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### “DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS..... TO THE HAVEN WHERE THEY WOULD BE”

#### ONGOING DIARY COLUMN (No. 2)

#### To Boldre, England from Melbourne, Australia by Freighter

*Andrew Neaum*



*Guided up Otago Bay - view astern*

#### **Sunday 16 June, 2013 Port Otago (Port Chalmers)**

At breakfast I was intrigued by the menu item, “Cowboy breakfast” and so succumbed. I abandoned my resolution to stick to muesli, fruit and a bread roll. A Cowboy’s breakfast, as envisaged by a Filipino or a Pole, is baked beans, bacon and a couple of fried eggs. Freshly cooked while I waited, but a little greasy, not the stuff to eat in a rough sea, but alright in port. Last night, when we got back from a walk ashore, we had a traditional Polish delicacy called “Pierogi” which we enjoyed. Pallid to the eye they look like a cross between large ravioli or steamed dim sims, unappetizing to the eye, but pleasing to the taste buds and stomach. Filled with diced mushroom and sauerkraut, their soft, white and glistening outside is covered with diced, chopped, fried onion. They were served with no sauce.

We learned from the chief engineer at breakfast that we leave only at 9.00am and that it takes a couple of hours to prepare the engines and fire them up, there being all sorts of safety checks to go through as well as a warming up process. They have thruster propellers fore and aft to aid tugs in getting us in and out of port. Passenger ships have four of these, two on either side, to enable the ship to move sideways and essentially do away with any need at all for tugs, though I believe tugs by law have to be on standby anyway.

It is a grey, misty, drizzly mid-winter morning and so we are unlikely to see much on the way out. Fortunately we saw it all on the way in. We arrived on schedule yesterday at around 1.30pm and although there was a ship at anchor outside the Bay, we were boarded by the pilot almost immediately. We passed a breakwater into what is a narrow inlet that stretches a good many miles right up to Dunedin, which for New Zealand is a major city. It faces more out to the ocean on the other side of the peninsular than down the long inlet towards Port Chalmers, which is only half way up the bay. We inched our way gently along a marked channel that seemed very narrow, with mud and sand flats exposed almost to the markers. On the bridge it was interesting to hear the Pilot direct the helmsman: "Port 5", to which, after making the adjustment the helmsman would respond: "Port 5" and so on. "Starboard 10", "Midships" which seemed to mean straight ahead. The Pilot appeared to be using a laptop to get his bearings, perhaps each of the channel markers is "live" in some way. We were also guided in by two tugs. It is an interesting and fairly rugged bay, hilly all round with pockets of houses here and there.

The port is a small one, able to accommodate only two container ships at a time. We noticed this morning that another and more scruffy one has appeared during the night, berthed in front of us. On the other side of the port area appears to be a third berth for timber exports, taken by bulk carriers presumably. So only three ships at a time. As we came up to this small port the ship's main engine was stopped, but the two thrusters were ready as the tugs turned us completely round to be facing the right way for leaving, a long task. Outside, on the deck beside the Bridge and on both sides, under a BBQ like cover, there is an alternative helm and "dashboard", so that the helmsman, pilot and Captain can direct and respond to the ships movements with close eye contact as to whatever is happening.

When finally docked we realised that our ship stands higher in the little town than any of its buildings, though obviously not those half way up the nearby hills. In such a setting we are a mobile skyscraper, our cabin, on the floor below the bridge, is seven floors up from the lowest floor, which is still well above sea level.

Any chance to get ashore and walk needs to be taken. We toggled ourselves up for light rain and cold, put the baby computer in the haversack and were ready to disembark as soon as we docked, though we were told we might have to wait an hour for Customs. This was not so. After a few minutes of waiting a delightful young man asked us a few casual questions and that was that. Down the steep gangway we headed, under the long legs of the already blinking gantries, along a walkway painted on the dockside to another very friendly official who confirmed our identities.

Port Chalmers is a small port town that is old by antipodean standards. There is one spired and dominant church which we thought would be Roman Catholic, but it turned out to be Presbyterian-Methodist. The original settlers here must have been doughty Scots Calvinists. Methodists would not have achieved wealth of the sort that puts up grandiose church buildings, nor would their theology encourage it. We thought that we might be able to make a church service here today, but the Anglican Church when we found it (with its sacristy door open, almost certainly by mistake), has a service only at 10.00am and we are due to leave before this. A pleasing church though. We then walked up the main street, which has a more than usual number of curio and

nick nack shops as well as galleries, indicating an eye for the tourist trade. Apparently cruise ships call here and the pilot was saying on the way in that he and some of his colleagues had been on a simulation exercise in preparation for bringing in the huge “Queen Mary” later in the year, though if the wind is above 20 knots it will not be allowed entry.



*Port Chalmers. Bahia's funnel in the distance*

We then went into a supermarket to buy some crystalized ginger. It was also important to try our Travel Card which, after one false start, we operated successfully. We decided on a grey and drizzly afternoon simply to walk, because such exercise is severely limited on board. So we strode off out of town towards Dunedin for half the time we allowed ourselves before a return in order to wave to the Web Cam that Peter in Tamworth might well be watching. The smell and feel of the place was good preparation for walking in England: sodden leaves and car exhaust, though the architecture of the houses brought an awareness of being somewhere rich and strange, as too did fuchsias, rhododendrons, azaleas and heather all in flower at the same time, just six days before midwinter's day. There was the sound of an umpire's whistle and the roar of a crowd indicating a game of rugby being played.

So back to the ship and a restful night after watching yet another two films. The first was *Lions for Lambs*, well done, good lefty propaganda, but posing real questions. We then watched and enjoyed, of all things, *Little Women*, a book that I know played a part in the formation of my sister Sue, but possibly also of Lil and Ray and Margaret.... not as saccharine as I expected, but how many girls today would make much sense of it we wondered.

*Later 10.30:* We are now out at sea again after a much faster exit from Otago Bay than entry. Partly because we were already turned round, a manoeuvre that takes a lot of time, but also because the tide was in and so all the sand banks and mud flats were gone and the bay was lovely and deeper. We watched our departure from our cabin window, whereas on the way in we did so from the Bridge.



There being no chance of a Sunday Service on land we amplified Mattins a little to honour the day, and added to our prayers for our family and friends a prayer for those at worship in Shepparton, Boldre and Benalla. By the way, I manage to lose my sandals at least twice a day in a two room cabin!

One of the justifications for our journey is to find space and time not only to chill out, but also to accomplish the digitalisation of old diaries. Most importantly the 1953-1956 Tristan da Cunha diaries of Dot, my mother, a task that has been before me for years, but is now more compelling since our trip to Tristan last year. I have diaries of my own I wish to digitalise too. We have been hard at it. Diana on Dot's, me on mine. Now we are both on Dot's to ensure that these at least are finished, though before we reach Antwerp we might well manage the lot. We tap away, improving our typing speed and occasionally disturbing each other for help to decipher a word, or to share an odd snippet. We play Gilbert and Sullivan as we do so. It is perfect music for such a task, demanding no concentrated listening, largely cheerful, melodic and just now and then transporting us, as was the case with the little gem "Prithee Fair Maid" from "Patience". This song has at last and mercifully displaced in our sub conscious the songs little Suzie played over and over for herself in Benalla. Lil ought to try introducing Suzie to G&S. She is the sort to be converted early.

#### **Monday 17 June, 2013 8.57am. To Napier**

A rougher sea today, we awoke to a blurred horizon and rain on our windows. The weather has lifted a bit now and there is a clear horizon, but the sea is choppy and the ship rises and falls a fair bit with some lateral motion too. An occasional great shudder is felt as if the propellor is lifted out of the water, though we have since learned that it is the stern above the rudder smacking down onto the surface after a large wave has passed. No sign of sea sickness as yet. We have been to breakfast, but there were no transgressions this morning, boiled sausage on the menu repelled rather than attracted, so just muesli and a grapefruit.



We didn't even go to the bridge yesterday, we typed diaries, sent off a letter, said Mattins and Evensong, and sometimes Diana knitted, while I continued to read

the book on the building of the Panama Canal. In the evening we watched Lawrence of Arabia. Interesting to see it again. I remembered so little that I wonder if ever I did see it. It is curiously dated in style, all that inflated and dramatic music to accompany stunning vistas. O Toole I thought a bit stilted, but I was pleasantly surprised at how less than deferential the film was to the legend.

We have taken a load of washing down to the laundry, our first batch. I am at present in a sweat shirt and shorts. The ship is ridiculously warm. Only outside does reality bite. We will be able to open our windows when in tropical climes, if ever we want to. They face forward and so we might well be able to negate air conditioning with balmy tropical head winds. The cabins are heated centrally to 23 degrees and so we cannot adjust the warmth to our own tastes.

*Later 11.45:* We have just spent a couple of hours on the Bridge, the best place to be in rough weather. It is a great privilege to have access at any time we like. We talked to Jim the Third Mate about the ship, weather, the Philippines, his family and his business plans once he gives up seafaring. He is a lovely fellow who seems to welcome our presence and conversation. Facts and figures are hard to retain, but he did say the weather today would be classified as rough, and that during the night the wind had got up to 40 knots - comforting news, because if we can handle weather like this then it is only really rough weather that is likely seriously to disable us. He reckoned the swell to be about 4 metres. We have been passing Cook Strait between South and North Island and so there are complicated currents and swells leading to quite a difficult motion. Things should smooth out a bit once we are fully in the lee of North Island at around two this afternoon. We were interested too to learn that the diesel burned by ships is very thick and black and viscous, almost like asphalt. It has to be warmed to pump and kept warm to flow and be used, let alone to start the engine.

### **Tuesday 18 June, 2013 7.20am**

Last night we watched the film "Anna and the King", primarily because Diana and Jan a good number of years ago befriended the Personal Private Secretary to the King of Thailand. His father had been Prime Minister, and so they have been feted among the rich and famous in their visits to what used to be Siam. The film is a romanticised account of historical events in Siam, an entertaining, escapist pleasure.

We spent hours idle on the ocean yesterday. To start with there was a "black out" of the engine, something that doesn't often happen. We switched to an auxiliary while the other was sorted out. Later we stopped because we are ahead of schedule and due into Napier only around 10.30am. This morning the ship still potters along at a mere 12 knots along a fascinating, but fairly distant coast, the sea is very calm. The sky appears all but clear and so some sunny hours ashore in Napier might well be in awaiting us.

### **Wednesday 19 June, 2013 8.57am. Napier**

I awoke this morning at about 5.00. They were still loading us. There are no gantries here in Napier, old fashioned cranes only, but they are used very skilfully. We sailed in to Hawkes Bay on a sunny, still day and for all our time ashore I was without a jumper. Not bad for mid winter and when most of the rest of the country is cold, grey and wet with the promise of widespread snow. Napier is one of the two sunniest places

in NZ, being well to the east and under a rain shadow. Unlike Otago this is a huge and wide bay. The sea as we came in was mirror-like and edging into so small but busy a port was a delicate operation. The difficulty is stopping a great and heavy floating hunk like the Bahia. Were it not for thruster engines forward and aft it would be impossible. No tug could stop quickly so large a vessel. As we left port this morning, at about 7.00am, I was on the bridge watching it all. The two tugs turned us round slowly, and there were mere metres between our stern and a bulk carrier on one side and between our bow and the side of the dock on the other. As we inched closer and closer to the bulk carrier it was easy to envisage us gently drifting into it, but then the rear thruster engine throttled and we stopped.

Our arrival took time and we didn't dock until after 12.00 noon. Getting off the ship was interminable, the problem not Customs but Security. We and members of the crew had to be ferried from ship side to security gates by security personnel who have to defer to stevedores and cranes. Anyway, we got our lift to the gates only after 1.00pm and there was Hamish waiting for us. He is the fellow who organised our whole trip, a plump, successful looking fellow who drives a smart, dark green, walnut dash-boarded Jaguar. He is talkative and proud of this strange and almost too tidy and film-set seeming city, a City Councillor he was for some years its Planning Officer. He's a member of its swanky "Gentleman's Club" and an enthusiastic golfer. He is English and was once a Purser for P & O and is a chef by profession. He is obviously a successful business man, decent and gregarious.

The city suffered a massive earthquake in the early 1930s, lifting the sea front by metres. Except for three buildings the whole city was destroyed by a fire that followed the quake. In the 1930s it was rebuilt all at one time and so there is a uniformity of style that is unusual, Art Deco which has become a feature of the place and there is huge Art Deco festival each year. The style, architecturally speaking, is purely decorative. The buildings essentially are mere concrete cubes, but their facades are decorated and painted in ways that make them distinctive and pleasing. The few that are not in this style are gradually being replaced.

Since the recent Christ Church earthquake stringent safety regulations have been imposed upon all buildings in New Zealand. Over the next few years the reinforcing, at huge expense, of so many buildings is going to be very, very costly. It was fascinating to watch a building being destroyed by two great earth movers right in the middle of this neat and compact town. A difficult job for the building was full of reinforcing and great iron girders.

It is a prosperous town, noted, so Hamish told us, for no litter and no graffiti, due to pride, prosperity and zero tolerance. There are no overhead electricity lines whatsoever. The city is the hub and port for a very rich wool, fruit and wine growing hinterland. Hawkes Bay wines are particularly famous, but the place also provides the world with its tomatoes, pizzas and McCains' peas. Hamish's time with us was limited because it had taken us so long to get off the ship. He gave us a bottle of wine and dropped us off at the library, where for a couple of dollars we were able to access our emails and reply to one or two of them. On the way back to the ship a fellow walking his dogs on a grey and gravelly beach asked if we had seen the Orcas, and indeed we caught a distant glimpse of our first killer whales.

We watched “The English Patient” last night. You do wonder why such fraught tales need to be told, (ask Shakespeare you idiot) but a beautifully done film with a few glimmers of light and beauty in the bleakness.



*Napier*

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