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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE

(December 2018)



CLIFFS OF THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN BIGHT

*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 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>

(276) “This and That” - 30 December 2018

“All Over Down Under” [11]

Thirty seven inches of rain have fallen on the Vicarage this year. How fortunate we've been. *Broken Hill*, our next Australian destination, averages nine inches a year. The bulk often falling in a couple of big thunder storms.

Involuntary genuflection

Eight degrees centigrade was the maximum temperature on Christmas Day at St John's. In *Broken Hill* a relatively mild thirty eight. Two days later, as I write, it is forty two. Midnight Mass in such conditions is torrid for an appropriately vested priest. None of the churches in which I ever ministered had air conditioning. On hot summer days candles sometimes softened and involuntarily genuflected, having to be replaced for services.

No lovers of excessive heat, we crossed the continent only as winter began to give way to spring, and so left the Great Australian Bight for *Broken Hill* untroubled by heat or flies. The further we travelled from the coast towards New South Wales the drier conditions became. In north east South Australia severe drought prevailed. Enfeebled kangaroos and wallabies were more than usually prone to suicidal road crossing. Carcasses littered the verges.

On our way we stopped briefly to look over unlovely *Iron Knob*, an iron ore mining town of modest houses and few facilities. Much of the ore, notable for its high quality, came originally from a large outcrop rising above a relatively flat plain, hence *Iron Knob*. The abundance of this rich ore gave rise to the Australian steel industry and 21% percent of the steel in the Sydney Harbour Bridge is from ore quarried at *Iron Knob*. The rest was imported from England.

Extreme conditions

After a night in *Port Augusta*, at the head of Spencer's Gulf, familiar to us from our previous, north-south transcontinental crossing, we pressed on towards New South Wales. We passed a car labouring slowly and exhaling unhealthy smoke. It caught us up at a layby and we learned that it had collided with and been damaged by a kangaroo.

The countryside, for the most part, was flat, salt-bush plain with, here and there, low undulating hills lightly wooded with mulga and ti-trees. We stopped for a break at a crisp village of about 85 residents called *Yunta*. Diana had a long conversation with the voluntary minder of the community shop and post office, the wife of a local sheep farmer. They run one sheep to ten acres and in a very bad year, like this one, the kangaroos are in a far worse condition than the sheep. The latter's birth rate drops considerably which helps them survive.

For lunch we stopped at *Mannahill*, twenty minutes further on and even smaller than *Yunta*. It's on the India Pacific rail line and we were able to admire its two significant buildings: an old hotel and a neat, stone railway station.

Broken Hill

We arrived in *Broken Hill* before dusk, signed into a motel for two nights and then walked into a fine, prosperous seeming town of substantial buildings and wide streets. Nearly seven hundred miles west of Sydney, it is set in the middle of semi-desert and has a population of 17,000. It is Australia's longest running mining town, the original home of the largest mining company in the world: BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary Company) The City is built on huge ore deposits of silver, zinc and lead. It is still mined, but no longer by BHP.

1915 Jihad

In 1915 there occurred the '*Battle of Broken Hill*', arguably the first example of a jihadist terrorist attack in Australia. The two perpetrators were ex-camel drivers originally from what is now Pakistan. They shot up a train, killing four people and injuring seven more. Later both were

shot dead themselves. They left notes connecting their actions to the hostilities between the Ottoman and British Empires, officially declared in October 1914. One of them, *Gool Mahomed*, left a letter in his waist-belt declaring himself a subject of the Ottoman Sultan and that, *I must kill you and give my life for my faith, Allahu Akbar*.

(275) “This and That” - 23 December 2018

“All Over Down Under” [10]

Familiarity breeds contempt claims the cliché. And, in matters matrimonial, as a consequence, it breeds adultery, spouse-desertion and divorce.

There could well be a remedy. A theory of art called *defamiliarization* argues that an important purpose and characteristic of art is the presentation of familiar things in unfamiliar ways. This enhances perception and appreciation of the overly familiar or commonplace. So instead of deserting a spouse, hire an artist to paint her with an artistry sufficient to defamiliarize her into renewed loveliness or significance.

Through the keyhole

It’s a persuasive theory. Merely to frame reality, even if only with a keyhole, can enhance appreciation of it. In the hands of genius dithering, indecisive J Alfred Prufrock fascinates, an anonymous girl with a pearl earring intrigues and a cluster of quavers and semiquavers moves the heart.

On leaving Penong and its windmills we travelled a mere 45 miles to Ceduna and so out of the Nullarbor Plain. Never again will that unique, semi-desert’s desolate and surprising beauty appear so eye-openingly wonderful to us, familiarised as we now are by having crossed it at last. Unless, that is, these short descriptive pew-sheet accounts are artful enough to defamiliarize us back into wonder.

Streaky Bay and slug-like pinnipeds

As night fell we stopped at a small, pleasing coastal town, still on the Bight, called Streaky Bay. Along the way bright green, early cereal crops and paddocks of feeding sheep predominated instead of scrub. Our motel was better than the Nullarbor’s roadhouses too and the town well appointed with a pleasing, long jetty. We settled in with the help of an excellent takeaway lamb curry and spent most of the evening working out the rest of our route and booking motels ahead accordingly. We were to head away from the coast, north east, to Broken Hill and Bourke before returning the car to my son Peter in Tamworth.

Next morning, as if reluctant to let go of the coast, we took a detour round a local peninsular before heading north. In a cold and strong wind we visited singing blowholes. Waves crashed in at the bottom of jagged cliffs, their noise subsided, only to be echoed in a breathy roar, amplified through unobtrusive blowholes in the limestone.

Before finally leaving the coast we stopped at a sea lion colony. The Australian Sea Lion (*neophoca cinereal*), the only pinniped peculiar to Australia, is an endangered and rare mammal. From a high cliff we observed about twenty lying on a rocky platform and beach so far below us they appeared little bigger and hardly more remarkable than slugs in our garden. The wind was strong and cold, gifting breaking waves with wildly flowing manes. We stayed long enough to be rewarded by a sealion coming ashore, to lumber and flap around before returning to the sea.

Murphy’s Haystacks

Our last call before finally turning north was to Murphy’s Haystacks. A striking cluster of orange granite boulders rising out of wheat fields like skewed and crooked molars from the gums of a tramp.

An agricultural adviser, many years ago, spotted them on the horizon from his coach and thought they were haystacks. He marvelled that a farmer could gather so much hay from such low-rainfall countryside. In fact they are small *inselbergs*, rock islands exposed by the erosion of softer rock around them. They're footling trifles to anyone brought up among the mighty granite kopjes of Zimbabwe or when compared to Australia's supreme example of an *inselberg*, Ayer's Rock. Yet for all that very lovely, with an air of mystery to them that reminded me, for no obvious reason, of Victoria's Hanging Rock, where the school girls disappeared.

The wind had softened into a breeze. The countryside was vibrantly green with young wheat, spring's new leaves atop eucalypts blushed pink as they rippled in the light wind and a deep blue sky was lightly brushed with expansive sweeps of airy cloud. Lovely.

(274) "This and That" - 16 December 2018 "All Over Down Under" [9]

Australian outback windmills are starkly skeletal, anorexic even, compared to plump, prosperous, traditional European ones. As Australian as corrugated iron, red dirt, goannas, and flies, they're beautiful, especially in silhouette.

Indispensable to the outback

They remain the cheapest and most reliable water pumping machine ever invented. Out there, where the crows fly backwards and barmaids devour their young, they have been indispensable. In the year 2000 the two hundred thousandth Southern Cross windmill was manufactured. Another famous Australian brand, the Comet, comes in 13 different sizes including a 35 foot monster. They have been known to last for 30 years without a service or repairs.

There was a derelict windmill I loved in the grounds of St Luke's Dookie, a small country church in my last parish. My son was married there. They're a fitting symbol of the Australian outback. In 2002 a fifty cent coin was minted depicting one.

Penong

Once we left the Head of the Bight and its whales, the treeless Nullarbor plain continued, but with a difference. Small trees and larger shrubs began to displace salt bush. There were areas of green grass that looked as if they were being grazed. By the time we reached the small village of Penong we were in wheat country, marginal wheat country. Still on the Nullarbor Plain, with an average annual rainfall of only 13 inches, this area marks the western edge of the South Australian wheat belt. Innumerable windmills draw water from the *Anjutabie* water basin. For subsistence, not irrigation. The harvest depends on the meagre rainfall. If it comes at the right time the wheat silos fill. If not, not.

In the village is a Windmill museum, open to the air and the public. At no cost. All sizes, types and ages of windmill are represented, including the largest in Australia. Searched out from all over the outback, often in poor condition, they've been lovingly repaired and put back together by talented enthusiasts. It makes for a fascinating stop.

The most versatile of minerals

For a lunch break we took a dirt road of about fifteen miles to Point Sinclair on the coast. It's close to a remote but renowned surfing destination called Cactus Beach. We passed great squares of ridged whitish sand. On talking later to a local, we discovered these to be crushed gypsum from the largest gypsum mine in Australia. Strip-mined, the ore once crushed, is bulldozed into great windrows, like those we observed, and left for several years for natural rainfall to leach out the salt.

I used gypsum to lighten the clay-heavy soil of my first vegetable garden in Australia. It enabled me to grow monster swedes as big as the head of a parson congratulated on a sermon.

Gypsum is used in an astonishing variety of products. Not only in plasterboard, plaster of Paris and cement, but also as a coagulant in tofu, a thickener in toothpaste and shampoos and as a dough binder in baking. It is found in most canned vegetables, flour, ice cream, blue cheese and white bread. It plays an important part in wine making. Brewers use it to condition water for their beer. Raise a glass to gypsum.

Nearby the mine is Lake MacDonnell. We crossed it on a causeway. On the left the water a lovely blue, on the right a surprising deep pink, due to a high concentration of salts.

Point Sinclair is sheltered by a low cliff from the south west winds that raise the surf for Cactus Beach. It has a jetty much used by anglers and covered barbecue facilities. Alongside the jetty is a netted enclosure for swimming. An information board tells the melancholy story of an 11 year old boy fatally attacked by a great white shark in 1975. Hence the erection of the net after intense local lobbying. We walked the jetty, enjoyed lunch in sheltered sunshine and learned a little about gypsum mining from a loquacious local. Goodbye to the Nullarbor, but not to the outback.

(273) “This and That” - 9 December 2018 “All Over Down Under” [8]

Memorable lullabies. Thunder, lightning and heavy rain on a corrugated iron roof. Owls hooting from a frosty copse. Nightjars churring through summer’s open windows. African drums from a nearby village beer party. Chorusing crickets and booming frogs on sultry evenings.

Huggermugger with mum

Best of all though, Tristan da Cunha in the 1950s. Falling to sleep on rare calm nights to the breathy honks of southern right whales, and the smack of their tale flukes on a tranquil, quietly heaving, sighing dark, dark ocean. .

Without telling us why, my son Peter had insisted we book in to the unremarkable Nullarbor Roadhouse. It was because of its proximity to the *Head of the Bight*. From May to October every year, this bay, the northernmost point of the Great Australian Bight, becomes a nursery for about 60 southern right whales and their calves from Antarctica.

We arrived to see them in perfect weather, a chill breeze, but deep blue and cloud-free sky. A smart building well above the cliffs offered ice creams, teas and a till to take a tolerable toll. We strolled down a path to the cliff edge, overlooking a sparkling ocean. There were sand dunes way off to the east, and the great ‘Bunda’ cliffs below us and to the west. We zig zagged down a well constructed wooden gangway along which others were gazing at the ocean and photographing whales and their calves. We counted about 20 near to shore and further out. Difficult to photograph memorably, we enjoyed them for an hour or two on our own retinas, not the camera’s. Just below us a mother and calf idly frolicked, drifting with the swell. The calf feeding and all fondly huggermugger with its mama..

Double vindication

In reading about southern right whales over the years, I have never come across references to them vocalising into the atmosphere. So much so I began to wonder if the noises I heard on Tristan da Cunha were a figment of my imagination. To my delight there, at the *Head of the Bight*, one great behemoth raised it’s monstrous, calloused head and gave a loud, breathy honk. My memory was vindicated.

That night I did a word-processor search through my mother's 300,000 word Tristan diary. I came upon this sentence in an entry for 11 October 1955: *The whales are making more noise than ever this year, the honks are terrifically loud both day and night. Double vindication.*

Lice and parasitic worms

In her diary my mother refers to whales frequently. Not surprisingly. Between our tiny wooden vicarage and the South Atlantic Ocean were only fifty or so yards of well grazed turf and a cliff. When the whales were around, during the winter months, they were often very, very close to land. She refers to them as being ugly, which, compared to dolphins and many other species of whale, they are indeed.

Their heads, in comparison to their bodies, are huge and notable for white, warty "callosities" of various shapes and sizes. Naturally grey these appear white due to the large colonies of whale lice, barnacles and parasitic worms that reside on them. Found on the upper surface of the whale's head, above the eyes, on the jawline and chin and surrounding the blowhole they form a unique pattern on every whale. Although when overgrown they tend to break off, the patterns do not change over a lifetime. This makes them a useful tool for the purposes of photo-identification and conservation.

In 1961 there was a volcanic eruption on Tristan da Cunha and the island was abandoned for a couple of years. During this time Russian whalers illegally decimated the island's whales. Since then numbers have never returned to those of the days when we were resident on the island.

Whistled on our way

As reluctantly we left the *Head of the Bight* we were whistled on our way by a small *singing honey eater*, perched on the gutter of the reception building. As unique to Australia as the kookaburra it is much, much sweeter voiced.

(272) "This and That" - 2 December 2018

"All Over Down Under" [7]

For 3000 miles across Australia, the distinction between the heavens and the earth constantly blurred. The sky leaked down into the road ahead. Distant oncoming vehicles loomed out of what appeared to be a highway of spilt sky distilled into water. Each approaching vehicle, reflected in it, appeared doubled.

Road and sea mirages

Apparently it is all to do with temperature inversion and refracted light. A layer of warm air along the road, with cooler air above, refracts light waves. The sky and distant objects appear to be where they're not. As all drivers know, road mirages like this are common even in cool Britain.

A little research reveals there to be different sorts of mirage. Those that appear below the object they purport to be are '*inferior mirages*'. Those above, '*superior mirages*'. More complicated are shifting '*superior mirages*' known as '*fata morgana*'. There was a fascinating example recorded after the sinking of the *Hood*.

The *Bismarck* was pursued by the British cruisers *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*. It passed out of sight into a sea mist in the Denmark Strait. Within seconds, the ship re-appeared steaming toward the British ships at high speed. The cruisers, anticipating an imminent attack, separated. Then to the astonishment of observers from both ships, the German battleship fluttered, grew indistinct and faded away. Radar operators reported that the *Bismarck*, in fact, had made no changes of course at all. Not an apparition then. A *fata morgana* mirage.

Cars, lorries and the flying doctor

The thousand mile long Eyre Highway is not heavily trafficked, certainly to those of us used to being snarled up on the M27. We did several vehicle counts. For an hour of travel at midday, on the “90 mile straight”, Diana counted 30 cars and recreational vehicles, 5 road trains and 2 lorries. In mid afternoon there were even less: 2 motorbikes, 6 cars and recreational vehicles, 2 road trains and two lorries. This seemed less than on our Darwin to Port Augusta journey two years ago. Possibly because, given the distance between Perth and Australia’s eastern capitals, more freight goes by sea and rail than by road.

It is not only kangaroos, wallabies, camels, dingoes and wombats that can be encountered on the highway. There is a remote possibility of running into an aeroplane. Some sections of the road double as emergency airstrips for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. They are signposted, have runway “piano keys” painted on the road, and turnaround bays for small aircraft.

Bush flies and featureless countryside

We left Eucla after midday, heading for a night-stop at the Nullarbor Roadhouse 122 miles away. The highway runs close to the Bunda Cliffs of the Great Australian Bight. We stopped for lunch at the first lookout. We set up the car’s comfortable bucket chairs and guzzled our customary noodles in bright sunshine and a cool breeze, overlooking the mighty cliffs and a glorious ocean. Diana put a net over her face for a postprandial snooze. The first of summer’s bush flies were beginning to be mildly troublesome. I killed five with deadly concentration and enormous satisfaction.

Other lookouts along the way were as deeply satisfying. Wild sea below great limestone cliffs with no protective beach, the cliffs undermined inexorably year by year.

The landscape alongside the highway, though featureless, was pleasing. Low shrubs, some of them surprisingly green and rather beautiful. Now and then they thinned out to give way to blue-grey salt bush, all the way to the horizon. There were also areas of thin, grey/brown grass.

It being the end of winter, during which most of the little rain that falls, falls, and when the sun is gentle enough not to bleach and shrivel everything it settles upon the grass ought to be green. It wasn’t. Is it ever?

We arrived at the Nullarbor Roadhouse as dusk fell. An unremarkable though comfortable enough place.

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