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## **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (November 2021)**



### ***St John's Boldre from the air***

*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 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>

## (428) “This and That” - 28 November 2021

The index finger, forefinger, pointer finger, trigger finger, first finger, arrow finger, or *digitus secundus*, is the most dextrous and sensitive finger of the hand. On my own left hand it is appreciably shorter than the ring finger. On my right hand they are the same length. Curious.

### Sensible babies

It is the index finger that is used for pointing. Babies, between the age of seven and eighteen months, begin pointing to communicate relatively complex thoughts, such as interest in, desire for, and information about. It's a crucial stage in their development and is thought to have a bearing upon their future language skills.

Babies have more sense than to point in judgement or accusation though. That comes later, in older children and adults. It's a way to deflect blame away from oneself on to others. There's a lot of it about. Especially in relation to our past, to our history. These days we, the English, are expected to point the finger at our Imperial forebears in disgust at their unenlightened, evil ways and practices. It helps us feel better about and excuse our own many faults.

### Breaking bread with the dead

Alan Jacobs, in a fine book called “Breaking Bread with the Dead”, takes issue with this. While it's necessary to acknowledge and regret all that is deplorable in our history, he invites us to be more charitable about it. It's a mistake, to blank it all out and dismiss it ....

*as at best a sewer or racism, sexism, homophobia, and general social injustice, or at worst an abattoir which no reasonable person would want to peek at.....a writer (he says) tells us to stop reading Robinson Crusoe because it's a document of racist, sexist colonialism; a librarian grieves at the space books by dead white men occupy on the shelves of her library; a professor of architecture rejoices at the “liberation” offered by the burning of Notre-Dame de Paris; a reader can't bear to be in the very presence of a classic novel featuring a vivid streak of anti-Semitism (“I don't want anyone like that in my house”). There is an increasing sense not just that the past is sadly in error, is superannuated and irrelevant and full of foul ideas that we're well rid of, but that it actually defiles us—its presence makes us unclean.*

I was brought up a colonialist in a colony, on mission stations by missionaries, a Christian by Christians. All of these are frequently deprecated, deplored and disdained on Radio 4 and in academe. Yet, to me, the land where I was brought up seemed, and still seems, to have been the Garden of Eden, albeit with the lurking serpent racism all too present, presaging an inevitable Fall. Was racist Rhodesia in those days, so much worse than tyrannical Zimbabwe now? In some ways yes. In others, a thousand times no.

### A secular heretic

In the year 2017 Bruce Gilley, Professor of Political Science at Portland State University, published an intriguing article heretically entitled: “The Case for Colonialism”. It was peer reviewed and published in a reputable scholarly journal. All hell broke loose. Hundreds of colleagues denounced him in a collective letter; editors of the journal resigned; publishers implored him to withdraw the article to protect them from possible violence and abuse. He himself received death threats. Read it and judge for yourself: <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/the-case-for-colonialism/>

It's a careful, well argued article claiming that European empires did some good. And that our advanced democracies might well learn something from looking back to such times and methods when dealing with today's failed states. All debateable, but debate, it seems, is no longer to be countenanced by those with too active a *digitus secundus*.

The secular Inquisition failed to silence Professor Gilley's. Last year he published a biography: *The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns's Epic Defence of the British Empire*. Attempts were made to have it withdrawn, but it's available and Burns appears to have been a most admirable fellow.

## (427) “This and That” - 14 November 2021

Our Vicarage on Pilley Hill is self-effacing. A good mile away from the church, it is discreetly hidden from view by great oak trees and dense laurels. Its pleasing, curved driveway denies any eye-balling from the road. In a brash, boastful, celebrity-stoned culture, reticence and discretion are to be treasured.

### **A motley muddle of mendicants**

It does mean, though, that the beggars who honour parsons by assuming them to be a soft touch for charity, rarely if ever drop by. This is a deprivation. Over the years my life as a priest has been enriched, my circle of friends and acquaintances broadened and my charity and tolerance challenged by encounters with a colourful, motley, muddle of mendicants.

Sadly, I have sometimes been intolerant, offhand, impatient and, now and then, even disgracefully rude to them. Yet I do miss them. They have given me as much as ever I have given them.

### **Visiting an old soak**

A nostalgic half hour trawling through my journal has brought a few of them back to mind. There was one irascible old bird of whom I became particularly fond, though she did sometimes drive me to breaking point.

She was one of those who made good use of the Rectory phone. My journal is punctuated by entries such as these: “Lots of messages on the answering machine from Liane H, the old soak. She says she has need of me, there has been a death in the family.....Liane H rang up twice. She wanted me to go and get her a packet of cigarettes and a serving of Kentucky Fried Chicken. I joked with her until she got fed up and slammed down the phone. ....The phone has just gone, at 5.45am. Liane H wanting to see me, apparently in fear of her life..... Went to see Liane, she thinks someone wants to kill her, but only on the strength of one threatening phone call. Her house was grubby, the room full of smoke and there was a cask of “Fruity Lexia” beside her. We shared a laugh or two.....”

“...Visited Liane H in her smoke wreathed and reeking den. She’s had her hair curled and was quite coquettish, but still an anorexic looking, pallid horror to behold .... Took Liane H to the bank because she’d forgotten her pin number. She then remembered it, enabling her to extract money to pay a bill and buy cigarettes and grog.....”

“...Liane H has died. We’ll be doing a service for her after Christmas. Her son tells me she’s been an alcoholic since thirteen and that his father, her husband, beat her terribly for years. He’s had a tattoo put on his chest in her honour. Their relationship was both loving and severely flawed. He’s a Superman fanatic....”

### **Alcohol fuelled perzazz**

We buried her, at no cost, in a plot beside the grave of the one love of her life and I was able to wax both lyrical and honestly charitable in a funeral homily. In spite of her disruptive phone calls at all hours of the day and night for several years, I’d grown fond of her. Why?

Because she was indomitable, fun, full of perzazz, albeit usually alcohol fuelled, and had a sense of humour. More importantly, she softened me up a little, challenged me away from any bleak censoriousness towards a more tolerant and Jesus of Nazareth way of looking at those whom life has boxed about the ears.

In short, she contributed as much if not more to me than ever I to her. W H Davies, the tramp poet, makes the point.

### **Beggar's Song**

Good people keep their holy day,  
They rest from labour on a Sunday;  
But we keep holy every day,  
And rest from Monday until Monday.  
And yet the noblest work on earth  
Is done when beggars do their part  
They work, dear ladies, on the soft  
And tender feelings in your heart.

## (426) “This and That” - 14 November 2021

Listening, on Remembrance Day, to the names of locals who lost their lives during two world wars, gives rise to reflection. Many of their surnames are still about. Young people called up to die, thanks to the failures of the movers and shakers who pull the strings of power. Too many of whom were bully-boy dictators, ideologues and egotists.

### **“Zonks” Badenhorst**

I’ve little experience of soldiering. Only for a few years did I march, in spit and polished boots with a bayoneted 303 on my shoulder, a sergeant in the cadet corps of Guinea Fowl Boys High School, Rhodesia. “Zonks” Badenhorst, an Afrikaans teacher, barked orders at us. His nickname was a shortened form of *Bambazonke*, an Ndebele word meaning “to take or grab everything”. An excellent motto for the present day governing elite of Zimbabwe.

I went on to live through the civil war in that now benighted land and so, on Remembrance Day, recall the names of fellow students who died. Particularly “Twang” Thomas, a mild, kind, inoffensive lad, or was it his brother?

John Masefield’s **Salt-Water Ballads** begins with a dedication to the ‘dirt and the dross, the dust and scum of the earth’ - the down-trodden, the oppressed, the powerless - not the hard-hearted ‘ruler’ but the hard-working ‘ranker’. Appropriate for Remembrance Sunday:

#### **A Consecration**

Not of the princes and prelates with periwigged charioteers  
Riding triumphantly laurelled to lap the fat of the years,—  
Rather the scorned—the rejected—the men hemmed in with the spears;

The men of the tattered battalion which fights till it dies,  
Dazed with the dust of the battle, the din and the cries.  
The men with the broken heads and the blood running into their eyes.

Not the be-medalled Commander, beloved of the throne,  
Riding cock-horse to parade when the bugles are blown,  
But the lads who carried the koppie and cannot be known.

Not the ruler for me, but the ranker, the tramp of the road,  
The slave with the sack on his shoulders pricked on with the goad,  
The man with too weighty a burden, too weary a load.

The sailor, the stoker of steamers, the man with the clout,  
The chantyman bent at the halliards putting a tune to the shout,  
The drowsy man at the wheel and the tired look-out.

Others may sing of the wine and the wealth and the mirth,  
The portly presence of potentates goodly in girth;—  
Mine be the dirt and the dross, the dust and scum of the earth!

Theirs be the music, the colour, the glory, the gold;  
Mine be a handful of ashes, a mouthful of mould.  
Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the rain and the cold—  
Of these shall my songs be fashioned, my tales be told.

Amen.

### **(425) “This and That” - 7 November 2021**

It’s worth making the acquaintance of the peg-legged, hobo poet W H Davies (1871-1940). His *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, costs 49 pence on Kindle.

#### **A parrot, a dove and a canary**

Born in South Wales, his father died when Davies was three. His mother remarried, leaving her three children to be brought up in a pub by their publican grandfather, a sea captain, and his grandmother, a Baptist “of a more austere and religious turn of mind than her husband”. In addition the home consisted of “an imbecile brother, a sister... a maidservant, a dog, a cat, a parrot, a dove and a canary...”

### **Six adventurous years**

At the age of thirteen Davies was arrested with five schoolmates for stealing handbags, resulting in 12 strokes of the birch. On leaving school he worked as an ironmonger and picture-frame maker, before setting out on his travels. *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* covers his six adventurous years as a drifter. During this period he crossed the Atlantic Ocean at least seven times on cattle ships, and travelled through many U.S. States doing seasonal work.

### **A lovely love lyric**

His life turned round in Canada when heading for the Klondike. He jumped a freight train and crushed his right foot under its wheels. His leg was amputated below the knee and thereafter he wore a peg-leg. On his recovery he turned a natural ability for versifying into the fulltime writing of lucid and unaffected poetry that deals particularly with the joys of nature and the commonplace. An acute observer of life, he loves, accepts and glories in it.

Particularly delightful and moving is this simple love lyric, especially the first two lines of the second stanza:

### **Come, Let Us Find**

Come, let us find a cottage, love,  
That's green for half a mile around;  
To laugh at every grumbling bee,  
Whose sweetest blossom's not yet found.  
Where many a bird shall sing for you,  
And in your garden build its nest:  
They'll sing for you as though their eggs  
Were lying in your breast,  
My love--  
Were lying warm in your soft breast.

'Tis strange how men find time to hate,  
When life is all too short for love;  
But we, away from our own kind,  
A different life can live and prove.  
And early on a summer's morn,  
As I go walking out with you,  
We'll help the sun with our warm breath  
To clear away the dew,  
My love,  
To clear away the morning dew.

At the age of fifty, fed up with loneliness, he decided to find a wife. He set about doing so in a way that we today would find horrifyingly unromantic and deliberate. He was looking for a companion, without intellectual or literary pretensions, to live with for the rest of his life.

### **A saucy velvet cap with tassels**

With this in view he picked up women in the street and tried them out. After three attempts, by chance, he spotted Helen Payne, a farmer's daughter come up to London, alighting from a bus at Marble Arch, wearing a "saucy-looking little velvet cap with tassels". They decided to live together. Though an innocent abroad, or perhaps because of it, she was already pregnant, but she didn't tell Davies; there followed a miscarriage which nearly killed her. Yet love arrived. In 1935, at the age of 64, Davies addressed a book of love poems to his wife with titles such as "Let us lie closer, as lovers should", "Our love this day is ten years old", "When I was old and she was young"..... Lovely.

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