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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (February 2020)



FAREWELL TRISTAN DA CUNHA

(See 333 below)

*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 **February 2020** 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>

(336) “This and That” - 23 February 2020

To live in a vicarage on a hill is altogether a good thing in wet weather. No matter how much it rains, we're safe. Until all the ice in the Arctic and Antarctica melts. Whereupon sea levels would rise 230 feet and we'd be about 140 feet under water where we are on Pilley Hill.

A deft, nifty, cocky vehicle

Going to church last Sunday we opted against Church Lane's dire potholes, turned right instead of left out of our drive, down Pilley Hill to Rodlease Lane. There the swollen Lymington river covered the road. Assuming it to be shallow I revved the engine mightily and, as Diana most sensibly protested, ploughed impetuously through. There's nothing poncey, over-sophisticated or delicate about a Ford Fiesta. It is the nifty, cocky vehicle for the common-sensical, common man. Behind a great bow wave it traversed the flood without a splutter, quietly belched, and then zoomed on to church. Where, with 43 other determined, intrepid worshippers, we rejoiced in Septuagesima's Gospel, a portion of the incomparable Sermon on the Mount. Storm Dennis outside began to ease off and settle down.

It has been a wet beginning to the year. My rain gauge recorded 4.37 inches in January. As I write, just over halfway through February, the February's total so far is 3.93 inches. This is nowhere near as severe as elsewhere in the U.K, but enough to so thoroughly sodden the garden that I slipped flat on my back yesterday on the way back from reading the gauge. Two sympathetic jackdaws chortled *chyak-chyak*.

Mumbling Oystermouth

We arrived back from a belated ten day post-Christmas break in Wales last Friday. There on the Sunday before last, in the gale force winds and driving rain of storm Ciara, we went to church at All Saints Oystermouth. It is the parish church that helped form the faith of a young lad called Rowan Williams. Up until 2013 he sat in the House of Lords as The Lord Archbishop of Canterbury. He is now there as Lord Williams of Oystermouth, a tribute to his affection for the village on the southwest edge of Swansea overlooking Swansea bay and the Mumbles headland.

We enjoyed the church and a service not at all dissimilar to our Eucharists at St John's. Last Sunday, like at St John's this Sunday there was a weather depleted congregation. Friendly folk all too ready to reminisce fondly about Rowan Williams and his many returns to All Saints. Anyone daft enough to think that Christianity is the last doomed redoubt of an ever diminishing band of credulous nostalgics should read Rowan Williams' several published collections of sermons. They are well able to exhilarate a surprised change of heart.

I'm a nobody who are you?

The poem Lycidas, by John Milton, is considered one of the finest in our language. It mourns the death of Edward King, the poet's fellow Cambridge university student and friend. Several of its phrases have passed into the idiom of our language, among them one chosen by Howard Spring to be the title of his enjoyable and perceptive 1960's novel: Fame is the Spur.

Milton goes on in the next line to characterise fame, (in parenthesis) as: That last infirmity of noble mind.

How right he is. You have got to be crazy or infirm of mind to desire fame and celebrity. For how rarely does it bring fulfilment and contentment. Its rewards, other than those of a pecuniary sort, are usually meagre or, in the case of poor Caroline Flack, toxic. Without constant twittering, tweeting and relentless self promotion it all too easily dissipates or metamorphoses into notoriety. Far preferable to be a nonentity. As Emily Dickinson perceptively points out:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!*

*How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!*

(335) “This and That” - 16 February 2020

The Australian poem below can help us to keep things in proportion given all the doom and gloom peddled in the media. It is written by John O’Brien, the pseudonym of Monsignor Patrick Joseph Hartigan (1878-1952), an Australian Roman Catholic priest, educator, author and poet. His verse celebrates the outback farming folk to whom he ministered as a peripatetic curate to southern New South Wales in the early 20th century. The verse’s *refrain* *We’ll all be rooned* has entered colloquial Australian English as a response to any prediction of dire consequences from events outside our control.

SAID HANRAHAN

“We’ll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan
In accents most forlorn
Outside the church ere Mass began
One frosty Sunday morn.

The congregation stood about,
Coat-collars to the ears,
And talked of stock and crops and drought
As it had done for years.

“It’s lookin’ crook,” said Daniel Croke;
“Bedad, it’s cruke, me lad
For never since the banks went broke
Has seasons been so bad.

“It’s dry, all right,” said young O’Neil,
With which astute remark
He squatted down upon his heel
And chewed a piece of bark.

And so around the chorus ran
“It’s keepin’ dry, no doubt.”
“We’ll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan,
“Before the year is out.

“The crops are done; ye’ll have your work
To save one bag of grain;
From here way out to Back-O’-Bourke
They’re singin’ out for rain.

“They’re singin’ out for rain,” he said,
“And all the tanks are dry.”
The congregation scratched its head,
And gazed around the sky.

“There won’t be grass, in any case,
Enough to feed an ass;
There’s not a blade on Casey’s place
As I came down to Mass.”

“If rain don’t come this month,” said Dan,
And cleared his throat to speak –
“We’ll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan, “
If rain don’t come this week.”

A heavy silence seemed to steal
On all at this remark;
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed a piece of bark.

“We want an inch of rain, we do,”
O’Neil observed at last;
But Croke “maintained” we wanted two
To put the danger past.

“If we don’t get three inches, man,
Or four to break this drought,
We’ll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan,
“Before the year is out.”

In God’s good time down came the rain;
And all the afternoon
On iron roof and window-pane
It drummed a homely tune.

And through the night it pattered still,
And lightsome, gladsome elves
On dripping spout and window-sill
Kept talking to themselves.

It pelted, pelted all day long,
A-singing at its work,
Till every heart took up the song
Way out to Back-O’-Bourke.

And every creek a banker ran,
And dams filled o’ertop;
“We’ll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan,
“If this rain doesn’t stop.”

And stop it did, in God’s good time:
And spring came in to fold
A mantle o’er the hills sublime
Of green and pink and gold.

And days went by on dancing feet,
With harvest-hopes immense,
And laughing eyes beheld the wheat
Nid-nodding o’er the fence.

And, oh, the smiles on every face,
As happy lad and lass
Through grass knee-deep on Casey's place
Went riding down to Mass.

While round the church in clothes genteel
Discoursed the men of mark,
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed his piece of bark.

“There'll be bush-fires for sure, me man,
There will, without a doubt;
We'll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan,
“Before the year is out.”

(334) “This and That” - 9 February 2020

The ability to see an opponent's point of view has meant that since about the age of sixteen I've had a covert flirtation with atheism. Though securely and happily married to theism, in its Christian guise, I have not been impervious to atheism's allure. Until now, that is.

Spooked

Atheists are everywhere. As common as midges in a Scottish summer, as fashionable as vegans in Notting Hill. To be fashionable freaks me out. To be one of the mob spooks me. Far better to be different, the odd one out. To be a Christian, for God's sake. I'd be nothing but!

To be out of step is to be in step. The mother of a young soldier called Jim, boasts as much in a First World War song by Irving Berlin:

*“Did you see my little Jimmy marching,
With the soldiers up the avenue?....
Away he went, To live in a tent;
Over in France with his regiment.
Were you there, and tell me, did you notice?
They were all out of step but Jim.....”*

Cosmic orphans

It's good to be out of step. Especially if it means being instep with the most intriguing, radical, compelling, bewildering fascinating and attractive of all human beings: Jesus of Nazareth. To be fashionable freaks me out. To be one of the mob spooks me. Far better to be different, the odd one out. To be a Christian.. I would be nothing but!

The Roman Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft invites us to compare atheistic fiction with theistic fiction:

Belief in God does not squash man; it raises man to a divine image. Heroism grows only in the sunlight of a divine sun. Squash the ceilings down low and we stoop. In classical Greek drama, in the Bible, in Shakespeare, man is great because he breathes the air of the absolute. In Faulkner, Gide, Sartre, Camus, Beckett and nine out of ten lesser twentieth century writers, man is 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' because he is a cosmic orphan. His universe is man-sized, not God-sized. Spiritually it is we, not the ancients, who live in a tiny world. Life in that world is a meaningless flicker of a candle for a few years between the cold and barren darkness of two eternal nights. Atheism screws down the manhole covers on the great deeps and flattens the sky to a low ceiling. Instead of a forest of spires and turrets, like the Gothic art that expressed an age of faith, we find ourselves in a ranch-style, flattened, one-storey existence.....

Digging a grave

A couple of weeks ago I dashed up to St John's to inter someone's ashes. I found no hole had been dug in which to inter them. Consternation. I knew it had to be no one's fault but my own. I'd neglected to copy Graham and Karen into my correspondence with the family of the deceased. So Pip, the gravedigger, had not been informed.

Fortunately the single mourner was a tolerant and easy going sort of fellow. I dashed back to the vicarage to pick up a spade and returned to dig the hole myself. More large pebbled gravel than soil made it hard work. I refused the mourner's offer of help, my mistake demanded its penance. Divested of surplice, but not my black cassock, the grimmest of grim reapers, I set to furiously, the spade on the large pebbles clinking, grating and shooting sparks.

In many cultures the digging of graves is the lowliest of occupations. Corpses, considered ritually unclean, rendered those dealing with and touching them unclean. In England this has not been so. Traditionally the digging of graves has been the task of the sexton, whose duties usually stretched far beyond the digging of graves to general maintenance of all sorts. Abraham Lincoln was the sexton of an Indiana churchyard for a while.

On the Island of St Helena, with its warm climate, bodies had to be buried within 36 hours of death. The cathedral graveyard was being reworked which meant an ancient thigh bone or two was sometimes visible in the heaped soil by a grave. The grave digger was a maestro. He could fill a grave before the watching and singing mourners could finish the hymn *Abide with Me*.

(333) "This and That" - 2 February 2020

Returning to Tristan da Cunha 2012 (33)

Thurs 4 Oct, 2012 final entry:

Our trip to Tristan is over. We are back on the polar research vessel *Agulhas II*. Beyond the ship's wake the towering island ceases to tower. A tailwind, the same speed as the ship, lends an eerie stillness to time on deck. Skuas water-skim and soar, rarely flicking so much as a wing tip. An all but effortless aerial existence.

Laudator temporis acti

Below deck, once the island was beyond the horizon, we chatted to several islanders. I asked one who'd been visiting relatives if he'd like to return permanently. "Not yet," he said, "the pace of the island is over leisurely, I'm too full of steam to be able to bear it." I asked about ennui and aimlessness in such a tiny, isolated, community. He admitted it to be a problem. Not least because many pastimes of days gone by are no longer practised. Sports and games once regularly organised are far less so these days. He reminisced about the sea scouts and abandoned Christmas rituals that involved the selection and killing of a sheep and the whole island making broth. While very obviously a *laudator temporis acti*, a praiser of times past, he's right, it does seem that creative and stimulating activities are organised less now than they used to be. The dread DVD player, access to the British Forces TV network and an over consumption of alcohol are less than satisfactory substitutes.

The promised land

The departure of my parents with my sister, brother and I in 1956 must have been far more emotionally intense than was ours in 2012. The three and a half year stint back then left a mark on the island and its life that our mere three and half week visit this time could in no way equal. The Tristan sojourn in the nineteen fifties proved to be a great pivot in my family's life, changing our outlook and focus permanently. The island remained a topic of conversation, reminiscence and interest for ever afterwards. My parents left thinking that they would never see any of the Tristanites again, for in those days there was little movement away from the island. How wrong they were. In 1961 or 1962, on long leave in England from their new life on a mission station in the African bush, they were delighted to meet up with the island's population again at Calshot. They had been evacuated there when the volcano erupted.

I am the only member of our family to make the trip back. It is not an easy place to get to, and takes time and money, though the actual voyage from Cape Town and back we didn't think prohibitive. I had nursed a desire to return ever since leaving aged eleven. The island became Narnia, to me, a place of deep longing, a Promised Land, a Garden of Eden. It fostered in me not only a desire to return, but also a more general and wider penchant for windswept and isolated places. My first serious attempt to relive the experience was not to Tristan itself, but to the Falklands, where I very nearly did end up. Eventually I had to settle for the island of St Helena instead when the priest on the Falklands denied me a turn there by renewing his contract. Tropical islands do not interest me anywhere near as much as temperate, sub Arctic or Antarctic ones.

Tempted to deny destiny

The most exhilarating moment of our 2012 visit was standing on the ship's deck as we drew near the settlement and seeing once more, with adult eyes, the strange, remote, beautiful pivot of my whole family's life. That small, homely village, lit up by early morning sun in a stiff, cold breeze, defying the sublime vastness of its great mountain backdrop and tempestuous ocean outlook. It was a sort of home-coming and although much had changed, there was no sense of disillusionment. The islanders themselves were as remembered; hospitable, kind, reticent and resourceful. As well as all too human and fallible with the quirks, oddities and eccentricities common to humanity. Plus a few more that are peculiar to isolated island life, supplementing more than detracting from an appealing distinctiveness.

Diana and I left the island enriched and grateful. We were half tempted to deny our Boldre destiny and offer to stay for a while as priest and wife. We didn't.

Home