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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (November 2019)



Tristan da Cunha: west of the village

*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 2019** 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>

(323) “This and That” - 24 November 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (23)

Wed 26 September, 2012 continued

Tristan’s population of about 260 live in one village, Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, on the settlement plateau, a narrow strip of land about 5 miles long squeezed between the 2000 foot base mountain cliffs and the ocean. Facing north west it’s between half a mile and a mile in width. On the ocean side there are cliffs of about 100 feet down to the beach. Yesterday was one of our few fine days so we walked to Burntwood, the plateau’s westernmost point.

Geographical foibles

The wind had ceased, the sun warm on our backs and for the first time I was in shirtsleeves and wearing a sunhat. We passed the potato patches and walked on. Then, in the space of just a few yards, the wind suddenly and coldly picked up from the west. On the way back, at the same spot, it died down to nothing. All to do with the geographical foibles of a mountainous island’s lee.

The 2000 foot cliffs on our left were scarred by great gulches. Some plunged all the way down into deep gashes in the plateau itself, others had debouched sprays of rock and boulder debris littering the plateau surface. We passed through a small sheep mustering paddock and then a large one full of sheep and young lambs, a few coal black.

At the very end of the plateau, in a bitter wind, where it met the sea and a bluff we came to a pristine black sand beach. Where dry the sand was grey not black and wind-driven blasted our arms and faces. A smooth, fine sand specked with minute glitter, possibly mica. We walked the beach, appreciative of sand instead of rocks, but not for long in so chill a wind. We settled down in a grassed and sheltered gully to eat an apple, lulled by the roar of breakers and awed by a limitless, dazzling, ocean vista. There are caves beyond the bluff that can be visited at low tide. Dangerous though. A rogue wave took a young man from the rocks there a few months before we arrived on the island.

Weekends among the potatoes

We returned along the cliff tops and through the potato patches. These are tiny, stone-walled fields, their surfaces considerably lower than the surrounding pastureland. The soil appears deeper than in most places on the island and scattered around the area are strange, conical grassed hummocks and hillocks of volcanic rocks and aggregate. Into some of them sheltered spaces have been hacked for small holiday dwellings to which islanders sometimes retreat for weekends. Gas cylinders and elaborate rain-catching drums and plumbing are evidence of a degree of comfort.

Some patches were being hoed and worked by family groups as we passed. Growing potatoes is an important part of Tristan culture. In years gone by they were an all important staple and they remain an important part of island diet. When I was a boy on the island, much of the pastry made for puddings used potatoes rather than flour. To my young taste buds they were none the worse for that. Whole families go out to plant, cultivate and harvest the potatoes sometimes over a weekend. There is also an annual “ratting day” during which the stone walls are pulled apart to enable dogs to pounce and kill the disturbed rodents.

The diet of islanders has much improved since my childhood. All of us then suffered from boils, carbuncles and sties. I remember my father placing scalding-hot, bread poultices on my boils to draw out the pus. Horrible.

An award ceremony

There was an awards ceremony in the village hall yesterday. A large number of medals to honour the Queen’s Jubilee were handed out by the Administrator. All the recipients were men except for one female constable who did at least receive two medals. The life boat crew and mountain rescue team all received medals, though Diana was told that unless the tide is right, the

harbour is too shallow to allow for the lifeboat's use. Kobus informed me that £200 would be about right as the average island wage, though fishermen can earn considerably more.

(322) "This and That" - 17 November 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (22)

Mon 24 September, 2012 continued

It rained most of the night and was doing so well and truly when we awoke at about six, but stopped soon thereafter. A pleasing and rare surprise in this unusual vicaragewas to hear the phone ring. It was son Peter in Australia.

There were about 65 present at church yesterday, the only expatriate being Bob the Scottish dental technician. He has made us a copy of the film from the nineteen fifties, now a DVD, which features our family on the island then.

My Sunday sermon fell into the vacuum of island reticence, a reticence that appears to be collective rather than individual. If you encounter folk one to one, or as a little family unit, they are very forthcoming.

Gelded donkeys

In the afternoon we went for a walk along the cliff edge west of the harbour clambering over some mighty bluffs and gulches. We encountered the donkeys, unused these days. All the males are gelded to ensure their eventual extinction. Pasture is too precious to waste on ornamental animals. They are wilder and more wary of human beings than in my youth when we caught and rode them to add authenticity to games of cowboys and Indians.

We walked along the bottom of the primitive golf course and then to the Hill Piece. It was necessary to travel inland a while to cross some of the gulches, but well worth it and it was not at all windy in the hill's lee. Only when we went a little way round did it begin seriously to blow.

This morning, on the way to matins, two temporary waterfalls tumbled down the mountainside. It was a gusty day with periods of welcome sunshine. The wind was blowing the water of one fall right back on itself. The mountain's rocks glinted in the sun. The weather is a constant preoccupation of my mother's diaries from the fifties. I find it much the same with this, my own, in 2012.

Wed 26 September, 2012 9.00am

I have just been up to the church to say matins and prepare it for the 10.00am Eucharist. It's a cold morning with a high blanket of grey cloud over all the sky. The mountain is clear though and the two flags on the way up indicated that for the first time the wind is in the east.

Monday's PCC meeting passed off easily enough. Present were Eddie Rogers, Lars Repetto, Carlene Glass-Green, Damien Swain, Harold Green, Trina Repetto and Agnes Lavarello (if Carlene is counted a Glass this represents all but one of the island's total of seven surnames). I took the minutes. Carlene usually performs this task but didn't bring the wherewithal and can only whisper because of the flu that has caused the school's closure and half of the island's workforce to be laid low.

Other than some disgruntlement with the Diocese for not providing a priest for the island in over two years, it was a happy meeting. I suggested that with the absence of a sermon when no priest is present, a children's talk from the Sunday School leader might go down well. Trina demurred, saying that she was an Islander and it would not be well received. The downside of small, interrelated communities.

Similar to the NHS

Island incomes are low. Teachers receive only a couple of hundred pounds a month. As with the NHS in England, the cost of medical treatment cripples the local economy. Hence the introduction of income tax and a nominal fee for hospital treatment. Surgical procedures tend to

be undertaken in private hospitals in Cape Town at little or no charge to the patient. This is unsustainable.

We visited the Tourist Centre to watch a demonstration of traditional carding and spinning of wool and to see a maker of model island long boats display his wares.

In days gone by Tristan longboats were renowned for their seaworthiness and buoyancy. They were made of painted canvas tightly stretched over a wooden frame. They are now redundant curiosities. The advantage of glass fibre over canvas is obvious, one mild encounter with a rock and canvas is rent, not so glass fibre.

(321) “This and That” - 10 November 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (21)

22 September, 2012 continued

It was a lovely dinner with Lars and Trina. Lars, an excellent fellow, has been closely involved in the life of St Mary's since he was fifteen. His job on the island for most of his life was to be the Fishing Company's paymaster and money man. Retired for about nine years, he has a great sense of humour and is full of wise little saws. He and Trina recall my father as being a man who got things done and of severe rectitude, but also humorous and widely remembered with joy and pleasure.

We had a fine dinner of beef hot pot, tinned peas and corn, with baked Tristan potatoes as an extra, the Island's prized speciality, for spuds were in the hot pot as well. There was also home grown beetroot and cold chicken. There followed traditional island 'spotted dick' (cooked in cloth and delicious, though made these days from wheat flour rather than potatoes as remembered from my childhood there. There was also a fine caramel topped milk tart.

An old villain but no cynic

Afterwards, to our surprise, we were shown a DVD, brought from England for the island archives of which I must get a copy. It is a promotional film made by SPG (the Missionary Society that sponsored my father as priest all those years ago). It is based on the visit of HMS Magpie in 1955 with Archbishop Clayton of Cape Town on board. There were lots of scenes featuring my father, and occasional ones even of us children. Best of all it was in colour, and so showed off the island as I vividly remember it. I have just had a look at my mother's Tristan diary. She says of the Archbishop: *He is an old villain! A grand chap!!... He eats anything and is most accommodating. No illusions about human nature, and yet not a cynic.....* We all stayed with him in Cape Town on our return to England trip in 1956.

Boozing safely

Lars and Trina were married in England in part to enable them to be allocated a caravan to live in rather than less than satisfactory single accommodation. Most of the wedding costs were paid for them including food for the reception, the exiled islanders being celebrities of that time.

We talked of previous priests on the island, one a hopeless drunk, though most who've served the Island are remembered with pleasure. We also agreed on the danger of accepting alcoholic drinks, so lavish are folk in pouring them. Light beer is the safest. Interestingly we were told that no one married on the island has ever been divorced.

23 September, 2012 6.25am

I turned the crayfish we received from the factory into a crayfish mayonnaise for lunch. Lovely, though the flavour is so delicate it's almost lost in the mayonnaise. As is so often the case with food, texture is all important. It's the denseness of crayfish and prawns that lifts them a peg or two above most other fish. Fr Michael, the Roman Catholic priest, tells me that a favoured way of serving crayfish in America is with melted butter, each morsel of fish is dipped most deliciously in it. It sounds good, except there's no butter available on the island.

Cow pat hazards on the golf course

In the morning yesterday we put the heater into the study and I read the priest's wife diary from 1906 aloud, as Diana rummaged through records. After lunch we went for a walk in slightly less dull weather than in the morning. We redid the beach walk from the harbour to Hottentot Gulch, then through a gate to look over the golf course. Far from flat its on flattest area of turf on the plateau and is dotted with several white painted, scientific monitoring stations and used for football, cricket and other games. Its spongy turf must make putting a challenge. Cattle graze the course regularly, so soft cow pats are as hazardous as bunkers. The cliff edge, unlike in the 1950s, is now attractively dry-stone walled, a wise precaution. The views of the beach and cliffs to the west are splendid. We walked past the generating station, not at all noisy, it's a large iron shed with four generators. The fishing company, I believe, provides two of them.

(320) "This and That" - 3 November 2019

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (20)

22 September, 2012 continued

Again a day with no horizon and a fairly rough pewter coloured sea fusing into a light grey sky. The cloud on the mountain is pretty well down to plateau level. We walked to church with light rain blurring my glasses, not enough to bother with waterproofs on our legs, but well buttoned up otherwise. A stiff westerly breeze.

Crayfish and psychiatry

Yesterday afternoon we returned to the factory to see the now cooked, large, whole crayfish, neatly folded, being drained of any liquid in a chilled room, prior to freezing. They're bright red and beautiful. We then ate halved tails from the shell and learned from Eric how difficult it is in small communities for those in authority to censure or discipline folk under them. In effect everyone is family. A girl inspector in the factory assesses the cray fish for size and looks for females in berry which should have been returned to the sea. Her husband is one of the fishermen. She records violations that lead to fines, which are not light, for the fishermen. She is able to do this because her job description specifically dictates that she must, but in less well defined situations things are more complicated and disciplinary action or penalties are more easily delivered by expatriates.

I then visited the tiny Internet Café to see if any mail had come in. Over the weekend the "Cafe" is closed, I suspect to prevent large scale downloading. I was able to get online easily and sent off a newsy note to the family. We then visited Francoise and Brian Robertson. He's the visiting psychiatrist. He told us that people are beginning to come to see him to talk about the usual things that blight people's lives, like depression. He and his wife are practising Catholics of an attractively and actively liberal sort. Back home in Cape Town they endure with charity a somewhat less than liberal priest of their parish. They told us that Fr Michael, the Catholic priest who travelled with us on the *Agulhas* is open-minded, and I determined to visit him, for surely he is lonely on his own in so isolated a spot.

Building houses and murdering whales

In the cold and damp, we then went to Trina and Lars for a meal and lovely evening as their only guests. Their house is called "Brick Front" because Lars built it with a concrete-brick front due to difficulty in getting the soft, dressable stone from which the gables are built. He was first on the island to do so. A photo of his house being built showed that the traditional house at present being built as a museum, with its small undressed boulder back wall, is indeed just how it was done in days gone by.

Lars was one of the twelve Advance Party that went back to repair damage to houses prior to the return of the whole population from exile in England, after the 1961 volcano. Six of the Advance Party did the repair work while six fished, presumably for food. The islanders had to

shoot their dogs before they left the island, but two had been left and were terrorising donkeys and sheep and so needed to be dispatched. Cows had pulled at flax on the rooves making holes, and these had to be repaired. Whalers had looted houses and they actually witnessed the sea red with blood from whale-murdering Russian or Norwegian ships.

Pining for peace and quiet

Lars and Trina enjoyed their time in exile and were actually married in England. Trina would not at all have minded staying, and indeed they did return for a year and a half later on, but Lars pined for the peace and tranquillity of the island. We talked about the price of housing, Lars joking that his cost him five pounds, though to fit it out and make it habitable must have cost far more. His son Paul with Geraldine his wife and child have returned from England and since had another daughter. Married in England, they have just built a house on the Island at an estimated cost of between thirty and fifty thousand pounds. Lars' and Trina's place, originally a simple, small, ordinary, traditional cottage, now much extended and beautifully equipped is lovely, homely, sparkling and comfortable.

Home