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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (May 2021)



St John's from Church Lane

*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 **May 2021** 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>

(402) “This and That” - 30 May 2021

“The bloud of a whyte Hen smered on a freckled, or a spotted face, and thereon suffred to drye, and after wiped away, doeth clearly take awaye all spots from the same.” So Thomas Lupton tells us in a book published in 1579 called: *A Thousand Notable Things of Sundry Sortes. Whereof some are wonderfull, some straunge, some pleasant, diuers necessary, a great sort profitable, and many very precious,*

Smelly feet, quinsy and splinters

“The powder of the tooth of a Boar mixte with the oyle of Lynseede, doth presently cure the Squynancie, (which is a payne or swelling in the throate,) if the grieved place be touched with the ende of a fether or pen, smeared with the same mixture.”

“Who use to rubbe their fingers betweene the toes of their feete when they go to bed, especially when they smell most, and then to smell the same at their nose, it is a perfect remedy to put awaye the crampe.”

“A lytle peece of the tongue of a Foxe, being moystned and made soft in vineger, (if it be drye) draweth out a thorne or any other thing deepe in the flesh, if it be layde upon the place where it is.”

Too good to be true

We don't know the dates of Thomas Lupton, but he was active between 1572 and 1584. His *Thousand Notable Things...* quoted above, was his most famous book. It's a fascinating read. He's also the originator of the phrase: *Too Good to be True*, which occurs in the title of another of the six books he's left us, this one inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*.

It is a good phrase when applied to human beings. None of us can be perfect. My mother, the daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother of priests was wary of too saintly people, professing to prefer folk “with a bit of the devil in them”. She might well have agreed with Logan Pearsall Smith who maintained that the best company in the world is made up of folk with wicked tongues and kind hearts.

Undiluted goodness is more saccharine than honey. Usually hypocritical, it's *too good to be true*.

Soft on sin

Which being so, calls into question the Church's practice of canonizing saints? Are they not *too good to be true*? In some hagiographies they do seem nauseatingly and masochistically pious. But to be declared a Saint is not to be deemed sinless. In spite of the Church's shocking history of inquisitorial censoriousness, sinner-bashing, torture and execution, the Christian faith, at its most authentic, is remarkably soft on sin. It is forgiveness that lies at the heart of the Gospel and of Jesus of Nazareth, not condemnation.

Toppling statues

Unforgiving censoriousness and sinner-bashing is more a characteristic of today's press and internet mob than of Mother Church. The Church canonises saints only after due and rigorous processes. This is not the case with secular saints. As the perceived need to topple statues demonstrates

One of the piquant ironies of living as a Christian in an increasingly post-Christian society is to see the sins for which the Church has been so often criticised, writ large, larger and yet more large in the secular, angry, finger-pointing secular orthodoxies of today.

The problem lies in human nature. It is grace, forgiveness and redemption that are most sorely needed.

Acceptance versus resistance

Acceptance is a creative virtue. Fully to accept a diagnosis, misfortune, or one's unsatisfactory circumstances allows grace entry to work wonders, open new opportunities, change situations and even heal. On the other hand, to accept evil circumstances too easily and readily can stultify change and progress. It is a matter of discernment.

I'm on the side of acceptance though. Change and progress, when initiated by grace, are more likely to last.

These commonplace observations arose, unasked, from reading Dick Francis's little poem:

Making a Meal of It

*No point in murmuring
Against the life you live,
No point in hungering
For what Fate cannot give;*

*No point in calling up
Vast, empty words like Fate –
The table's set, sit down
And eat what's on your plate.*

(401) “This and That” - 23 May 2021

Even in the best of restaurants one's fellow diners rival the cuisine for titillation and interest.

The bawdy bard

Speculation as to the relationship between dining couples makes for great sport. Judicious guesses as to the profession or occupation of individuals calls for imaginative sleuthing of a high order. It almost justifies the cost of eating out instead of at home

Conclusions are drawn from deportment, demeanour, gestures, dress, table manners, menu choices and so on. Couples are particularly fascinating. Are they in love? Is their love licit or illicit, blossoming or fading? Are their silences comfortably companionable or smoulderingly resentful? Is their conversation happily animated or desultory and dull? Does their plate fascinate them more than each other's face? Do their eyes ever meet?

Elderly couples are especially intriguing. Evidence of enduring love is both heartening and moving. One of the finest and loveliest celebrations of enduring love comes from the unlikely, pen of the bawdy bard Robbie Burns:

John Anderson my jo, John,	<i>jo: sweetheart</i>
When we were first acquent,	<i>acquent: acquainted,</i>
Your locks were like the raven,	
Your bonie brow was brent;	<i>brent: smooth</i>
But now your brow is beld, John,	<i>beld: bald</i>
Your locks are like the snaw,	<i>snaw: snow</i>
but blessings on your frosty pow,	<i>pow: head</i>
John Anderson, my jo!	

John Anderson my jo, John,	
We clamb the hill thegither,	
And monie a cantie day, John,	<i>cantie: cheerful</i>
We've had wi' ane anither;	
Now we maun totter down, John,	
And hand in hand we'll go,	
And sleep thegither at the foot,	
John Anderson, my jo!	

The Fornicator

It is odd that the love of a pair of ancients should be so movingly celebrated by Robbie Burns. He died at the age of 37 and his romantic and marital relations were tangled and complicated. Three of his 12 confirmed children were born out of wedlock and of the nine by Jean Armour, who eventually became his wife, only three survived infancy.

At least once Burns and a lover were required to sit or stand on the Presbyterian Kirk's *cutty stool* or *creepie*. This was a low and usually three legged stool of repentance. It was placed in the kirk where all could gawp at any offender, sometimes every Sunday for weeks or even months.

Burns celebrated this experience with defiance not repentance. He mocked the Kirk's attempt to shame the two young lovers in a rollicking poem called "*The Fornicator*". More commendably and movingly he wrote affectionately about the daughter born of the affair in a poem entitled "*A Poet's Welcome to His Love Begotten Daughter*". Here's one verse of eight:

Welcome! My bonie, sweet, wee Dochter!
Tho' ye come here a wee unsought for;
And tho' your comin I hae fought for,
Baith Kirk and Queir;
Yet by my faith, ye're no unwrought for,
That I shall swear!

Queir: Choir

Base metal to gold

Burns had a heart, was the real deal. He placed his failings where they belong, under the table, of little account, doggerel for the dogs. He was moved by his heart. A heart to hearten, warm and open all of us up to beauty and truth. He's that heady mix of good and bad, saint and sinner, sad and happy, that makes humanity lovable enough for God to want to be one of us in Jesus of Nazareth.

Unsurprisingly there is more to the lovely John Anderson my jo poem than meets the eye. It's based on a bawdy ballad of the same name, but in which the wife berates John for his waning performance in bed and threatens him with the cuckold's horns if he doesn't deliver.

Burns has taken someone else's base metal and turned it to gold. The real deal indeed.

(400) "This and That" - 16 May 2021

At the church door after services, my priest father was good humoured, witty and genial to a fault. He was also emotionally contained.

If he detected a gleam in the eye of an affectionate parishioner that might just possibly indicate an intention to peck his cheek or give him a hug, he would extinguish it with a fierce frown. If the peck or hug had already been launched and was on its way, he'd avoid it with an abrupt face-turn and agile back-off.

Most of us are pleased and delighted at the thought of being able to hug and be hugged once more. For him, the ban on such expressions of affection, would have been one aspect of the present pandemic he'd have had little quarrel with, though he did soften with age.

Not the happiest of marriages

In England, during the eighteen thirties, there was a flu epidemic to which the attractive and radical critic, essayist and poet Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) succumbed. On his recovery he made a surprise visit to Jane Welsh, the wife of the heavily bearded, curmudgeonly historian and polymath Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). Their marriage endured but was often unhappy. Samuel Butler remarked upon how good it was "*...of God to let Carlyle and Mrs Carlyle marry one another, and so make only two people miserable and not four*".

Leigh Hunt might well have disagreed. On visiting Jenny Carlyle, newly recovered from his bout of flu, he was greeted with a welcome enough kiss to inspire the second of the two poems for which he is most famous, this gem:

Rondeau

Jenny kiss'd me when we met,
Jumping from the chair she sat in;
Time, you thief, who love to get
Sweets into your list, put that in!

Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say that health and wealth have miss'd me,
Say I'm growing old, but add
Jenny kiss'd me.

Thomas Carlyle's small poetic output contains no such happy sparklers. This is more his line:

Cui Bono

What is Hope? A smiling rainbow
Children follow through the wet;
'Tis not here, still yonder, yonder:
Never urchin found it yet.

What is Life? A thawing iceboard
On a sea with sunny shore;—
Gay we sail; it melts beneath us;
We are sunk, and seen no more.

What is Man? A foolish baby,
Vainly strives, and fights, and frets;
Demanding all, deserving nothing;—
One small grave is what he gets.

Categorising and pigeon-holing

To categorise, pigeon-hole and label people, diminishes, narrows and reduces them. Even to be called a Christian doesn't do justice to those times when we are doubtfully or hardly so. Is ever an atheist totally atheist?

A few weeks ago I discovered a poet born in the same fine vintage year as me, 1945. He would probably more readily categorise himself an atheist than a Christian but here he is on the subject of faith:

"I feel very conflicted about organized religion, but I must admit that there's some religious art, both visual and musical, but especially musical, that takes away my will to resist it. There are particular pieces of Christian music that are so moving that I find myself assenting to their spirituality while I'm listening to the music. I suppose I tend to think of my religious feelings as kind of an 'evening' thing. At the end of the day, you often allow it. But when you wake up in the morning and the sunlight comes in, you think, 'Oh, that can't be true.' But later, when the evening comes, you're ready for it once again. I also have the feeling that the same thing might happen in the 'evening' of life."

Part of the family

I love him for that. He's part of the family. As for his poems, I love them too. His name's Dick Davis.



(399) "This and That" - 9 May 2021

Dandelions are as beautiful in name as in flower, and they are everywhere. Their name is derived from the French *dent-de-lion*, lion's tooth. It refers to the plant's coarsely toothed leaves, not to its Aslan-like, sunny, shaggy, golden maned head. That's a pity. It's the head that dazzles. The name's focus should be on the flower not the leaves, on 'dandy' (as in *fine and dandy*) not *dent*.

Dandizettes and dandiprats

In the Scottish borders, and throughout England too during the Middle Ages, the word 'dandy' was the diminutive of Andrew, his female counterpart 'dandizette'.

For a long time, adjectivally, the meaning of ‘dandy’ was complimentary. It meant anything superlative or fine. It was in the nineteenth century, as different derivations were proposed, that foppishness and affectation attached themselves as meanings to the word.

One of the suggested derivations was *dandiner*, French for “to walk awkwardly or to waddle.” Another was *dandiprat*, a small Elizabethan coin that over time came to be a pejorative term meaning dwarf, pygmy, midget, or a silly, finicky or puerile person.

Be that as it may, dandelions are notable for being edible as well as dandy. A green salad, liberally decorated with fresh dandelion heads would make the sunniest of summer salads. So on a recent walk along a local lane, I decided to try eating a head or two to test how edible they really are. It was a mistake. The lane is favoured by dog walkers. As I bent to pluck a tousled, sun-gold head, I noticed a pile of something unspeakable in close proximity. It was a good warning. Wait until you are home in your own garden, and even then thoroughly wash your choice.

The taste proved to be flat, mildly bitter and unremarkable. The texture was more promising: chewy, dense and almost crunchy. Spiced up, or even lightly battered and quick fried, they might well become a Vicarage delicacy.

T R Milford honours the lovely flower thus:

Dandelions

Last week those children of the cheerful sun
Spattered the field with tiny suns. Too soon
Their gold was spent! But see, how every one,
Haloed in white, displays a silver moon.

Cloud-cuckoo-land

I have a few convinced, atheist friends who dare sometimes to gently challenge my theism. It is a waste of time. I am all too well aware of the strength of the case for atheism. For a time I was tempted to head that way myself, but deliberately chose not to. For a variety of reasons and non reasons, some laudable some not. One of the less than respectable ones is a deeply held preference for cloud-cuckoo-land over purposeless nihilism.

In Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* one of the characters asserts that if God does not exist then all is permitted. In a plain and literal sense it is hard to disagree and so go on to argue that atheists such as Pol Pot, Stalin and Mao Tse Tung were liberated to unleash the horrors that they most certainly did, at least in part, by their lack of any belief in God or moral absolutes.

But they are the exception. Most atheists, like nearly all of us, live and act as if hatred, evil and obsessive self aggrandizement are not permitted. Thus the cloud-cuckoo-land they deem belief to be is, in practice, judged preferable to fully living out the nihilism implicit in their chosen creed.

Cloud-cuckoo-land originates in Aristophanes’ drama *The Birds*, first performed in 414 BC. In the play a middle-aged Athenian man persuades the world’s birds to create a new city in the sky to be named *Nubicuculia* or Cloud- Cuckoo-Land. Which they do. One of my favourite birds, the beautiful hoopoe, plays a significant part in the story.

The flashing red light

How convenient in a supermarket to be able register the price of each purchase, with the help of an electronic wand, before placing it on your trolley.

How insulting, though, when a little red light flashes on the till because you’ve purchased alcohol, and the assistant, instead of asking if you’re over eighteen, takes it for granted that you are on the strength of a mere glance. Can it be that obvious? I am only 75.

(398) “This and That” - 2 May 2021

After my finals at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, I was required to endure a *viva voce*, an oral exam, before a panel of lecturers.

Evasive ignorance

In written exams it's easy to conceal a lack of knowledge. You simply wax eloquent and expansive about whatever it is you do happen to know. In an oral exam, shameful ignorance is all too easily exposed.

I remember little of my *viva voce* except the nervous and tentative evasiveness with which I attempted to conceal my ignorance, and also a comment made by one of the examiners, a clever, unhealthily pallid, Oscar Wildean lecturer and drinking companion called Duncan Middleton. As I stood up to leave he said: "Don't call us Mr Neaum, we'll call you." It was a joke I didn't fully appreciate at the time.

Oscar's viva voce

Oscar Wilde had to endure a *viva voce* examination for 'Divvers' at Oxford. He performed with more confidence and elan than I did for mine. He was required to translate a passage from the original Greek of the New Testament. The one chosen was from the story of the Passion. Wilde began to translate easily and accurately and the examiners, soon satisfied, told him that this was enough. Wilde ignored them and continued to translate. After another attempt to stop him, the examiners at last succeeded, indicating that they were satisfied with his translation. "Oh, do let me go on," said Wilde, "I want to see how it ends."

I had to study New Testament Greek at St Paul's Theological College in Grahamstown, South Africa. I was one of only three in the class and seriously disadvantaged. The other two had studied classical Greek at university, I had not. Our chosen set book was the Epistle to the Hebrews. Instead of buckling down assiduously to learn the language, I took an easier option and simply learned the Epistle to the Hebrews off by heart in English. The Revised Standard Version sticks very close to the original Greek. I passed the exam with relative ease.

Phronimos

Our Greek tutor, the college Warden, had high hopes for me, but must have cottoned on to my subterfuge and been disappointed. He was a fine man, with an impressively hooked nose, eye-twinkle and quiet wit. His students gave him the nick-name *Phronimos*: shrewd, wise, cunning.

He had a strange liturgical tic. When taking services in chapel he began every new phrase with a strange nasal prefix: "Nyer, O Lord open thou our lips.... Nyer, O God make speed to save us...." He retired to Noorhoek on the Cape Peninsular and we visited him there in 2012, as my diary records:

".....in his nineties he looks much as he always did except that his hair is white. His great hook nose adds character to his face, as such noses do. He showed us a photo of our year at St Paul's and although deaf, not so severely as to impede conversation. He gave me a copy of one of his books, duly signed, and he seems au fait with the whereabouts of many of my contemporaries, most of whom are either retired or close to it...

A similar trajectory

"He told us that many of the present teachers at St Paul's College are not Anglican and that fundamentalism is a problem among the clergy generally. He and others are trying to do something about this. He hosts a regular gathering, in his retirement village, for local clergy and others to discuss matters theological. For many years he has also lead a mountain walking group, though he indicates that this is coming to an end for him.... His wife is in "frail care" and he visits her three times a day.

"English born, he was given a copy of *codex Sinaiticus* at the age of eleven and was conversant in Latin and Greek very early. He went to St Paul's school in London and on to Oxford to do Classics. He was then selected for ordination, but the father of his wife-to-be had gone out to George in South Africa, so he did too and was trained at St Paul's Grahamstown....."

I too was selected for ordination in England and elected to train at St Paul's Grahamstown. In passing my New Testament Greek I proved to be as *phronimos* as him.

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