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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE

(November 2018)



THE BRIDGE - NEAR ALBANY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

*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 **November 2018** 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>

(271) “This and That” - 25 November 2018

“All Over Down Under” [6]

Boy scouts are wrong. It's best to be unprepared. Too much preparation takes the edge off travel. To read and explore all about where you're going invites disappointment. To be bushwhacked by surprise and wonder is best.

The sunrise of wonder

This happened on leaving unlovely Cocklebidy. It was a cool, breezy sunny morning. Our one full day on the Nullabor plain which is a vast, arid, flat, almost treeless, riverless plain on the Great Australian Bight. It's the world's largest, single exposure of limestone bedrock, 77,000 square miles of it. The first European to cross it was Edward John Eyre in 1841. It was described shortly afterwards as “a hideous anomaly, a blot on the face of Nature, the sort of place one gets into in bad dreams.” We loved it.

Our first surprise was an escarpment sixty miles out of Cocklebidy. At the Madura Pass the Eyre Highway drops two to three hundred feet to the Roe Plain. We were half way down before the remarkableness of what was happening registered. We turned back to stop at a layby at the top, under eucalypts with sun-silvered, glittering leaves, on a cool and breezy morning. We drank in an expansive view, deeply appreciated after so many, many miles of flat, treeless tableland. The escarpment itself was well wooded. Towards the bottom is the Madura Roadhouse. A lovelier stop for the night than bare, windswept Cocklebidy. It was once the homestead of Madura Station, still in operation. At 1.75 million acres it is the second largest sheep station in Australia with a carrying capacity of 58,000 merinos.

Geographical acuity

As we approached Eucla, a tiny village of about fifty inhabitants, beautifully sited above and in splendid view of the Southern Ocean, we were able to confirm our geographical surmises and speculations as to the unexpected escarpment. At this little township the scarp meets the ocean to become the impressive sheer cliff face of the Bight. The Roe Plain we had just crossed must once have been under the ocean, at which time the escarpment would have been the continent's cliffs. The present Bight's impressive cliffs, the Bunda Cliffs, vary from 200 to 390 feet in height. As limestone they are vulnerable to the undermining ravages of the Southern Ocean. They form part of the longest uninterrupted line of sea cliffs in the world.

As we neared the end of the lowland Roe Plain we spied on the south east horizon a bright whiteness that at first we took to be cloud. We later concluded, rightly, that it was sand dunes. Below the tablelands of the Nullabor proper, we were hardly above sea and dune level.

On reascending the escarpment we turned into tiny Eucla, a mere motel, police station and handful of neat, small houses on a couple of short streets. While admiring the ocean view we were joined by another couple. They had motored from Sydney to Adelaide, put their car on the train to cross the Nullabor to Perth and were now driving back. The train runs parallel to the highway, but a lot further north through less varied and more extreme countryside.

Exultant and mesmerised

The original township of Eucla was sited below the scarp. Inexorable, wind-driven dunes, had led to its abandonment. A 1890s plague of rabbits ate dune stabilising vegetation sufficient to unleash dunes on the settlement.

A ruined and half sand-swamped Telegraph Station is well signposted, so we backtracked to have a look. It was desolately lovely. A kangaroo bounded off as we approached and the

attractively light-coloured, roofless stone building was backed by a bank of high, leafy gum trees alive with the squeaking and squawking of galahs.

We pressed on over the dunes to the ocean, a fifteen minute walk to a bright, white beach completely to ourselves. We walked along it exultant, mesmerised by the roar of a brilliant turquoise ocean at high tide. Enlivening and tingling car-dulled feet in the crisp, clean southern ocean. We made our way west to a stark, beautiful, derelict jetty covered with large terns and cormorants.

(270) “This and That” - 18 November 2018

“All Over Down Under” [5]

We left Esperance singing “Cockles and Mussels” a song triggered by our destination on the Nullarbor Plain, Cocklebidy. A lovely name and a lovely song. When sung in a light tenor voice, it warms the “cockles of the heart”. That phrase derived not from the near heart-shape of delicious little cockles, but a 17th century corruption of the Latin name for the heart's ventricles, *cochleae cordis*.

The word “biddy”, in the 17th century was a name for chickens. Derived probably from people calling them to feed: “Biddy, biddy, biddy.” The word is also a diminutive of Bridget, common to Irish maidservants. So common it became a term for women generally. Hence my name for Cocklebidy: “Molly Malone”. A cockle selling woman.

Saline lakes and goldmining

We began the 400mile journey in cold blustery weather. There had been rain during the night, but things brightened up as we headed 130 miles north to Norseman, through typical Mallee bush. Modest forest country of trees no more than thirty feet high, eucalypts which, once burnt, regenerate with many stems. Great swathes had been turned into fields filled with canola or wheat, often to the horizon.

We stopped for a while at Dundas, an abandoned gold-mining town. There were no buildings to be seen, just a crisscross of bright red dirt tracks incongruously street named. Close by is a great, shallow, saline lake called Lake Dundas. There we had a cup of soup, delighting in cool sunny weather, red dirt, silver bushes, spindly trees and a crunching stroll along the lake's salty shoreline.

We then stopped at Norseman, a small, well ordered town of about six hundred people. The centre of a gold mining district, it's notable for imaginatively decorated roundabouts, immensely wide streets, an impressive old hotel and houses largely of the prefabricated sort. It's the last 'major' town before the South Australian border, four hundred and fifty miles to the east. It's also the beginning of the great Eyre Highway across the Nullarbor Plain.

The ninety mile stretch

Between Norseman and Cocklebidy are two roadhouses: Balladonia (an Aboriginal word meaning “big rock by itself”) and Calguna (an Aboriginal word meaning “spear track”). They offer little more than fuel, food and less than luxurious accommodation. Between the two lies “the ninety mile straight”, one of the longest stretches of road in the world without a bend or kink.

Up until Balladonia we passed through pleasing woodland. Our greatest achievement and joy was Diana spotting, although travelling at speed, a patch of Australia's most famous wild flower: the Sturt Desert Pea. Two years ago, on our trip across the continent from north to south, we had only seen them in a tub in a town. At last we found them in the wild. *Swainsona formosa*,

named after English botanist Isaac Swainson. The flowers are a bright blood-red, with a bulbous, shiny black centre, or “boss”. Beautiful. We stopped and photographed them from every angle.

From Baladonia onwards the landscape began to change. Woodland gave way to stretches of shrubland, and when trees returned they were more sparsely spread and less robust. By the time we approached Cocklebiddy it was all low, grey shrubs. The roadside was littered with dead kangaroos and wallabies, as well as an odd fox or two, an occasional dingo and rabbits. Wise drivers stay off the road from dusk to dawn. The great road trains tend to plough on, killing anything in their way.

Cocklebiddy

Foiled by my fondness for the name Cocklebiddy, I imagined it to be a pleasing little bush village. It was not. Just a motel, restaurant and petrol station on a featureless plain. It was buffeted by cold winds as we arrived at about 5.00pm. There being no competition the accommodation is basic. No matter. The atmosphere was warm, the fish and chips delicious and the beer as good as it is in Boldre’s Red Lion. We hunkered down. Happily.

(269) “This and That” - 11 November 2018

“All Over Down Under” [4]

As boring as most sermons, surely, are accounts of other people’s dreams. Possibly because both concern what is unreal, in a material sense. Clergymen’s dreams then, if sermon related, would be doubly boring.

Dreams and Ravensthorpe Silos

In Albany, during a good night’s sleep in the most comfortable of our whole trip’s motels, I dreamt of visiting and talking to two unbelieving adult girls who had lost their mother. My journal comments laconically: “I got nowhere.” What does that mean? Even in a dream I wouldn’t set about trying to convert someone in extremis.

The journey east from Albany to Esperance is about 300 miles. Inland from the coast, the road crosses low-rainfall, Mallee-type, scraggy forest and scrub. Vast acreages of this have been cleared for wheat and canola crops, most of which looked promising as we sped past. In the distance, to the north, are the Stirling Ranges. Were we not focussed upon crossing the continent we would have dallied there. By Australian standards they are impressive. One of the richest areas for flora in the world.

We stopped briefly at Ravensthorpe. It is roughly the size of the first Australian village I was Rector of in 1985, on the other side of Australia in Victoria. The population a mere 600. We stopped to photograph Ravensthorpe’s three great wheat silos. They are strikingly decorated with 82 feet high murals of a local wild flower: *Banksia baxteri*.

The silo painting project took 31 days to complete, used 75 gallons of paint and involved countless trips up and down the silos in a knuckle boom. The artist, known as *Amok Island*, is based in Fremantle. Like Banksy he began as a graffiti and street artist.

He says of the Ravensthorpe silo mural: *Each silo side shows a different stage of the flowering cycle of this species of Banksia, only found between Esperance and Albany, from flower buds, to full bloom, to seedpods developing, drying out and opening. The animals are this species’ main pollinators; the Honey Possum and New Holland Honey eater. The artwork encircles the three silos infinitely; the final silo marks the beginning once again of the first, making a connection with the cycle of the seasons and grain farming processes this area is known for.*

In bright sunlight the murals were striking enough to invite us to break our journey in an otherwise unremarkable village. Though it is notorious too for the *Ravensthorpe Massacre*, where many of the local Noongar aboriginal people were massacred in revenge for what was then the lawful spearing of John Dunn in 1880 for raping a 13 year old Noongar girl.

Esperance

We arrived in Esperance as dusk fell, having phone booked ahead into rather more plebeian accommodation than that enjoyed in Albany. Only \$90 for the night. We had to venture into a rowdy bar to find someone to sign us in, but it was good natured, family rowdiness. Very Australian, we enjoyed it. Unusually there was no internet in our room. We sent off a necessary email from the hotel foyer, with raucous bar noise and jovial passers by to distract us.

A walk around the town's sea front in the dark yielded nowhere enticing to eat. We returned to the hotel where, in the noisy bar, we had excellent fish and chips, in my case with a beer. It was all enjoyably companionable with families and children tucking into meals as well. We left as a karaoke evening worked itself into full swing.

Space litter

The next day we had many, many miles to travel and so the varied delights of Esperance were ignored. In 1979, pieces of the space station Skylab crashed onto Esperance. The municipality fined the US \$400 for littering. The fine was paid in April 2009, when radio show host Scott Barley raised the funds from his morning show listeners, and paid the fine on behalf of NASA. A 17 year old local lad picked up a \$10,000 prize by being the first to deliver, in person, a piece of the space junk to a San Francisco newspaper.

(268) “This and That” - 4 November 2018

“All Over Down Under” [3]

I get up earlier than Diana, though she's no sluggard. Our first conversation takes place as we don boots for our early morning walk.

Passion and dalliance

She has an organised and organising mind. Her subject matter is the day ahead's tasks and events. I invariably respond with queries as to what to cook for our evening meal, subject matter for this weekly article or whatever sermon I'm obsessed with. She's loving enough to engage with my passions and preoccupations, albeit briefly.

Cooking is as enjoyable as writing. Both occupations are creative, but cooking is also relaxing and therapeutic. While crossing Australia cooking's place in my life was replaced by mere dalliance over what meals and snacks to buy. Article writing was replaced by longer than usual entries to my journal and the taking of photographs to complement them.

Breakfast lunch and dinner

Breakfast at home is a bowl of fresh fruit soup. A variety of fruits are blended with natural yoghurt and appreciatively slurped as we watch, through the window, birds breakfasting on our feeders. While travelling across Australia we joined the birds, settling for a selection of grains. My son had left a bin of very good, toasted muesli in the car. Not of the health-fascist, unsweetened sort, but just sugary enough to encourage joy and optimism for the day ahead.

For lunch we parked somewhere scenic, set up canvas bucket chairs and gobbled a pot of instant noodles. The crinkly sort. This was followed by a couple of saved motel biscuits with a

mug of hot chocolate or coffee. It sufficed, because eating while driving is the one sure way to keep me awake. Throughout the trip Diana fed me dried fruit and nuts to save our lives. So we were never ravenous for lunch. Only for evening meals did we eat out or take in takeaways.

Our first night out of Perth and third in Australia was spent in Albany. It's a substantial and lovely town on the southern tip of Western Australia . We arrived as dusk fell. For the only time on our journey we had left it late to phone ahead to book accommodation. We ended up in the most comfortable and pricey accommodation of the whole trip. A good walk around town on a cold, breezy, weekday night revealed nowhere suitable to eat out. A supermarket yielded an excellent curry to microwave in our apartment.

Wild seas and dazzling beaches

We allowed ourselves a couple of hours the next day to sightsee before heading east to Esperance. It was sunny, with a cold breeze. We visited 'The Gap', a deep channel in granite cliffs carved by the mighty waves of the Southern Ocean. The drop of about eighty feet to foaming, wild ocean is overhung by a platform that invites a thrilling attack of vertigo. The cliffs were once joined directly to Antarctica, when Australia was a part of the supercontinent Gondwana. The wind on this exposed stretch of coast was wild and everywhere hazed with sea-blown mist and foam. There was also an impressive, wave-sculpted, granite bridge.

We then crossed a hill into sunnier, calmer and warmer weather to visit a defunct whaling station, now a museum. Set on a bay of dazzling white beaches it ceased whaling in 1978. From 1958, until then, 1,136 humpback whales and 14,695 sperm whales were caught and slaughtered. The station remained profitable almost to the end. Its whale oil was used by NASA and to make Swiss watches.

There was not enough time to explore the museum. Instead we had a good walk and look around outside before heading for the road to Esperance through and around Albany's many lovely bays. We stopped at an astonishingly white sand beach, and enjoyed road signs advising caution because of crossing turtles, and mallee fowl.

Goodbye tallow

Vegetarian sensitivities seem to have done away with real soap. In our Perth Motel we were required to shower with a "Skin detox body bar".

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