are little regarded. Even *Punch* slipped. The final issue, published in 1992, reprinted the famous cartoon, but with a caption that excluded the Bishop's observation entirely. The curate alone remarks: *This f****ing egg's off!*

(235) "This and That" - 18 March 2018

The pattern of daily life for a parson is different. His whole week crescendos to Sunday.

The week's ground bass

In Pilley Hill Vicarage ordinary weekdays, like a Purcell song, are based upon and held together by a repetitive, unchanging, reassuringly predictable ground bass. It consists of thinking through and composing this little article; gathering together and formatting the rest of the weekly pew-sheet; composing and revising a sermon and discussing with Diana a suitable topic for a children's talk.

Above this regular ground bass more varied melodies bubble, froth and fill each week. Sometimes frantically, sometimes dissonantly, sometimes leisurely. All culminating and resolving in Sunday's services. The week's apotheosis.

It is Sunday evening as I write. Mothering Sunday was a joy. Thanks to the efforts of a variety of good folk. Outside my study window the sky darkens. Late winter oak, beech and poplar silhouette to intricate tracery. A robin twiddles and tweedles a triumphant goodbye to the day. The gentle melancholy of a Haydn *andante* hovers beautifully over and around me, but without settling. All is well with the world. Vicarage Sunday evenings are blessed.

Alex and Monteverdi

Yesterday I listened to a snatch from a treble solo sung in Gloucester Cathedral. The soloist was Alex Taylor. Rosie had sent it to me attached to an email, lovely.

What an excellent musical education cathedral choristers acquire. I trust Alex remembers that it all began in St John's Boldre. Rosie tells me that he has recently discovered Monteverdi's Vespers and that they have become one of his very favourites works. At his age, living in the African bush, I didn't know Monteverdi from Monte Carlo.

Singing Peter Chitty into heaven

We have lost a mover and shaker with the death of Peter Chitty. What a good looking fellow he was. Even in old age. Not unlike Peter O'Toole, and just as intriguing.

Everywhere I go I hear tales to his credit. One of the best comes from two of our finest and oldest parishioners, Joy and Colin Erne. They are now all but housebound and receive Communion at home. After which we relax and chat over a cup of coffee and bountiful biscuits.

Colin sang in St John's choir as a boy and has played a part in its life all his life. He is a fountain of charitable information about St John's. He and Joy told me last week of how helpful, solicitous and comforting, far beyond the call of duty, Peter Chitty had been in visiting them during their daughter's ultimately fatal illness, many years ago. This quiet side of Peter's lay-ministry is easily overlooked.

He was a dedicated choirman. We will be raising him heavenward on great wings of song at his funeral. There will be a large choir to help us do so. Wings of song, not angel wings. Peter,

like his namesake Simon Peter, was no angel. One of his most attractive qualities was a certain maverick anti-authoritarianism that sometimes led him into trouble and conflict. Not a characteristic of angels as generally perceived. Admirable to the likes of me though. As too, one suspects, to the man who chose as friends, impulsive Peter son of Jonah, fiery James and John sons of Zebedee, and Simon ‘the Zealot’. Peter will be welcomed by his Lord. We’ll raise him heavenward to be so as surely as the Mary Rose was raised from the Solent with his help and guidance some years ago. Albeit with a heart-stopping hiccup or two.

Jacob Rees Mogg defined

I keep a file on my computer for thought provoking, interesting or funny snippets from my reading.

From Rory Sutherland in the Spectator, the definition of a *sheppey*: ‘the distance of approximately seven eighths of a mile defined as the minimum distance at which sheep remain picturesque’.

From the Economist a definition of Jacob Rees Mogg ‘the blue passport in human form, the red telephone box made flesh, the Royal Yacht Britannia in a pin stripe suit’.

(234) “This and That” - 11 March 2018

Nikki Forsyth has leant me her bread-maker. In a children’s talk she had heard me commend young choir boy Ben’s mother for making bread regularly. I had gone on to suggest that Diana might do the same at the Vicarage.

A knot in the Lord’s handkerchief

The loan came with all necessary ingredients and a pointed note to say it was for me to bake bread, not Diana. I have obeyed. The result delicious, and how easy with a bread-maker. Different from my mother’s twice weekly efforts with aged and recalcitrant yeast on Tristan da Cunha.

It’s important stuff bread. There is a fine poem about it by the priest David Scott. Called *A Long Way From Bread* it is too long to print in its entirety. A couple of snippets:

*We have come so far from bread .
Rarely do we hear the clatter of the mill wheel;
see the flour in every cranny,
the shaking down of the sack, the chalk on the door,
the rats, the race, the pool,
baking day and the old loaves:
cob, cottage, plaited, brick.....*

*I go on about bread
because it was to bread
that Jesus trusted
the meaning he had of himself.
It was an honour for bread
to be the knot in the Lord’s handkerchief
reminding him about himself. So
O bread, breakable;
O bread given;
O bread, a blessing;
Count yourself lucky, bread.....*

As I write, on Monday, there is a loaf baking. Lunch at the Vicarage today will be as good as in any restaurant in Hampshire. Homemade hot, crusty bread smothered in molten butter and

a large, perfectly boiled, Pilley Community Shop, free-range egg. The edge of the eggs yolk about to softly harden, but not quite. Well salted and peppered.

No ear for music

Partly because of Lent and what I am reading, as well as the company I'm keeping, the faith I love and practice appears more than usually beautiful, life enhancing and true. A N Wilson has captured exactly what I feel:

When I think about atheist friends, they seem to me like people who have no ear for music, or who have never been in love. It is not that (as they believe) they have rumbled the tremendous fraud of religion - prophets do that in every generation. Rather, these unbelievers are simply missing out on something that is not difficult to grasp. Perhaps it is too obvious to understand; obvious, as lovers feel it was obvious that they should have come together, or obvious as the final resolution of a fugue.....

All ears for music

Last Sunday we attended Evensong in Salisbury Cathedral. Against a grey afternoon sky its incomparable tower and spire loomed a stark, black silhouette as we approached the city on the A36. As is usually the case, though on Sundays not always, we sat in the choir stalls with the choir. The trebles were girls. Their unutterably splendid voices indistinguishable from boys. How do their teachers elicit such sounds from young throats?

Hundreds of years worth of wind, rain and frost have worn and weathered the building's exterior mellow.

Inside, for centuries, wave upon wave of glorious polyphony, measured prayer, and awed praise have echoed, resonated and polished arch upon soaring arch and pillar upon imposing pillar with a patina of sanctity real enough to stop my heart. It was good to be there.

Snow bright

How lovely the snow. How satisfying to walk to St John's noisily crunching its crisp surface crust. How the snow's whiteness brightens the dark. More light came in through our camellia darkened back windows during the day than in the height of summer.

(233) "This and That" - 4 March 2018

A good priest falls out with his bishop and diocese from time to time. In the early nineteen sixties my father did in the diocese of Mashonaland, Rhodesia.

Introduced to Paradise

Two old Wykehamists persuaded the bishop that our mission station was a perfect site for an African equivalent of Winchester College. After all, a prestigious old-school tie is less malign in the hands of talented African boys than an AK rifle. My father considered a school for girls a more pressing need than an elite school for boys.

With the bishop's reluctant agreement he left them to get on with it and moved 40 miles north. There to build a new mission station. This introduced us to paradise.

While he and an African builder built a home for us on the new mission station, we lived in an isolated farmhouse called *Vuta* some miles away. Set among low, well- wooded hills, the bush encroached on all sides. We loved it.

Birds and wild animals were less than usually wary. My school holidays were spent linking bird calls to their throat of origin. In a thicket close to the front door Burchell's Coucals announced rain in water-from-a-bottle melodious scales. A particularly haunting, melancholy song took three weeks to link to the black-capped bush shrike. Every day the ringing, antiphonal duets of black collared barbets thrilled as Cape turtle doves crooned and crooned.

The wagtail and the grass mouse

Though no nature mystic, I did once, at *Vuta*, all but tip over into a bliss of wonder. I was sitting on a stone, my binoculars focussed on a yellow wagtail footling and head-nodding on a sandy track. As I delighted in it, a little grass mouse emerged from the verge just behind the bird. It casually ambled and nose-twitched its way across the track and disappeared. That was all. Unremarkable creatures, momentarily brought together to transfix me with delight. I can still see them.

Goldcrests splinter the light

On an October day R. S. Thomas happened upon a clump of bare trees. He walked so quietly his approach was unnoticed. He stepped inside:

...it was alive with goldcrests. The air purred with their small wings. To look up was to see the twigs re-leafed with their small bodies. Everywhere their needle-sharp cries stitched at the silence. Was I invisible? Their seed-bright eyes regarded me from three feet off. Had I put forth an arm, they might have perched on it. I became a tree, part of that bare spinney where silently the light was splintered, and for a timeless moment the birds thronged me, filigreeing me with shadow, moving to an immemorial rhythm on their way south.

Then suddenly they were gone, leaving other realities to return: the rustle of the making tide, the tick of the moisture, the blinking of the pool's eye as the air flicked it, and lastly myself. Where had I been? Who was I? What did it all mean? When it was happening, I was not. Now that the birds had gone, here I was once again.

Brexodus

The Old Testament readings for our daily recitation of Matins this week have come from the Book of Exodus. They have seemed strangely relevant.

The Israelites are in E for Egypt, not Europe.. They wish to be out of Egypt (not Europe). Their leader, determined to take them out as sweetly as possible, is a somewhat reluctant M for Moses, not Mrs May. The Egyptians don't want them to go. So they pile on punishing economic hardship to persuade them to stay. Hardship to do with brick-making without supplying straw, not customs duties and tariffs. Whereupon many Israelites profess a desire to remain. They give Moses (not Mrs May) a hard time for making them stink in the nostrils of Pharaoh (not Juncker).

There follows a decade of plaguey negotiation, threats and disasters. The Egyptians (not Europeans) finally urge them to leave, but change their minds. This leads to disaster for them. Moses' Israelites (not Mrs May's Brits) head off for forty years of hardship and backsliding in the wilderness.

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