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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>

(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 though 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 be 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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