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RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (1)

Andrew Neaum



The remotest inhabited place on earth is Tristan da Cunha. I lived there from 1952 to 1956, aged seven to nearly eleven. My father was Chaplain on the Island for three and a half years and he, my mother, sister, brother and I all loved it. It is the sort of place that you never forget, that grabs hold of your imagination and haunts you ever afterwards. I have longed to revisit the island ever since I left it. Last year, with Diana, I finally found my way back. One of my lifetime goals achieved at last. I diarised our visit and so for the next month or too I will be editing up and toning down that diary into some sort of coherent narrative, attempting to order and make sense of our visit as well as to honour the place and its people.

The Island is situated almost plumb in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean on the edge of the “Roaring Forties”. It is approximately 1,750 miles from Cape Town, 2,088 miles from South America, 1,350 miles from St Helena and 2,550 miles from the Falkland islands. It is in fact one of several islands, the largest island in a small archipelago consisting of the uninhabited Nightingale Islands as well as the wildlife reserves of Inaccessible Island and Gough Island. Tristan is roughly circular, about 7 miles across, with an area of 37.8 square miles. Its permanent population is about 267.

As well as being the most isolated inhabited place on earth it is also, at first and close sight, forbidding and grim, all mountain, cliffs, ravines, gulches and wild ocean. From a distance out to sea, however, it is thrilling and exquisite, a near perfect, classic volcanic peak, often snow capped and even more frequently cloud capped. The cone is scored by deep gulches radiating out in all directions carved by the frequent rain, but sea erosion is even more drastic and so for most of the island's perimeter the slope of the cone has been eaten away by a relentless ocean to form forbidding two thousand foot base cliffs that soar up from very narrow stone or black sand beaches.

Its one little human settlement, the village "*Edinburgh of the Seven Seas*", has an average of 67 inches of rain a year and the wind rarely ceases to blow. Yet my childhood memories are bathed more in sunshine than gloom and even our recent three and a half weeks, wet and windy though they were for most of the time, are in no way recalled as at all dark and inhospitable.

The people live on a half to one mile wide, rolling and verdant strip of land along the north west coast possibly six miles in length, sandwiched between mighty mountain and turbulent ocean. Sublimity is ordinary, the ordinary sublime.

The fine South African poet Roy Campbell wrote a long and impressive poem entitled *Tristan da Cunha*. In it the island becomes a symbol of his own isolation and alienation from colonial society:

*Exiled like you and severed from my race
By the cold ocean of my own disdain,
Do I not freeze in such a wintry space,
Do I not travel through a storm as vast
And rise at times, victorious from the main,
To fly the sunrise at my shattered mast*

Getting to the island is not at all easy. We had been booked on the

SA Agulhas for two years, not realising that this vessel had been replaced by a brand new SA Agulhas II. This vessel was completed only in the year we were due to sail, having been commissioned by the South African Government from a firm in Finland at a cost of 163 million Australian dollars. While our trip was not its maiden voyage, it was its first to Tristan and Gough Island, and being a state of the art Research and Survey ship as well as a Tanker, Ice-breaker, Cargo and Passenger ship, berths were much in demand by scientific folk, the ship's owner being the South African Department of Environmental Affairs. Three weeks before our date of sailing from Cape Town we were informed that our berths were no longer available. More scientific personnel than originally envisaged needed berths and so the ten allocated to the likes of us had been summarily withdrawn. Before we had confirmed a far less satisfactory alternative berth on a small cargo ship we were squeezed on to the Agulhas II after all.

There is no airport on the island and no regular passenger ships. If the annual Agulhas trip cannot be caught, then either the small chartered island supply ship, at present *The Baltic Trader*, or one of the Fishing Company ships have to suffice. The Agulhas trip allows a very convenient three weeks on the island. After it has deposited personnel on Tristan it heads for Gough Island, three hundred miles away, to supply or replace the researchers and meteorological officers there, as well as to participate in research.

Tuesday September 4th 2012

..... We made our way to Cape Town's "East Wharf" and with no difficulty at all gained entrance to the dockside in the car. Like my father I love docks, though they are nowhere near as interesting nowadays as they were before the advent of containerisation. Whenever my father found himself in a city with a port, he would take us all off to look around and to goggle at great chutes filling holds with wheat or other grains, and lanky cranes loading pallets of pig iron, or cars or whatever into capacious holds.

We made our way on board the Agulhas with my sister Sue and Bob her husband. Having signed in we waited for the purser to turn up. Martin was his name, an amiable fellow with usually a faintly harassed and puzzled look upon his face. He found our names on his computer and took our passports for processing. With some reservations we left them with him and he told us that we should board at any time after 10.00am on Thursday. We then had a quick look over the boat before leaving. It had its front hold open as some powerful little cranes, all a part of the ship's equipment, loaded stuff into the hold, which was not a deep one for the ship's draft appears to be relatively shallow, possibly to facilitate ice-breaking. We couldn't get into the cabins but looked over with approval one of two lounge bars, looking out over the front deck and bow. The ship is obviously a functional and working vessel, rather than a touristy passenger ship. It is well appointed though and in its own way beautiful and inspiring. It made my sister Sue very envious of us. There appears to be no superfluous comfort or concessions to luxury. The stairwells were not carpeted, nor all of the corridors, hard-wearing linoleum instead, and all the handrails of stairways are stainless steel. The great doors out to the deck are heavy and require strength to open and shut and all the decks are green-painted, rough textured metal not caulked wood. A fascinating vessel.

Coincidentally Bob and Sue's next door neighbour's father used to be the captain of a ship plying regularly to Tristan and is married to an islander. He too will be on the ship and we met him coming off as we boarded.

**Friday 7 September, 2012 7.55pm
(on board SA Agulhas)**

I lie on the bunk of cabin number 6136 on the Agulhas. We arrived at about half past ten with no fuss, parked the car near the gangway, unloaded the suitcases and I struggled up the gangway with them, depositing them on the deck, there being lots of security people and others around. I then descended the steps for a couple of photos taken by Bob of Diana and me. We then boarded and waved

goodbye to the good Bedinghams who drove off as we turned our attention to finding our cabin, guided there by a fellow who took one of the big bags off me. The cabin has a biggish oblong window rather than a porthole and we are fairly high up, deck 6. There are two beds separated by a fair sized desk with four plugs above it and a monitor for I know not what. There is also a three person settee as well as our own en suite basin, toilet and shower. It is as good a cabin as I have ever travelled in. We dumped our stuff and went outside to the deck to enjoy what we presumed would be our imminent departure. However, we were destined to leave late.

We talked a fair bit to a very friendly fellow passenger called Linda who informed us that her husband is the Executive Officer of the Island and loves it. She is making her first voyage to see him there and by profession is a Labour Lawyer. She wouldn't mind going to live for a while on the island, but no cats are allowed there, even doctored ones, and she loves her cats. Interested in the mystical properties of rocks as well as cats, and a polisher of stones to make ornaments and trinkets, she has a good sense of humour, a strong South African accent and a deep appreciation of wine.

We were initially told through the loudspeakers that at 1.00pm we would be briefed in the ship's 100 seat auditorium, but this was postponed, partly because there were a whole lot of speeches on the wharf to do with this being the first Gough and Tristan trip of the new ship, and there is a team of scientists of one sort or another heading to Gough, eight of them to spend thirteen months there, one with special medical qualifications, this being the 58th contingent. So speechifying and even the South African National Anthem, sung by two African fellows with splendid tenor voices were all part of an official send off. There is also something not right with one of the cranes and someone has been flown in from Norway to fix it. So we have left port and are anchored in the Bay until 9.00pm when we are due to sail.

Immigration was a formality, we all assembled in the auditorium

where our passports, with a photo of the main page, were tabled and everyone was called up by name, names were matched to faces, and that was that. No interrogation at all.

It is a fascinating ship and we feel hugely privileged to be on it. I have already explored it pretty thoroughly. There are two helicopters in two hangars behind a large landing pad and about eight technicians, pilots or whatever in a uniform of their own. We talked to a “retired” psychiatrist and his wife, going to investigate any possible problems on the island, for the first time ever, having done the same over some time, for St Helena. A lovely and intelligent couple. There is also an RC priest as well as a Dutch Reformed Church Chaplain to the Gough Island mob. He will be running a little service on Sunday relieving me of any obligations I am pleased to say, though he has invited me to say a prayer or some such thing.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (2)

Thursday 7 September, 2012

Night has fallen and our ship is anchored in Table Bay. We have both taken a seasick pill, though the motion of the ship is very gentle. We bought a great swag of pills in London, *Sturgeron 15*, recommended by folk who should know. (In the end we used very few of them).

I have been so terribly afflicted by seasickness in the past that suicide seemed a preferable alternative. Tuna fishing on St Helena brought on violent attacks of the old heave-ho, providing bile-marinated bait for the smaller fish we were pulling in as we circled around waiting for tuna, the air noxious with diesel fumes. The tuna did offer themselves up to our hooks eventually, to take my mind off my misery. Worst of all was the voyage to Tristan as a little boy on the *HMS Actaeon* in 1952, it was a vibrating little sardine can of a vessel, again stinking of diesel. Seven days of unutterable misery.

We are anchored in Table Bay to allow an expert engineer, flown in from Norway, to fix one of the cranes on the ship. We learned later that he did this in a matter of minutes, a simple fault easily remedied. What a wonderful expertise to possess, granting a trip to Cape Town all the way from Norway to do a two minute job. After he had fixed the problem and been taken ashore by launch, there was some rearranging of cargo in the hold to be done by the repaired crane and we set sail after 9.00pm.

Food plays an important part in my enjoyment of daily life. One of the first discussions I initiate each day with Diana has to do with what we are to eat for dinner. So our first meal on board was of great interest. We are allocated to the second sitting at 7.00pm, a mere half hour after the first sitting. Obviously lingering, languorous table talk over coffee and port is not encouraged. We were served a good four course meal by unfussy waiters who double up as stewards, deckhands and more, for this is indeed a working ship. The fish course was too strong and acrid for me. That line of dark flesh in so many large tropical fish is far too sharp and pungent, it needs excising before cooking. Otherwise no complaints: fillet steak, tender and pleasing and an eclair (confectioner's cream, not the real thing though) to follow.

At a brief briefing with the captain we were given some interesting facts about the ship and learned that twice each day the vessel heaves to for an hour to allow sea water samples and other observations to be taken. It really does appear to be a working ship with mercifully few plans to entertain passengers. Even the bar is open only for about three hours a day. We sat at dinner with a bright young African oceanographer and a female intern. He was very forthcoming on his work and love of it, she hardly said a word, possibly through shyness.

There appears to be no easy internet access on board, though I might be able to access emails on my small travelling laptop, if I can get a cable to attach my machine to the network plug in our

cabin. I have asked the faintly harassed and lugubrious looking purser about this and he tells me he should be able to obtain one.

Friday 7 September, 2012 11.42am

So far so good, no sign of seasickness whatsoever, I am keeping on with the pills every eight hours for another day, Diana has abandoned them already. The sea is fairly calm, though there is regular motion that causes us to stagger now and then and one is always aware of it. It appears to be from bow to stern with very little lateral motion.

We had a good night's sleep. Some time after nine I looked out of the window and seeing no lights from Cape Town realised that we were on the move. This morning has been sleepy too. We got up at around seven, had a welcome and scalding hot shower, and then went for a walk round the ship wearing beanies and our waterproof jackets. There was a very stiff breeze, partly from our speed, but we must too be heading into the wind. As is so often the case at open sea, there is very little sign of life and the ocean doesn't really have any scent. It is when land meets sea that there occurs that explosion of scents that so invigorate us. At the top of the ship, above the bridge, there is a splendid viewing cockpit with half a dozen seats behind great glass windows offering wide views ahead and to the sides. Two birdoes were there with note pads and binoculars watching out for anything interesting. They reported seeing one bird, and we ourselves spotted what appeared to be a tern. A whale was announced later over the intercom, but we didn't bother rushing out to see it. I asked a Tristanite about the frequency of whales around the island and he said they do still come, but not often these days. When I was a boy on the island they came in good numbers during spring, I think it was, possibly to breed. The sound of their trumpeting and blowing and of their tail flukes clapping the sea surface was a thrilling commonplace in my boyhood.

Lorna Lavarello-Smith told us that when the Island was deserted from the time of the volcanic eruption in 1961 until the return of the

islanders in 1963, Japanese whalers (others later claimed them to have been Russian or Norwegian) visited the islands and slaughtered every whale in sight. They have never, ever returned in any number.

Breakfast at seven is the whole tutti frutti, though the waiters are hard pressed and finding a table can be difficult. The two shifts don't seriously seem to be kept for breakfast. We sat with a jovial South African engineer going to Gough Island for three weeks to fix some problem or other in the cabins there. When it has unloaded its cargo and scientists at Gough the SA Agulhas sails off to position buoys for scientific purposes for three weeks. Hence the convenient length of our stay on Tristan.

We had a life boat drill yesterday. There are two great big life boats, bright orange in colour and fully covered. Each seats seventy five people, all of them sitting in four, tight rows having first donned special orange suits in which one has to relieve oneself until rescued, an unpleasant thought. Though when you think about it, what else could possibly be the case? The ship is designed for Antarctic waters and bright, well-sealed and totally weatherproof gear is absolutely necessary. To be pickled in your own urine and dung for a few days is a small price to pay for survival.

Saturday 8 September, 2012 6.58am

I lie on the bunk having been up and out to collect a cup of coffee at the end of the lounge just round the corner from us. Not only is there hot water on tap all the time and the wherewithal for mugs of coffee, tea and milo, there is also one of those fancy coffee machines that grinds the beans before it makes your cup. I have begun to master its intricacies, though not entirely. Another good night's sleep and at several times during the night I fancied the movement of the ship to be rather more boisterous, but if so only marginally because on going to get the coffee, things seemed much the same. Talking to the Gough Island paramedic about sea sick pills she commended the one we are taking and said that she herself,

being a very bad sailor indeed, takes in addition a single pill a day more usually prescribed for epilepsy, this apparently deals with vertigo and balance. Some folk are so susceptible to mal-de-mer that ordinary seasick pills do not suffice at all. Diana was talking to just such a person last night, a conservationist who, having been working on St Helena for a while, is now returning to finish a project on Tristan. She had been to the ship's doctor to have an injection to help her cope.

I have talked to all sorts of interesting people and regret not hurrying down to the cabin to write up actual conversations. Unlike James Boswell I cannot be bothered, nor do I have his memory or recreative imagination.

One particular conversation was with two young Frenchmen, both of them delightful. Their role on the island has something to do with monitoring seismic and possibly even atomic activity in this remote part of the world. They are employed by the United Nations in conjunction, I think, with a French company. One of them is on his way to the island for the first time to take over, the other has just completed a year on the island and has been to the Cape for a short break, returning to shoe-horn in his replacement and pack up. I talked to the latter for an hour or two, and he told me about his desire to write, how and what, and that at school he was more a humanities man than a scientific one, but that he had chosen science at university with a view to getting a decent job. Both of them come from Brittany so we congratulated ourselves on being, in a sense, all British.

The one with whom I had the longer chat, Geoffroy, has enjoyed his year's stay on the island and is very positive about the place, but he does also hint at there being problems there, including drink. I asked how he had avoided romantic entanglements, but he said there was no problem because there were many more men than girls around. I wouldn't have thought that to be a problem for a personable young foreigner, but perhaps he had good reason to be

reticent! I mentioned the 1908 Tristan Diary of a clergyman's wife that I had discovered and he told me that he had it on disk and would give it to me, with some other bits and pieces, which he duly did last night.

I had another conversation in the morning with a group that included an islander of the Rogers family and who has lived in England for many years. Although retired he has no desire to return to Tristan permanently, but visits regularly to see his family, especially his old mother. He told me that the sea pool that I learned to swim in is now a part of the harbour, confirming what I had suspected, that Garden Gate beach, so enjoyed as a little boy, has been wrecked by necessary progress. He did say that part of the beach remains and that the cave I so well remember is also still there, remarking on my good memory. He tells me that most of the donkeys have gone, being of course redundant now with cars and motorbikes available. Someone else suggested that I looked fit enough to climb the 2000 foot Base cliffs, though the Peak might be another matter. Certainly it looks daunting from photographs and is almost certain at this time of the year to be snow covered.

We walked round the ship outside several times, all wrapped up and head covered, for the wind is cold indeed. Last night after dark we did likewise and the wind was much, much decreased, so perhaps the headwind has turned to a tailwind. We appear to be doing about 14 knots an hour (*16.1109 mph*) according to information on the board beside the purser's office.

I continue to read the letters of that miserable fellow Philip Larkin who has all my faults magnified a hundred fold. I wish I had his gifts in similar proportions, though the cost and labour involved in writing his verse seems to have been horrendous. At lunch, or was it dinner, we sat with the Chaplain appointed to the Gough team of eight that is to be deposited on that isolated spot for thirteen months. He is only with them for the trip and will not stay on the island. Also at the table with us was a Norwegian fellow who like

me is returning for nostalgic reasons. He was actually born on the island and returning to stay for three weeks with his nanny of that time. The Chaplain is of the Dutch Reformed Church, amiable and keen to share his experiences. The trouble is they were both interesting and so in competition with each other and the Chaplain tended to win. His stories were about his time in Burundi with army, doing apparently excellent work in that benighted country. He seemed a wise fellow in many ways, almost certainly an admirable forces chaplain.

At lunch (it must therefore have been dinner with the other two) we sat with the parents of the Captain. They are travelling not to Tristan, but to Gough as a surprise, to meet their daughter who is the paramedic and team leader of the group about to be relieved. We enjoyed their company, they too are Afrikaans and touchingly and obviously devout. Before we ate they covertly joined hands briefly and muttered a little grace. Lovely.

They have spent years in Namibia and I asked about that country's politics and prospects. He maintained that it is doing better than South Africa, there not being the hatred between black and white still so evident in the latter.

Later: Much of the day was taken up with lectures or presentations in the auditorium. One on seals, one on Nightingale Island buntings, one on Oceanography and one on Geodesy, the last by a brilliant fellow from whom we learned that the sea is not flat and can vary up to 140 metres in height from one part of the globe to another, even the level of the earth's crust is not constant. To measure them, therefore you need something constant and for this they select one of the furthest quasars in space.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (3)

Sun 9 Sept, 2012 6.40am

I had a chat to Fr Michael yesterday, he is the RC priest travelling to Tristan with us, a pleasant old cove. He tells me that he is a member a Society of priests based in Barnet in London dedicated to work in Africa. He, however, is seconded to the South Atlantic and based in the Falklands. He flutters his hands expressively a lot and appears to get on well with Anglicans, especially those of a more conservative sort. He is very friendly with the previous Bishop of St Helena, John Salt, as well as the present one, Richard Fenwick who apparently is in England having a pin put in his ankle.

We spent a fair amount of yesterday in the observation platform at the top of the ship. In the late afternoon we were there as we ran into strong wind and heavy rain, exhilarating. The birdoes spot birds with the naked eye, then observe them closely through high quality binoculars, identify them (usually with ease) and list them in a notebook to be put to some statistical use.

We had an excellent steak for dinner last night, cooked medium rare to order. We were joined by the Captain's mother and father, lovely folk. Afterwards, in the lounge, I had a long chat about religion and politics with Bob and John. Bob is a dental technician who comes from Dundee and has a heavy Scots accent. He has been making visits to Tristan for a good number of years to do necessary dental work. He has loved doing so and is very highly regarded by the islanders. This will be his last visit though. He is past retirement age and regretfully acknowledges that enough is enough. John is an extremely articulate, amusing and sceptical English Labourite. He is married to Debbie, a lovely Tristanite who is the daughter of Lars and Trina, Lars being one of the three Lay Readers who help to keep the Anglican Church on the Island alive and well.

It was sceptical comments on the Monarchy overheard from John that drew me in to the conversation. He is a fascinating fellow, working class and proud of it, with a strong distrust and dislike of the Establishment. He treasures a comment made to him once by a priest, I think on Tristan, who told him always to remember that Jesus was "working class". He and Debbie live in Weymouth, but

have a house on Tristan which they doubt that they will ever retire to. Their one child, a daughter, is about to begin her A levels.

I enjoy sceptics like John, who have a sense of fun. Not least because I too am a sceptic. The great miracle of my own life is that I believe in God at all when so devoid of certainty and so questioning of everything else. Certainly I am sceptical of any attempt to hijack Jesus into the “working class”, “intelligentsia”, “middle class” or whatever. The Catholic Church declared May Day to be “St Joseph The Worker’s Day” in 1955, attempting to baptize May Day so precious to Socialists and Communists into Mother Church. As a less than brilliant versifier once remarked to do this was simply :

*.... nasty deviousness,
A Churchy double-cross.
Joseph owned his wood-work shop!
So Joseph was a boss!*

I am now off to make a coffee, or should I shave....hmmmm.

Later: I have just had a shower, splendid hot water and good pressure. We are asked not to use too much water, though there is a desalination plant on the ship. One of the presentations yesterday was by a salty old fellow to do with a particular weed eradication program on Gough Island. It has cost thousands and thousands over the past eight years. The two delightful birdoes, Chris and Mara, he from Northumberland she from New Zealand, have recently declared their engagement. They are in the Gough Team as part of the weed eradication program as well as bird-observing, ringing and monitoring are. It will be a make or break year with this particular imported and highly invasive weed. If eradication proves impossible the weed will have to be merely contained.

Later still 12.50pm

I have just eaten a lamb curry, very good with the authenticating bone and gristle all a part of it. It was followed anticlimactically by

fruit jelly and cream. We then repaired to the lounge for a cup of coffee and to watch the bow of the ship plunging up and down, sending great plumes of spray all over the front half of the ship. Earlier I tried to catch this on my little camera from high up near the observation station. The wind was so strong it almost carried me away, I had to lean against the binnacle to use my camera, though a little one like mine cannot really capture the drama of it all. Later, down on the lowest deck at the stern, the waves were so high they blocked out the horizon, being far higher than the observer. Splendid. There were albatrosses gliding along behind the ship.

We went to the ecumenical service taken by Ben, an armed forces Chaplain. Like so much ecumenical worship it was pretty bland in its attempt to please everyone, though he did his best with the aid of Power Point and was good humoured. He got me to say a prayer at the end and the RC fellow one at the beginning. There were about twenty five or so there I calculated. Interestingly the two cleverest of the boffins were among them.

One of spots on the ship we most frequent is the observation deck. It is a glass enclosed space high up above even the bridge with a bench to lean against, rest your books, pads and binoculars on and as well there are about six or seven seats. It faces out over the bow, offering a splendid view of the great waves spuming all over the lower front deck. Its purpose is to allow specialists to spot and record birds, marine life and activity, weather phenomena and anything else that interests or baffles boffins.

It is interesting to rub shoulders with specialists and most of those on the Agulhas were all too ready to share their knowledge and to answer questions.

Later in the day we went to observe the oceanographers drop a great circle of instruments and canisters down the "Moon hole", a name no one yet has been able to explain. This is a hole in the bottom of the ship, which when it is open reveals a circle of turbulent, welling

and falling sea at the level of the waves outside. A great circle of cylindrical canisters to collect samples at different levels down to a thousand fathoms was lowered into the well and disappeared. To perform this action the boat is required to be stationary.

We were informed today that the ship is attempting to arrive at Tristan on Tuesday because the weather is expected to deteriorate thereafter. This means that the regular stops for scientific purposes are to be of much shorter duration. We sat with the delightful Chris and Mara at supper hearing all about their plans for a wedding on the small Orkney island of Westray.

I have now read seventy percent of Larkin's miserable, but most interesting *Letters to Monica*. It yielded this:

*Ring a ring of roses
Coronary thrombosis
A seizure, a seizure
We all fall down.*

My diary records another rollicking piece, unfortunately too scatological for the tender readers of this column.

We have also been reading aloud "*Three Years in Tristan Da Cunha*" by K. M. Barrow, the wife of the Rev. J. G. Barrow, Missionary Clergyman on Tristan Da Cunha in the first decade of the twentieth century. This is a fascinating read, available for nothing on the Internet. It is published there on the splendid *Project Gutenberg* site. I downloaded it onto my Kindle before leaving Australia. I quote from its second paragraph:

In the autumn of 1904 we saw in "The Standard" a letter which arrested our attention. It was an appeal for some one to go to the Island of Tristan da Cunha, as the people had had no clergyman for seventeen years.

Now, Tristan da Cunha was not an unknown name to us, for as a child my husband loved to hear his mother

tell of her shipwreck on Inaccessible, an uninhabited island twenty- five miles south-west of Tristan da Cunha.

She, then a child of four, and her nurse were passengers on the "Blendon Hall", which left London for India in May 1821, and was wrecked during a dense fog on Inaccessible, July 23. The passengers and crew drifted ashore on spars and fragments of the vessel. Two of the crew perished, and nearly all the stores were lost. For four months they lived on this desolate island. A tent made out of sails was erected on the shore to protect the women and children from the cold and rain. They lived almost entirely on the eggs of sea-birds.

After waiting some time in hope of being seen by a ship, they made a raft from the remains of the wreck, and eight of the crew set off in it to try to reach Tristan, but were never heard of again, poor fellows. A few weeks later a second and successful attempt was made. The men reached Tristan, but in a very exhausted state. Then the Tristanites, led by Corporal Glass, manned their boats, and at great personal risk succeeded in fetching off the rest of the crew and passengers, who remained on Tristan till January 9, 1822, on which day a passing English brig took them to the Cape of Good Hope.

This was eighty-four years ago. And now the son of that little shipwrecked girl was seriously thinking of going out to minister to the children of her rescuers. Here I may mention that in the whole of their history, from 1816 to 1906, they had had only two clergymen living amongst them.....

Diana and I were enthralled by this book which records a three year stint on Tristan that is closer in time to my own three and a half year stint from 1952-1956 than is 2013 to my time on the island. The life recorded by Mrs Barrow in 1906 is not all that dissimilar to the life I remember as a boy.

The sea continues to be fairly rough, but with no effect on us whatsoever. I too have now given up seasick pills. Diana hasn't had one for a couple of days. Strangely Diana this morning, having done a little bit of computing, a note to some folk on Skype, did feel just slightly queasy and so we went out for a walk on deck and all was well again. I haven't taken any pills today and though the sea is rough have had no feelings of queasiness at all and eat mightily. We have taken to walking ten times and me twelve times round the helicopter landing pad after each meal.

We watched a 1966 film on Tristan in the upstairs lounge this afternoon. Black and white and mostly to do with the erupting volcano induced evacuation in 1961 and the return. Later about thirty five returned folk decided to return once more to Britain. Because the DVD was black and white it gave a fairly drab impression of the island. How distant the 1960s appear, years which were Diana and my salad days.

The unattainability of utopia or the Garden of Eden is the ultimate message from it all. They rejected Britain, or most of them did, but have imported much of the stuff they rejected so that today materialism, cash, cars etcetera are to be found on the island, inevitably or course.

Tuesday 11 September, 2012 7.35am

We sat with a young fellow at dinner who is the youngest of the Gough team, a mere twenty two (or was it twenty four?) He applied for the job before even finishing his degree. He had to wait five months to hear he had got the position. So many of them seem so young to the ancient fellow writing this journal. The girl who explained to us the dropping of instruments down the moon hole

also appeared very young and breathless. Ho hum or as Larkin would say ogh, ogh, ogh.

I have finished Larkin's letters to Monica and am delighted to be into AN Wilson's *The Elizabethans*. Wilson is always bracing to read, not least for being so opinionated. He starts the book by tackling two great problems with the Elizabethans, the first being their treatment of Ireland, the second their attitude to slavery.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (4)

Andrew Neaum

After dinner I had a good chat with the ship's doctor. Ships' doctors tend to be a breed of their own. Why would you ignore the usually not inconsiderable rewards and varied clientele of land-lubber doctoring, in favour of the limited, isolating and surely less lucrative doctoring required on a ship? To do so could well mean an interesting and unusual personality, or an inadequate one unable to cope with conventional life and doctoring; or a failed career or marriage, a flight from scandal, or a propensity to drink. Any ship that carries more than twelve passengers is required by law to provide a qualified doctor. This is why freighters tend never to provide more than twelve berths for passengers, if any at all.

I find the doctor on the Agulhas with us to be interesting indeed, but with no apparent failings or bizarre peculiarities. She is no ancient mariner, a good deal younger than I am with a piercing but twinkling eye. It turns out that like me she was Rhodesian educated and went to Highlands Junior School, Oriel School and Roosevelt School. all in Harare where, she declared, she received a superb education. The first two of those schools were in my father's last parish of seventeen years. He taught R.E in them. Her husband apparently died when their second daughter was only four and so she brought up two girls on her own. She is now studying tropical medicine because having been brought up in Africa she is fascinated by it. A bit of an idealist she fancies working somewhere in Africa for an NGO. One of her daughters is a vet in Australia,

though likely not permanently. She has served both on Tristan and St Helena and is a fascinating and intelligent person.

I also talked to an inveterate smoker called Simon, whose father is an educational adviser and teacher on Tristan at present and obviously loves the island. He worked there for eight years when Simon his son was a boy and has returned many years later to work there again. So Simon's trip is not dissimilar to mine. He has a lively little girl with him from a previous marriage and a partner with her father, good folk. I had a Castle beer with Simon, Castle being the beer I drank as a young man in Rhodesia.

Because the ship travels to Antarctica frequently, most of the steps out on deck have an electric element underneath them so as to stop them treacherously freezing over in bitter weather. After breakfast Diana and I did a brisk walk on a grey and wild day round the helicopter deck. We then went up to the observation deck for a while before an obligatory briefing on the helicopter flights. We then listened to a fascinating talk by a single-minded, somewhat fanatical conserv-ationist, John Cooper. One of those necessary fanatics though. On Gough Island the greatest problem and threat, especially to albatrosses, is mice, of all things. With no serious predators they have grown much bigger than those ancestors who had stowed away with human beings disembarking to explore the island. They now burrow into the warm bodies of albatross chicks when the parents are away looking for food. Then the skuas, spotting the blood, finish the job off.

John Cooper is an advocate for a plan to drench the island with poison to eradicate them all. Some hope I would say.

Wednesday 12 September, 2012 *Arrival day*

Five thirty in the morning. I tap away at my small laptop. Outside it is too dark to see, but if it wasn't we would be well within sight of the island. I must close up the computer soon and get organised, though Diana is still in bed, relaxed and unhurried, how sensible.



Last night there was a fancy dress party to which Diana persuaded me to go as the second half of the French comic strip hero Tintin. She carried a big tin, I carried an identical one and both of us affixed to our heads a piece of teased out and fluffed red nylon fishing rope to represent Tintin's ginger hair. It worked well and we were judged winners and got a block of chocolate. It was a rowdy party in the upstairs lounge and good fun. A lot of people entered into the spirit of it all, and one of the helicopter crew, a natural clown, was the star of the party. We left about ten, having put back our clocks another hour, Tristan being one hour ahead of GMT apparently. I wrote and sent off a little piece for the Diocesan Paper in Cape Town and sent a photo with it.

Yesterday was as rough a day as any we have had. Again it was most exhilarating up at the observation deck. I sign off now to go and have a look outside for an island in the dark.

Thursday 13 September, 2012 10.00am

On the Island of Tristan da Cunha

I sit at the office desk, looking out of the window over the garden wall of the little cottage that is the Rectory on Tristan da Cunha. The shape of the Garden is the same as I remember it from sixty years ago, so too is the sea, which appears to lap the cliff top. Not

much else is the same from this view though. The little gully below the house is now crossed by a road, and there are two jagged, black volcanic stone walls across it, forming a pair of paddocks out of what was once common ground running down the gully to the beach. A couple of cows graze in the nearest paddock. The 1961 volcano, sadly for a nostalgic like me, in destroying the old factory and the two main beaches, caused a great shift westward of all the industry on the island. The beach we used to play and sunbathe on, and from which we learned to swim, is now the island's essential little harbour with all the detritus associated with such places. Above it is the factory and the supermarket and so on. Not ruinously ugly though. My view as I sit here typing, while rain pours down and the wind blows, is still pleasing. It is just that west of the rectory is now the tiny industrial and commercial hub of the community, whereas this was not so when we left nearly sixty years ago.

The sound of rain on a tin roof thrills me. I suspect the three and a half years as a boy here first gave me a taste for and love of that sweetest of nature's music.

We arrived to anchor pretty well spot on eight o'clock yesterday, as scheduled. Best of all though, as light dawned on our vessel, so the classic view of the island in its entirety merged from darkness into light and we were able to take lots of photographs as we approached. The island's peak had a few streaks of snow on it and although most of the sky was cloudy, not so the island, mere wisps of cloud wreathed it now and then. We even had early morning sunlight on the 6,765 foot peak for a while. Nightingale Island, twenty five miles from Tristan was visible faintly to the left of the island until we drew really close, whereupon Inaccessible island appeared on the right. There was a cold wind to numb us all as we stood on the observation soaking it all in, but the wind was milder and less fierce than for the last few days and the sea had no white caps to its waves. We were blessed with an excellent day for landing.

As we drew closer a fair number of the ship's decks were roped off. Fore, because of the crane and the hold to be unloaded, aft, because of the helicopters to be used for ferrying us ashore. The island is formidably inhospitable looking, except for the plateau upon which the village is sited. The 1961 lava extrusion appears very black and hardly weather-soften at all. It forms low black cliffs against which the sea pounds. What vegetation there is on the base mountain looks relatively scant, but this is probably a distance illusion. Above the new lava plateau and hill there is evidence of a monstrous landslide, a great whitish coloured scar on the mountain's face, behind the village.

A few more albatrosses than usual were flying around, as well as a dark petrel known as a "stinker". None of the "kingbirds" I remember are in evidence, and of course no whales.

We were allocated to helicopter flight number seven of nine. The machine in use takes about five passengers at a time and so there was a fair wait to be enjoyed. All the more so as there was a great deal of dithering about before even the first exploratory flight took place, to test everything and deposit two of the crew on the island to assist passengers disembarking from the helicopter there.

We went down early for breakfast and had a plate of cereal, then later a piece of toast. We had packed all our cases, and as directed took them up to the deck and left them with everyone else's to be enclosed in a great rope net and lifted by the crane on to a fairly crude seeming pontoon. It appeared from the island's little harbour, an uncompromising square on floats, powered by two outboard motors.

Having been briefed we were packed into the helicopter for what is a very short flight, a mere minute or two, and deposited not far from the Rectory in a field where crowds of folk waited to greet their loved ones and friends, let alone us. We were met by Eddie, an exact contemporary of mine and Churchwarden. We must have been

in the same class at school. He introduced us to Sean, the English, very welcoming Administrator of the Island and his wife Marina. We then headed for the Rectory where three of our five bags were already deposited. We strolled down to the harbour with Eddie to find the other two. They were already in a ute and so we followed the vehicle up to the house, helped unload them and carried them in.

The Rectory is not quite as smart as the photos seen on line had suggested, but it promises to be a congenial home for us while on the island and it has been kindly cleaned for us. There was a loaf of homemade bread, several cakes, one large egg and three small ones and a bowl of crayfish mayonnaise, delicious I later discovered. Sometime afterward, when we were out, a shepherd's pie was dropped off as well. We settled in only slightly before heading out, first to the supermarket which reminded us of some of those we encountered in Zimbabwe a couple of years ago, rather limited in variety, but with more than enough to provide us with some sort of reasonable tucker while here.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (5)

13th September 2012

After a first visit to the small and only supermarket on the island, we made a preliminary reconnaissance of the village. First impressions were slightly disappointing. The new method of building the walls of the low cottages is to put up wooden shutters and fill them with reinforced concrete. Such walls are rather less attractive than the traditional, axe-shaped blocks of soft, volcanic rock that formed the gables ends of houses in days gone by. However most of the new houses are brightly painted and so look pretty in a different way. The island's single village, called *Edinburgh of the Seven Seas*, has the feel of a Scottish crofters' village. The flax-thatched roofs have all given way to brightly painted corrugated iron, but the houses are low and nestle comfortably into New Zealand flax wind breaks. In my youth there

were no trees at all, it being too windy for most varieties. There are now quite a few New Zealand pohutukawa trees around the village which, because they spread with great ease, threaten to displace endemic trees and shrubs on the mountain. Zealous, purist botanists urge their eradication.

Stone walls are more a feature of the village than sixty years ago. The common land around the village is now largely paddocked with them, and most gardens are walled as well. The 1961 volcano has made available an unlimited number of small, jagged black rocks that prove ideal for dry stone walling.

Each house appears to be minded by a black and white collie-like dog, for the most part they appear silent and wary. We had been warned by someone on the ship to be careful of them and so were. The pleasing call of cockerels brought back memories of Africa as well as the Tristan of old.

A map of the village had been left for us in the rectory. It has every house numbered and all occupiers listed, 270 in all. Very useful. As we wandered around we were able to identify Lar's place and Eddie's.

We found the church and looked it over. It is much changed. Affixed to the east end is a good sized vestry, constructed of unpainted concrete, adding to the building's facilities both running water and a toilet, a welcome addition. The whole church has been widened and so there are no longer attractive pillars and it is less cosy and intimate than I remember. We said mattins in it this morning at eight o'clock. As we did so, by the window looking out over flax to the sea, we felt very much at home, and blessed to be here. Neum vocal chords setting moist South Atlantic molecules of air vibrating with the sweet cadences of Anglicanism once more. The psalms for the day, 96 and 97, were particularly appropriate: *Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad: let the sea roar and all that fills it..... The Lord is kin let the earth rejoice; let the*

multitude of the islands be glad. Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him: and burns up his enemies on every side. His lightnings light the world: the earth sees it and quakes. The mountains melt like wax before his face:.....

The oak altar rails that I helped to sand as my father made them all those years ago are no longer there. Of necessity they were replaced with the widening of the church. A portion of them remains as a handrail outside the church gate, weathering into decay they were fingered lovingly by me as I walked in.

In our village wanderings we met Simon, a fellow passenger on the ship. He asked us round to his father's place for lunch, so we went, although it must have been a bit of a surprise for his mother. We later discovered that Jim and Sue Kerr his parents, are two of only three expatriates who come to church with any regularity. They gave no hint of this as we talked and ate with them. To my delight there was crayfish galore in a variety of forms and very good indeed. Jim had spent eight years as school principal years before, when Simon was a little boy. He and Sue returned a year or so ago for their present stint, not as principal, for that post is now held by an Islander, but rather as an "Adviser".

We were told that the little school has thirty five children and is made of up composite classes, with a teacher for each class and one spare. The teachers are competent and dedicated locals, though largely untrained. Some of the classes have only two or three pupils, few if any over five. There used to be an arrangement to send a couple of bright children to Denstone College, an English private school which had once sent an expedition to Inaccessible Island and so developed a relationship with the island. For a variety of reasons the sending of pupils no longer occurs. Instead a few pupils were sent to the Prince Andrew School on St Helena, but because of transport difficulties now that the RMS St Helena no longer visits Tristan regularly, this arrangement too has fallen

through. Jim Kerr has managed recently to organize for a few bright kids to attend a little school in Cape Town.

After lunch, because we had been warned that the weather was to break and that today and Friday were likely to be wet, we set off on a walk to the west of the island's settlement plateau. The road is now paved, after a fashion, with a sort of smooth tar, forming a pleasant narrow little lane. The island is riven by deep gulches, the first of them on the way west being Hottentot Gulch, no longer the formidable obstacle that I remember it to have been. There is a little bus stop there, to pick up folk heading out to the Potato Patches.

We walked as far as the Hill Piece, a green hill slowly and spectacularly being eroded into the sea, hence only a piece of a hill. We decided not to climb it, but instead made our way up one of its little foot hills to get a lovely view of the potato patches, the sea and Inaccessible island. Very beautiful.

The base mountain, past Hill Piece appears rather less scarred and rough looking and also greener, though the grass is rather less than vivid as it reaches up to the cliffs. There are sheep all the way up these slopes and there is a fence at the foot to keep them there. It is difficult in photographs to catch the immensity and closeness of this great 2000 foot base mountain that hides the peak from view. It is omnipresent and dominating. I do love it. The great watercourses and gulches are spectacular, some of them in great steps, which after heavy rain must be spectacular waterfalls, though only briefly, for the journey from the island peak to the coast is short and sharp.

We sat on the hill overlooking the west of the plateau for a while, the turf being very soft with a fair proportion of moss enabling me to walk bare-footed. The cattle are obviously much better managed than in my day, appearing nowhere near as emaciated. There were several pens for ducks along a "watron" on the way and the wind had all but died down on our trip back.

On the way out we passed one vehicle, the Kerrs returning from a look at the potato patches, and on the way back we met the relief doctor going for a walk, a very friendly fellow, who said he'd been brought out by a Royal Navy frigate (as was I sixty years ago,) but his frigate made the journey in less than three days, what remarkable, fast vessels they are these days with no portholes and so electronically sophisticated.

On our return we called on Lars and had a cup of tea with him and Trina, welcoming and lovely people. He will come to the Rectory early tomorrow to discuss Sunday's service. I looked at the registers earlier and saw that they had between forty and sixty on most Sundays. He and his fellow Reader appear to do a good job and the service seems straightforward.

After an exceedingly good night's sleep, we were in bed by about half past eight, we went up to the church to say mattins and had a bit of a look around. How the wind whistles about our sheltered house. The view from the office where I sit typing this is lovely, straight out to a tempestuous sea. Geoffroy the Frenchman who is in the process of handing over his seismic and atmosphere monitoring job to a compatriot, called in to see if we had any stuff off the ship that they are missing and which is vital to the three week's work that a Swedish expert is doing to their equipment. We suspect it is still on the ship which is now on its way to Gough island.

What an odd place this island is. Not poverty stricken or down at heel in any sense, yet also a little make-shift, make-do. Heath-Robinson has to be called upon frequently to do his best, given the time required and expense called for to bring in parts to repair things. So isolated too, in spite of wonderful communication facilities. The changes since my youth are huge and yet the sense of having been here and a part of it is very strong. The old "station" (the expatriates' compound), at the bottom of which was the Rectory, is long gone, but the Rectory is in the same place and

behind it is a narrow and lovely lane meandering beside heavy flax where I smoked my first cigarette with my brother, Lucky Strikes and where we made a slide down the flax at one end.

The gully in front of the Rectory and over which I look as I write, although interfered with to its detriment by a new road and stone walls, is still the same shape and the steep little bit of garden behind the rectory which I remember as darker and danker, and where our pet penguin moulted, still resonates.

Heating and cooking in the houses here seems to be all cylinder gas. Electricity from the island's diesel generators sees to everything else. We headed out to get some marmalade to have with our toast and bought a few other things as well. We got some aged and seriously deteriorating little onions for nothing, and have bought the only pulses we can find here, split peas, as well as some curry powder. The rain teemed down on the way back and our over-trousers are likely to be very useful if such wind driven rain persists. The mountain, so close to us out of the back windows, is obscured completely by cloud, nor is there any horizon as I look out of the front window, the sea merges into grey sky a few hundred yards distant. We are both very well clothed and so although there is a gas cylindered heater in the lounge, we probably won't use it.

Friday 14 September, 2012 2.12pm

It begins to look as though the sky is lifting and that we are in for some better weather. We went up to mattins this morning well toggged up with beanies under our hoods, it being still cold, grey and wet. When I awoke during the night there was the sound of rain on the roof. We called on both Eddie and Carlene. Carlene is a bright spark and her lovely and friendly husband appears to be the son of a near contemporary of mine, James, who became a minor celebrity as a boy when he fell over the cliff and was severely injured. It is wonderful to see that he is still alive sixty years later. I must go to see him. His son was just off to take a meal to him. We had a soft drink with Eddie and his wife who was busy knitting. She came out

with a good proverbial expression when he offered only half-heartedly to get a drink for us, leaving her to provide it in the end: “He only offered with one hand” she said.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (6)

Saturday 15 September, 2012 9.00am

We are back from Mattins. The day dawned sunny and still, but has turned grey again, though the sea viewed from the window remains tranquil. The mountain, completely clear of cloud loomed as large as ever as we walked up to St Mary’s Church. It is probably still clear. Looking out of the kitchen window at the back of the Rectory reminds me of looking out above the flax as a youngster to see if the top of the mountain was visible.

This morning I awoke early and had some darker and more negative thoughts about the island. Possibly the result of our walk yesterday, in less than good weather, up the 1961 volcano mound and then beyond that to the partly bulldozed mess of clinker, ash-dust and jagged black rocks that is the island rubbish dump. The area is littered with wrecked cars, great tanks and rusting metal of all sorts including moulds for the concrete dolosses that protect the harbour from a very wild sea. Dolosses, Margaret always maintained, I am sure rightly, are a South African invention. They look like gigantic concrete versions of the small, metal, three dimensional crosses that used in the game of Jacks.

Rubbish dumps rarely elevate the spirits. My dark thoughts meandered here and there, feeling their way to a possible article waiting to be written. They went something like this:

The Tristan da Cunha of my boyhood, before the 1961 volcanic eruption, my Garden of Eden, was prelapsarian. Literally, if one posits the volcanic eruption as the “Fall”. The clinker is so black, black, black.

The islanders, exiled from Eden, were driven out like Adam and Eve, into the real world of weeds, materialism and struggle in England. They longed to return to Eden. Lorna told us of Pam's father saying that in England "*I can no longer hear the voice of God*". Well God did indeed walk in the Garden did he not? He spoke there to Adam and Eve.

But the Islanders' Eden was no more, the Fall had occurred on the Island itself, symbolised by that great, black, black scar of dried lava and clinker. As a way of expressing their contempt and hatred of this they, as it were, shat on it, made it their dump.

However the evil of the Fall spreads its tentacles out into the community, symbolised by the black volcanic rock walls now everywhere (not unpleasing, but very much a reminder of change). Worst of all, from my prelapsarian perspective, is that the eruption in destroying the factory and boat beaches, forced the commercial centre of the island to be shifted west. So my Garden Gate Beach, (significant name in this context), where I learned to swim in crystal clear water pools, where klip fish, baby crayfish and small octopus abounded, was blasted and ruined into a small harbour and around it are now gathered the iron sheds, rusting detritus and oil patches that are so characteristic of the commerce, industry and profit that characterise the world outside of Eden!

As I type these darker thoughts in the little Rectory office, I look out to a wonderful sea and clear horizon, but no longer down a pristine gully with a few naturally scattered rocks and roaming donkeys. Rather the view now is over a narrow rock wall lined road, two further rock walls, and an ugly shed. There is the top of a machine of some sort peeping above the cliff and a heap of tattered plastic sacks filled with goodness knows what. They are distant, not too ruinous of the natural beauty, but unpleasing. And to the west of the house lies all the administration buildings, the supermarket and workshops, rather than the little lane up the "station" past modest houses and on to untrammelled turf as was the case in my

prelapsarian youth.

The mountain on this side of the island is also scarred and scree more than it used to be. The waterfall over the cliff to Little Beach, where you could wash the salt off your body after a swim, is no more.

The people who came back from exile in England brought with them a different view of the world, so much so that about thirty returned from their returning back to England. All very interesting.

Some time later Harold Green, one of the wisest and most congenial of fellows on the Island, gave me a much less negative symbolic account of the 1961 eruption, to which I will return when I tell of our visit to him and his wife Amy.

We popped in early yesterday morning to see Carline in the Mechanical and Engineering department, of which she is the head. As delightful as ever she printed off my Sunday sermon for me, plus the gospel, notices and collect. I have had to acquaint myself with the South African Prayer Book, a different one from that used when I was at Theological College in Grahamstown in the early nineteen seventies.

I noticed a little piece of verse on her desk, with a slightly risqué title. I took it and read it out to Diana in front of Carline. She was a bit alarmed that her visiting priest should have seen such a piece on her desk. It was an amusing little ditty however and we had a good laugh over it.

From there we went to the Internet Café, with its ironic notice forbidding eating and drinking. We managed to get an email off to members of the family. I would love to get the code for wi-fi here and so connect my own little travelling laptop to the Web direct, enabling Drop Box to do its good work and save all I type in the

“cloud”, but I doubt that this will be possible. We then went to the Supermarket to stock up on a few more food items. Eddie brought us in some potatoes and a small joint of what we took to be lamb, very kind. It is difficult to know what to buy when gifts pop in unannounced so regularly.

Before we left the house Lars, as Sunday’s Lay-reader, came down in his car, it being rainy and windy, and we went through Sunday’s service. We will keep things as close to normal as possible. He will take pretty well all the first part of the service, with both of us positioned at the prayer desks. I will do just the greeting, the absolution and the sermon, he everything else, including the intercessions. I then take over with the Offertory right through to the end. Very easy and what a delightful and accommodating fellow Lars is.

In the afternoon we headed out for a walk over the wet paddocks to the east of the Rectory. Kikuyu grass, introduced by an agriculturalist some years ago, is now as much a curse as a blessing. An aggressive grower it fills the walls and gardens, insinuating itself everywhere. The rainfall is high and there are no frosts, it loves Tristan.

We looked over the three small graveyards, as always most interesting in their melancholic way. I took a photo of Basil Lavarello’s grave with Pam’s headstone a part of it, presumably containing her ashes, to show to Sue my sister. Pam was her bosom friend when they were little girls together on the Island in the fifties.

The kikuyu paddocks were spongy and lush as we walked past two docile bulls. We wondered how natural some of the ups and downs and gullies are. Along the western edge of the great lava plateau there runs a rivulet, the redirected “big watron” doubtless. It ends in a fair sized pool, barred from the sea by a natural dam of large beach stones. I wondered why this pool had not been dredged and opened to the ocean to make a safer little harbour than that

which actually was built. Surely this would be far less likely to be washed away by a wild sea.

We passed a memorial to fifty souls lost in the shipwreck of the “HMS Julia” in 1806. There are some fairly well developed pine trees on the sides of the steep bank down to the stream, perhaps relics of single and only tree on the plateau in the fifties, way out west, blown over in a violent storm and no more. As cub scouts we used to walk out to camp beneath it. Little hen coops are dotted in sheltered hollows of the paddocks.

We then walked up over the clinker plateau and noticing a track marked by white arrows to the apparent summit, we made our way up its unforgiving rocks and dust, going carefully. It yielded splendid views of the village and we made it to the top with relative ease. On coming down we pressed on further, past the dump, littered nastily with ubiquitous plastic and other horrors over a large area. It is presumably bulldozed under clinker and dust regularly, but it remains nasty. I wanted to press on even further, but cold rain and wind began, so we made our way back to a dinner of potato cakes and baked beans, the former containing chopped and fried onions.

The day before yesterday the Roman priest called in. A fairly lonely fellow I would surmise and so , “teeming with a lot of news about the square and the hypotenuse....” He is an “Apostolic Prefect” which means he wears a mitre on occasions and can perform Confirmations and such and even has a crosier, but does not possess episcopal orders. He told us at some length about the heroic Catholicism of the devout woman who brought religious division to the island in the form of the Roman Catholic faith and although I restrained myself I did suggest how idiotic and scandalous it is that there should be two religious communities and priests on the island. When I mentioned the shortage of RC priests throughout the western world, meaning that it would be unlikely that there could ever be a permanent RC priest on the island, he

disagreed that there is a shortage at all (talking of the thousand upon thousand present in Rome at the culmination of “the year of the priest”, and citing percentage as the necessary criterion for priestly ministry rather than numbers). Oh dear, oh dear. He is a good man and priest though, I am sure of that and we moved on to an interesting conversation about philosophy in which he is interested and pursuing further study.

The two denominations do at least get on very well together and we have been invited by a family that was on the ship with us to the reception into the RC Church of their little boy, recovered from an operation in Cape Town.

A.N. Wilson’s book *The Elizabethans* is fascinating, especially on the Anglican church. He quotes an amazing sonnet on the Church by Donne in full, but with a prose translation by Helen Gardiner which is a huge help in understanding it. I should send it to my newly Roman Catholic friend Tony. Wilson says of Elizabeth’s response to her Catholic sister on being questioned about her beliefs on the Eucharist, “.....the theologically impeccable, but brilliantly ambivalent quatrain of her own composition:

*Christ was the Word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it,
And what His words did make it,
That I believe and take it.*

...Only the word ‘*did*’ is dubious from a catholic viewpoint, since it implies a questioning of the sacerdotal power to summon Christ to the altar with each and every offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice.”

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (7)

Sunday 16 September, 2012 11.30am

A cold and windy day with occasional showers. I awoke at

about 5.30 to hear a shower on the tin roof and realised that yesterday was an aberration not a new norm. It had been a lovely and largely sunny day with only a light breeze, though cool to cold along the beach. In the late morning we went down to the harbour and headed west, past the stinking fishing boats, where drying out pieces of dead octopus attracted flies and so down on to the beach. I was hoping to find the cave we used to visit as children, but didn't. I learned later that it is on the east side of the harbour, on the beach that has been ruined by heavy traffic and industry.

We walked along the very pebbly beach under the cliffs, big pebbles too, difficult to walk on. It was good to be beside real sea though and with only a gentle if cold wind blowing. We came across the two French lads with Frank Repetto and his brother who was fishing. He already had a couple of rather small "five fingers" in a bucket. As we chatted to them Simon and his family came along looking for a penguin someone had seen earlier. They discovered it too, just sitting on the beach, possibly ill. It allowed Jim, Simon's father, to pick it up. Having photographed it the two of us pressed on as far as you could comfortably walk, almost up to the Hill Piece, where the water came right up to the cliffs.

We headed back by way of Hottentot Gulch, having first thrown a lump of pumice into the sea to see it float. The beach, sadly, is littered somewhat with debris from the sea: plastic bits and pieces being the most unpleasant. There is a lot of fishing flotsam such as rope and buoys that detract from what one hoped to be pristine ocean and beach. It could do with an occasional clear up.

In the morning we attempted to visit the Administrator whose house is next door to the Rectory. The door was open but we couldn't rouse anyone. Later, when at last in our back garden, it being fine and so good for hanging out washing, we heard voices through the flax and found both Administrator and wife in their vegetable garden. Diana had a bit of a chat to them, largely to do with gardening. We then unravelled a piece of old nylon fishing

rope to make a line to hang washing under the eave of the back of the house.

Later in the afternoon we did a little visiting, returning bowls in which gifts of food had been given to us. We visited Agnes behind the church, but there was no one there and so we left the bowl with a note. She was the one who gave us the crayfish. We then visited Peggy and Brian Rogers who had given us a shepherd's pie and had a really good chat with them. She is an exact contemporary of mine and was in the same class at school. On the way we encountered Julian Swain, the best of fellows, who had been on the boat with us. He told us that an old girl called Rose Glass had informed him that she used to babysit us when we were on the island. I have no memory of this at all, but we must go and see her. Peggy had been with Pam and my sister Sue as girls on a trip to Nightingale in the old canvas long boats. Peggy is a very bright spark indeed, and remembered my brother Peter as the one who liked to fight and was naughty. She filled us in on a variety of people and names and her husband Brian showed us two of the model longboats he makes for tourists. Rather lovely, they don't take him all that long to make. We had a good laugh over a drink and she gave us a great nog of frozen fish - goodness knows what, but probably blue fish - and three uncooked crawfish tails. Earlier in the day Linda Potgieter had brought us round two whole but cooked crawfish, also frozen so they are now in the freezer.

In the evening we were cold and so tried to light the gas heater but couldn't get it going, the kindly Linda informed us that she was well used to such heaters, but even she could not get it going and decided that there was something wrong with it. Later her husband Kobus, who is a sort of CEO under the Administrator, came round with a similar heater from his place next door and put our gas cylinder in it. It worked and we were soon warm. He said he would tell Carleen to sort out our own heater on Monday.

We had a light breakfast of toast and a hot drink before

heading off to church for our first Sunday Eucharist. We enjoyed observing the little calf born to one of Lars' cows in the paddock in front of the Rectory.

The church was already open with a line of people in the very last row, their backs to the wall and one or two others scattered about the pews. Today, for the first time since being away, I donned a clerical shirt and took sandals to wear with black socks for the sanctuary.

A very bright young girl called Jade was already robed and waiting in the vestry as the day's server. She was only too eager to assist in any way. The service went easily and smoothly, Lars is a confident lay reader, and the lessons read by Beverley and then by him were well done. The hymns were very pretty, from some modern collection or other, but they were sung robustly and seemed justified in such a setting, though my parents would have been turning in their graves. No choir any more!

Although there were hardly any kids present I did a little kids talk, which I think everyone enjoyed. My laryngical voice aroused a little comment afterwards, but not the content of either the talk or the sermon. However, I divined that they were well pleased. About sixty folk were present and we finished at about five past nine, in time for those who wished to do so to join the RC's for the big reception ceremony of a youngster who had been baptized in extremis earlier.

We found our way into the back of the R C church and I sat next to the Administrator. Several expatriates were present including Bob the dental technician and Katarina, a botanist of some sort. Anyone who wished for a blessing was invited forward, but none of us stirred. The little church was comfortably full, about forty of us I would say. The priest was in a purple zucchetto, taken off for the Consecration Prayer and mounted by a mitre for the Blessing. The priest I thought strangely hesitant and fumbling and

he elevated the host once with one hand as the other held down the page. Unfortunately we were too late for the homily. There were apparently fourteen godparents.

Afterwards we had a quick chat in the cold to the Administrator and to Brian and Francoise Robertson, he being the psychiatrist who came with us on the boat. We invited them in to a cup of coffee and had a most interesting conversation with Brian, all about psychiatry, me asking questions and probing which he seemed to enjoy. The nature of imagination for instance and whether there is a difference, as of course there must be when you think about it, between a normal, laudable and vital imagination and the imaginary world of the schizophrenic, but how different and in what way? Then we got on to empathy and autism, empathy itself being a form of imaginativeness. We also touched on just how psychiatrists train and whether they have any deep knowledge of psychology. According to Brian too little in most cases, and so psychiatrists have a tendency, due to dealing always with abnormality, to be ignorant of psychology in “normal” people. We touched too on St Helena where Brian has worked and on suicide, and the inevitability of losing patients to suicide as a psychiatrist, how to cope and much more. Altogether I warmed to him as a wise old bird, human and not at all bonkers himself.

Half an hour after their departure we headed up to the Prince Phillip Hall for the big “baptism” bash. Pretty well the whole island was present. We were deliberately about twenty five minutes late, so it was a bit daunting to walk in on a great crowd of people who are not much given to effusion. There were lots of ex-pat people to relate to first of all however and so we duly did that. We were able soon to make sure we fraternised more widely. I had three light beers and some very good tucker, of which there was a constantly replaced abundance, the most notable being a variety of crawfish pastries and home made potato crisps.

Before sitting down on a bench with some of the older island

women I had a good chat with Kobus, who is a Buddhist. When I asked him what had turned him that way he said he had been working in the war-ravaged hell hole that was Sierra Leone and it was largely in response to that. I asked him how Buddhism answered the problem of that sort of evil and his answer didn't fully explain it to me, possibly because of the noise in a hall full of merrymakers. It has something to do with the necessity of being able to find inner peace. He also said that in Buddhism he found an absence of politicking. He is obviously a thoughtful and interesting person and we will engage in Island questions over dinner on Wednesday, because he and Linda have asked us round.

My talks with a succession of older ladies were good fun and involved for the most part reminiscing and repeating myself about what used to be. We had plenty of good laughs and I think it was a useful exercise. I should perhaps have gone outside to join the majority of the younger men. However a good time was had by all and we left at about ten to two.

We fell asleep in the sitting room until about four and then went out for a walk. It was sunny but windy from the west. We decided to visit the ruined Garden Gate beach. It is now little more than an industrial dump and wasteland. The sand has all been bulldozed away, there is an old and large rusting iron pontoon frame dumped there, the boulders below the cliff are infested with kikuyu grass and the beach is now great pebbles with no sand left at all. Three ancient and derelict boats are beached high and dry further along, two of them not dissimilar to the life boats on the Agulhas. I tried to determine the contours and whereabouts of Little Beach which no longer exists as we walked up to the little lagoon gathered behind the great dam of beach stones, but found it very hard to do so. The great lava flow it seems has swallowed up both Big Beach and Little Beach. I need to look at some of our old photos to see if things aren't made clearer.

RETURN TO

TRISTAN DA CUNHA (8)

Sunday 16 September, 2012 *continued...*

Walking on the big stones that compose the remnant of what used to be black sanded “Little Beach” is difficult, keeping your balance a trial. We made it to the lava flow and began to climb up its sterile and rough surface. Then we noticed an approaching squall and decided to turn back. On the way down Diana put her hand on a piece of jagged clinker to steady herself and it gave way. She gently fell over, rolling on to her back, the only harm being a nastily scraped hand. We fixed it up temporarily with micropore from her pocket and made our way home by way of the harbour. There I discovered the remnant of the cave I was looking forward to rediscovering. In my memory it was a clean and pleasing cave with a sandy floor, but now it is all but in the harbour, has rough sheds in front of it, no sand and is dank, shaded and uninviting.

17 September, 2012 Monday

Using the South African Prayer Book for Mattins has introduced me to an excellent, very brief but comprehensive prayer of general intercession. I shall use it sometimes at the weekly Eucharists once I get back to Australia: *Lord God we ask you to give us your blessing, to your Church, holiness; to the world, peace; to this nation, justice; and to all people knowledge of your law. Keep safe our families, protect the weak, heal the sick, comfort the dying and bring us all to a joyful resurrection. We ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

In spite of falling asleep for a good hour yesterday afternoon, we slept well and long last night as well, getting up only at about seven and making it to 8.00am Mattins in the church only just in time. Much as I love the Lady Chapel in St Augustine’s, tucked so beautifully and completely away from the outside world, a glittering, warm-brick cavern, it is pleasant to say Morning Prayer with a window beside you looking out over low cottages and flax to the South Atlantic.

Our breakfast as always was a piece of toast and a cup of coffee. I then made my way to the internet café where I tried to connect my own computer to the internet with the cable I obtained on the ship. It would have none of it. So I used the public machines to drop a note to the Bishop, a letter to the family and reply to letters from John Southerden and Heather Camm.

It is a grey day and fairly cold but as yet with no rain. We will take a walk later to “Pig Bite” the easternmost part of the settlement plateau. We have made the day’s most important decision of all though, what to have for dinner tonight. It will be a meal enjoyed as a lad on the island fifty five years ago: toad in the hole, if we can obtain some Vienna sausages from the supermarket.

Tuesday 18 September, 2012 8.42am

Another good night’s sleep. The toad in the hole, after some difficulty in working out how to light the gas oven, proved to be highly successful, eaten with half a large gem squash, tinned peas and fresh but ancient and mildly scabrous carrots. We also watched an episode of Downton Abbey, the first I have ever seen and absorbing. Tinned pineapple, cake and yoghurt afterwards. We intended going for a walk yesterday, but didn’t get round to it, the weather was indifferent to say the least, though no actual rain. When I took my early morning and invariable glance up at the mountain from the bathroom window it was clear, just.

We did a bit of visiting yesterday, first to Lars and Trina to deliver two little parcels, one from my sister Sue and one from Lorna in England. We then went to visit Rose who we had been told had sometimes child-minded me and my brother and sister when we were little, but we found in fact she had not. She had child-minded the daughter of the Administraor of the island at that time Phil Scott. Rose is a widow of some years standing, her husband had been policeman for many years. She is a lovely person and was delighted to see us.

We then visited Harold and Amy Green. He an old fellow in his late seventies or early eighties, acute of mind and witty. He informed us that his parents had been particularly close friends of my parents, as indeed was the case because their names were Johnny and Sophie Green whom I well remember. He told us of what a pleasure it was these days to hear the fishing gong go and be able to turn over in bed and pull up the duvet. He also had an interesting interpretation of the 1961 volcano as a providential event. The lava had flowed without damaging the village, curving round it rather than annihilating it, like a protective elbow sent by God. He also maintained, I am sure correctly, that in opening the island to the world it had taught the islanders not to defer obsequiously to expatriates, but rather to treat them as equals, a very good thing. Johnny Green, his father, died in exile in England, of a broken heart he said.

Harold and Amy were taken back again to England after their return to the Island from post volcanic exile. They were persuaded by a vicar who wanted a trip back because his wife needed to return for health reasons. He persuaded twenty islanders to go with him, informing them that he had accommodation available for them, when in fact he hadn't. If he had sufficient numbers desirous of leaving, it legitimised the diverting of a ship to take them. I would like to quiz him further on this and find out which parson it was. He told us how good a job Lars and the lay readers were doing, but expressed sadness that no priest can be found for the Island. He reckons the English based U.S.P.G., the Missionary Society that sent my father to Tristan would be better at finding one than Cape Town Diocese, of which the island is a part. He could well be right.

We visited the Tourist Centre in the morning and bought two T-shirts for Susan and Meg and a little knitted penguin for Hetty. Eric from the fisheries rang up to offer us half a dozen eggs, and I gratefully accepted the offer. He will bring them round later. I asked Harold about the daisies I remember as being everywhere in the fifties, suspecting that the rampant Kikuyu grass has done away

with them. He maintained that they are still around during summer. I find the island accent very musical, far more pleasing to the ear than the South African.

Wednesday 19 September, 2012 6.10am

I awoke early and to spare myself those morbid early morning mental rambles I decided for the first time since being here to get up and on with things. It is dark, of course, but a creaking roof and souging flax indicates a windy day to come. On opening the top half of the house's back door, I detected moisture on the wind, not enough to be heard on the roof but the ground is soggy. Good Tristan winter weather once more.

Yesterday we rushed out in the wet to see the MV Edinburgh come in. There was no horizon, the misty sea blurred into the sky and the Edinburgh is white. We only noticed it because we had heard on the way back from Mattins that it was due to arrive. From the study desk Diana noticed the faint ghostly shape of a white ship of which we took an ineffective photo or two. We later noticed a small shape coming away from it and heading for shore. We dashed out to see this small boat land in inclement weather, as the M.V. Edinburgh steamed off east. The harbour offers only limited protection from wild weather but we were too late to witness the boat's entrance, though we did see it craned on to the wharf. No boat could be left afloat in the harbour, the entrance to the wild sea is too close, big waves coming in would play havoc with anything afloat. I had not put on my over-trousers and so I was very wet from wind-driven rain when we returned. I later put them into the dryer, discovering that it works and effectively too.

In the afternoon Diana went to a Mothers' Union meeting: *"there was a little service with robust singing in church and then we all headed off to Margaret's house in the wind and rain, our hoods up, forming a crocodile along the tracks between the low houses like the seven dwarves off to work. We did justice to the variety of tasty homemade goodies passed round a cosy sitting*

room to enjoy with a cup of tea. I was the only one without knitting secreted in my bag, but learned much from these expert crafts women as I quizzed everyone about their garments and memories of the Neaums.

The only two TV programs available are from the British Forces Channel. They offer both good and bad, but blessedly no adverts. We watched a program called “Unzipped”, blatantly crude and unsubtle. It revealed the huge gap between hedonistic young folk and the likes of me and Church folk generally.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (9)

Thursday 21 September, 2012 2.45pm

We have been lying on a mattress outside in the front garden of the Rectory, under the wall and hydrangeas, out of sight from the road. It is the first relatively still day we have had since the day we arrived. At about six, or half past, this morning I heard the gong ringing insistently, signalling a fishing day, again the first since the day we arrived. There appear to be nine fishing boats, each with a crew of two. However, each of the nine boats has two crews and so each crew fishes alternately. We hope to go down and watch them come in and unload their catch and then go up to the factory to see the initial processing.

The day has clouded over rather, but is still fairly still. Yesterday was sunny, sunnier than today, but with a bitter and strong wind, so we decided not to go to Pigbite as I had proposed, but to do other things. The Wednesday morning Eucharist was fine with Lars present and Diana, a total of six. Afterwards Lars and I went off to take home communions to the eastern side of the village, four visits in all. The first was too a young woman expecting a baby and due to go back with us on the Agulhas for expert observation and care in Cape Town. There are a few worries about how things are developing. A friendly and grateful person in a spick and span

house. The next was to an old lady whose “laigs” don’t allow her to make it to church anymore. In a small, dark, Spartan but pleasingly simple house, attached to a son or daughter’s, she again was most grateful for our visit, though not hugely communicative. The third was to Helen, outside of whose house was a man weeding the flower bed. He turned out to be the delightful Frank, visiting Helen his mother all the way from Southampton and who had been with us on the Agulhas. A second son inside turned out to be Henry or “Linger”. He was the one I remember my brother Peter having a fierce fight with all those years ago, rolling around on the grass, pummelling each other. The cause of the scrap is long lost to memory and the fight, as with most fights looked back upon with hindsight, doubtless unutterably futile. I took his photo and his mother’s. The last Communicant was Ivy she and her husband Andrew were again welcoming and grateful in their simple and traditional cottage home, aged but bearing it stoically. Andrew looks after Ivy lovingly and assiduously. We have said hullo to him at his gate before now, on the way up past the school to the church. We offered the sacrament to Andrew as well as to Ivy, but he demurred because he can still get to church.

While on our rounds we met Harold who told us that he had been to the Rectory and left us there a joint of lamb and some potatoes. A top fellow indeed.

In the early afternoon we walked out into a bitter wind of easily forty and possibly fifty kilometres an hour. We made our way through Hottentot Gulch and down well cropped grass to the beach and then along it, watching awhile some Tristan terns soaring on the wind, crisply beautiful birds, sea swallows, known on the Island as king birds. There were some mighty waves crashing to shore, more especially spectacular when we came to the harbour and sat for a while to watch them roar in. One rogue wave came up behind, wetting us with its spray right over a high wall.

Later we went visiting. First to Robin and his vivacious wife

Dawn who works in the Tourist Centre where earlier we had a hot dog lunch and socialised with fellow visitors to the island, a very good hot dog too. Robin is on the Church Council and is soon to be put in charge of all the electrical work on the island, which will include renovating the whole distribution system. He came in some time after we called, while we were being entertained by Dawn, Eugene and Joy, Robin being Joy's child, and a very bright and friendly young man. He and Dawn are the parents of one of the Sunday altar servers, Jade.

Eugene and Joy are an interesting couple. They live in the Cape and had been fellow passengers on the Agulhas with us. Eugene is not a Tristanite, but a South African. He began his professional life as a young fisherman in the Cape. He is a great raconteur, full of amazing stories of his life. He used to be captain of the MV Edinburgh and Joy lived on board with him for ten years. He has splendidly profuse eyebrows.

We talked with Robin and Dawn about electricity on the island. Which is subsidized and would need to be given the cost of importing the fuel. There are four generators that run on diesel, though not all at the same time. Sewage on the island is dealt with by way of septic tanks, but not individual ones per house. The big concrete structures we had observed in the meadows beyond the cemeteries were such, there are four of them. A windmill for generating electricity was tried here, but according to Robin the wind here veers in complicated ways and the project was not researched enough. The windmill was blown down in the first twenty four hours!

The Chief Islander is elected, having to be nominated first and the present Chief is the brother of Nigel, another passenger with us on the ship. Their mother is Agnes, whom we were scheduled to visit next. At present the Chief is off the Island on the Gough trip. It is not a salaried position, though there is some sort of slight remuneration for entertainment purposes. It does seem as though the

islanders these days do feel that they run the show. The Administrator being more advisory than anything else. He is a member of the Island Council, and I think chairs it.

The popularity of the Chief depends to a great extent, as you would expect, on the decisions he makes with the Council. Not long ago they put in an income tax which needless to say is less than popular with some. Apparently the Fishing Company is beginning to be able to export a proportion of the heads of the highly exportable crayfish tails to the Far East which is interesting. Eugene, who has been a fisherman all his life informed me that the crayfish in South Africa which he fished for many years as a young man are different from those on Tristan, the latter more spiny and harder on the hands.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (10)

Our next visit was to Agnes and Gilbert. Agnes is on the Parish Council, and it was she who left us the delicious crayfish dish that was there to greet us on our arrival. She is a character and with her husband Gilbert as interesting and idiosyncratic as some of the best characters in Dickens. We sat in their kitchen sharing a cup of tea with them, the scene and its setting one that Dickens' superb illustrator George Cruikshank would have rendered unforgettable.

When Agnes warmed up she told us a story about their time of exile in England during the volcano eruption. Gilbert is a gardener who apparently assisted my father in our fine vegetable garden when we were here in the fifties. Because of his gardening prowess Gilbert was able to acquire a job in England that happened to be near to the great train robbery which occurred at that time. According to Agnes Ronnie Biggs, the most notorious of the robbers, came to her door one evening looking for accommodation, clutching a suitcase. When she asked how he would pay for his lodgings he opened the case and it was full of wads of notes!

Although not knowing at that point who he was, she realised nonetheless that it was a shady offer and refused him hospitality. He had to go elsewhere. She was too nervous to go out to find a public phone to contact the police, though they interviewed her later. I might well have got some of the details wrong, but it is essentially the story she told me and I am sure is true, possibly the most interesting event in her life.

In the evening we went to a reception at the Administrator's residence to honour those who had arrived on the Aghulhas. Apparently such receptions are the norm on the arrival of a ship and he is splitting the function into two this time. We were the first half of what is termed a "Welcome and farewell". It began to rain a little as we walked up the long path to his residence, so it was good to get into a warm and pleasing home, full of people. There was a great table of booze in the foyer with a bevy of folk pressing it upon guests. Lars and Trina were just ahead of us, as was Eddie. I asked for a red wine and was given a large glass of pinotage full to the very brim. Whenever my glass was anywhere near empty it was filled to the brim again without asking.

It was an enjoyable evening with a good mixture of islanders, visitors and expatriates. I got talking to a selection of those near the door, including Lars and Eddie, but also a fellow called Jeremy or Jerry who, it turns out, is the island shepherd, an important job and an articulate man, obviously something of a leader. The island sheep are cross Dorset and Suffolk and roam the mountain right up to the top of the Base and beyond. We have spotted them in what appear to be the most inaccessible of places. Each islander is allowed only two sheep. Unfortunately much of the conversation has now fled my mind because I am a couple of days away, but we do begin to get a better picture of the Island and how it works.

Many of the island women seemed happy to sit down and quietly watch all that went on without any obvious participation, though of course a raised eyebrow can be as eloquent as a tirade. At one stage I went and settled myself down next to one of them, but

even my charm elicited little response.

The Administrator gave an informal little talk, welcoming us all individually. He and his wife seem ideal for the job, not at all stand-offish, snobbish or reserved. I managed to resist too much wine, but only just and in future will stick to light beer. The food was excellent and I enjoyed a lavish plate of cray fish, possibly I will soon be tired of it.

Friday 21 September, 2012 10.30am

After a rather lovely day yesterday, the cloud today is low on a dark and brooding mountain, and the horizon is blurred rather than sharply defined. There has been a little gentle rain in the night. We awoke late and so made Mattins only at half past eight a peaceful and lovely start to each day for us both. On the way back we popped down to look over the cliff onto the harbour to see how the waves are coming in, for although the wind is almost still here in the village, the waves are choppy. Further out there are white horses on a pewter coloured sea. It is odd that the sea should appear so choppy on a still day, we are doubtless in some sort of lee. We then popped into the supermarket to buy some brown flour and yeast for we are going to try to use the Rectory bread maker. Bread from the supermarket is frozen and very ordinary. There was no dried skimmed milk, which the recipe calls for, so we have used wet milk diminishing the water accordingly. We shall see.

Yesterday we took a trip out to Pigbite. We walked across the meadows, over the Big Watron, which apparently runs in its traditional course and it is only its end that is different since the volcano. The mountain, once you get past the jagged, clinker volcanic cone, is striking for the different colours on the various precipices where there have been fairly recent slips and falls. There are great though usually fairly thin pipes of different coloured rock wending upwards, obviously fissures through which lava pushed years ago. The precipices also reveal different layers of rock and colours indicating, one supposes, successive eruptions and layers of

lava and ash.

We walked across a flat area covered for the most part with the ubiquitous kikuyu grass and then clambered up what would be similar to the Pigbite of old, stony with a heather like, low-growing shrub which might be what used to yield the indigestible but welcome little crowberries I remember collecting as a youngster, but perhaps not. When we got down on the other side there was a great front-end loader with its engine going and a big fellow sitting inside. We had passed two great tippers full of black volcanic sand and it is he who fills them up, the sand a long way back from a shoreline that is lined with large boulders, as is pretty well every beach on the island these days. This little way inland there appears to be great lots of sand available for building purposes. He hopped down and told us to beware of a seal that had been on the beach earlier and which might still be there and all too easily mistaken for a boulder. They can be nasty if you get too close. He also showed us the route taken if you wish to get up to the base from this end of the island, not one I would wish to take from the look of it. A decent and friendly fellow.

We made our way down to the beach and sat and ate an apple. In the distance two of the fishing boats were at work. Big Point, the bluff that marks the end of the settlement plateau, with the beach below it looked inviting to me, I would have loved to scramble over the beach boulders to look around it, but we only went a little way because it was heavy walking and the cliffs above looked so unstable there would be a good chance of being knocked on the head by a rock fall. While sitting we noticed what we thought was something a bit taller than a mere fishing boat, though very close to what we assumed to be one. We realised after a while that in fact the tall thing was the superstructure of a ship on the horizon, the boat bit being its bow. We climbed the stony hill to where a brave pine tree struggles to survive and got a good view of a passing bulk carrier that we learned later was full of soya beans making its way from Brazil to China. A fair number of such ships pass, this longer

southern route being cheaper than using the Panama Canal. They are all being tracked and monitored by the island in the hope of making a case for an exclusion zone, since the disaster of a few years back on Nightingale Island, where human error caused the wrecking of a ship with no loss of life, but the oil-ruination of great lots of penguins. It is interesting to note that the rights of the Islanders to gather a certain number of penguin eggs are being foregone at present, not so much for the sake of penguin numbers as for insurance purposes! If they are still gathered then any claim of financial or even ecological loss of eggs would be hard to sustain. I cannot remember who informed me of this, but it was an islander.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (11)

Friday 21 Sept, 2012 10.30am (*....continued*)

On our way back from our walk we made a detour to view a house being built in the traditional style and way. It is to be a museum as well as a tribute to the old way of doing things. We have lots of black and white photographs depicting such house building from my time on the island in the nineteen fifties and we have left digitalised copies of these at the Tourist and Heritage Centre. The gable ends of houses in the old days, as with the one we viewed being built, were constructed of huge, irregular sized blocks of soft volcanic rock, shaped by an axe. The front walls were built of similar stone, though with door and window spaces. The back wall was usually set into the slope and so often had no windows and was made from dry-stone-walled, hard, jagged blue stones. On the one being built as a museum there was a great concrete plinth on top of the back wall which in days gone by would probably have been a wooden beam. The inside walls of these old houses were lined with timber, much of it gathered from the beaches, washed ashore, or made from crates. The rooves were thatched with New Zealand flax and turf was used to seal the ridge. The house we viewed was nowhere near finished, but its construction faithfully followed the

old ways and I saw a picture of it recently finished at last and looking very fine.

We made our way back home to finish of the second half of an improvised macaroni dish made a couple of days ago. We ate it outside in light, cloud-filtered sunshine and we then put out a mattress and lay down in the sun for a snooze, me a very short one, Diana's more substantial. I lay there looking at the flax high above me on the eastern side of the garden. It grows on the top of what was originally a high turf wall, as I well remember and behind which in those days was our vegetable garden. We then went down at about four o'clock to watch the nine fishing boats return.

Cray fishing

The fishermen lower their traps down into the sea about a hundred feet, baited with fish heads that are stuffed into small, finely meshed canisters. Interestingly nearly all the fish heads are imported frozen from South Africa. To fish merely for bait is forbidden around the island, for sustainability reasons, though of course wastage from any fish caught for eating purposes can legitimately be used for bait. We watched some young men baiting up for the next fishing day. It seems that they don't bother freezing the stuffed canisters until that day, presumably because the stinkier they are the better.

The caught crayfish are stored in plastic open boxes in the boats. We observed one boat come in prematurely and then go out again, for they were still sizing the fish before putting them into the boxes. There are penalties imposed for any crayfish below regulation size presented for processing. The boxes are craned out all together, put on a tractor trailer and taken straight up to the factory. Then the boat itself is also lifted out, put on a wheeled trailer and pushed out of the way to make room for the next boat.

Processing crayfish

We then made our way up to the factory on top of the cliff,

overlooking the harbour. There we were eventually ushered into the Factory Manager's office. Eric is a delightful South African fellow with an open and pleasing face. His lively and very lovely little daughter was there with him at the factory, back from school. There were five of us who had arranged to look over the factory and we donned gumboots, white coats and disposable hygiene hats.

We were shown the process of sorting the crayfish. The big and strong ones are selected, and dropped into a series of large bins of filtered sea water to be purged. They will be cooked and packed whole for sale in Australia and Japan. These are the ones that make the most money for there is no weight loss in taking off the head and claws. We were told that because quotas in Australia have been severely reduced, these Tristan lobsters are marketed in Australia as Tasmanian lobsters to make up quota numbers. As with all luxury products, downturns in economies can hit industries like this very hard. Eric told us that the downfall of Lehman Brothers in the USA curtailed sales because such expensive fish are mostly eaten on expense accounts! The smaller fish have their heads pulled off and the tails go down a watered chute where they are picked up by a line of island women and the "thread" is expertly pulled. The number of islanders employed after a fishing day is high. He told us that this day's catch, about three and a half tonnes, would fetch in cash, gross (I assume), about £40,000.

There is no fishing in June, July and August, and the present month, September, is not the best of months. A good catch would be double the amount of yesterday and could be as high as ten tonnes. I cannot now remember what the fishing company's exclusive rights to the fishing grounds are worth, the Administrator told me this last night, but it is based on a percentage and so could be seventy or even a hundred thousand pounds per annum. The exact species of crayfish is found in only very few locations in the world, all within roughly this latitude: around a couple of Indian Ocean islands, New Holland being one and on a couple of mid-ocean, below-the-sea-surface mountain tops, though variations

between this and other species might be small.

The tails are packed in boxes raw, flash frozen and go mostly to the United States. The Fishing Company is attempting to get into the European market as well, though regulations are tight. The vulnerability of markets to economic conditions means that the more outlets available the better. One of us remarked that China would be a wonderful market to crack and that he had a friend in another fishing company who had told him that they did indeed get into China by way of Hong Kong but not legally and that ultimately there was a heavy price to pay.

There is now the beginning of a market developing in selling the discarded heads as items in their own right. Some are sold to serve merely as a decorative addition to sea food dishes in restaurants, but also there is apparently some substance in the shell which, if treated, reduced and ground, can be made into a pill that absorbs or prevents the digestion of oil in human beings and so is valuable. They also bundle up broken whiskers to send with the whole lobsters, these can be put in with those specimens who have lost a whisker and so encourage the assumption that they have been lost in transit. Those sold as whole crayfish are permitted to have lost two or three legs, but no more.

At this time of the year female crayfish are not often caught, but Eric found several and was able to pick them out and show us the difference between them and the males, the most obvious being far greater protection under the tail for eggs.

When viewing the lobsters in the tanks, I inadvertently stepped back against the outflow pipe of the constantly running water and half filled one of my gumboots, to everyone's amusement. All in all the Factory operates a slickly run process, with exact and impressive attention to detail.

Five Fingers and a party

When we got back home Kobus brought us a large Five Finger gutted and cleaned. This is a fish which my father maintained provided the best eating on the Island. So before heading out to a celebration at Carlene's I sharpened a knife and filleted it. I haven't made up my mind what to do with the two large fillets. We are out to dinner tonight and tomorrow and so will have one of the them for lunch, possibly simply as it is, fried with a bit of bread and butter.

We next headed to Carlene's house to celebrate her son's twenty first birthday. To start with this was less crowded than such celebrations on the island usually are because of folk working at the factory. Later on the house filled up tight. The Administrator and his wife were already present when we arrived and a handful of others. The large table in the kitchen groaned with the weight of food: pastry horns filled with a tuna mix, crayfish tartlets, nogs of cray fish to be dipped in mayonnaise, Vienna sausage rolls, pasties, little quiches, homemade potato crisps, (made, Carlene tells, me by hand not machine) and then cakes and pavlovas and so on. I managed not to over indulge this time, but such bounty is hard to resist. I had a good chat once more with Jeremy, the Island's shepherd and then Marina, the Administrator's wife raised my hopes by suggesting that there could well be suitable conditions on Monday for a trip to Nightingale Island. After a while Jeremy's father came in, a tall, thin fellow with one of those amazing faces you would love to paint, with a great character-imparting nose, and an air of quiet wisdom and integrity, an astonishingly fine looking man. We left shortly after the Administrator and wife, though beforehand I went into the bedroom where there were a lot of men gathered, quietly sipping beer keeping Carlene's husband company, who was in bed with gout. There we got talking about the traditional house being built. The Administrator was interested in the photos I have on the computer (mentioned earlier) and suggested I take them to Dawn in the Heritage Centre so that she can archive them, something I will do. (I received an email only a few weeks ago from Dawn asking my permission to publish some

of these in connection with the opening of the traditional house now completed)

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (12)

Sat 22 Sept, 2012 10.20am (*....continued*)

Again a day with no horizon, a fairly rough pewter coloured sea pewter fusing into a light grey sky, the cloud on the mountain pretty well down to plateau level. We walked up to church with light rain blurring my glasses not bothering with waterproofs on our legs, but well buttoned up otherwise, a good breeze but not a strong wind, the flag blowing out briskly to the east in a westerly.

Toasted homemade bread for breakfast. It was made yesterday and moderately successful, though the recipe erred in asking for too much sugar and so rather too sweet. Fine for toast and marmalade, not so good for the five finger fillet we had for lunch. We have lit the gas heater in the little office and so build up a happy fug here. When I have finished this diary entry I will hand over the computer to Diana to do some more statistical work from the church registers. Yesterday afternoon we returned to the factory to see the now cooked large whole crayfish, neatly folded and being drained of any liquid in a chilled room, prior to freezing, bright red and beautiful to the eye. We then ate halved tails from the shell. Shelley's husband a real and talkative joker of a fellow and head of the PWD on the Island was discussing with Eric how difficult it is in small communities for those in any sort of authority to censure or discipline those under them. In effect everyone is family. There is a girl Inspector in the factory who assesses the cray fish 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 and

delivered by expatriates.

After the factory I visited the tiny Internet Café to see if any mail had come in, prior to the weekend when the “Café” is closed, I suspect to prevent large scale downloading. I was able to get online easily and sent off a note to the family telling them a little of this and that. We then visited Francoise and Brian Robertson, he being the visiting psychiatrist and a thoroughly good egg. We had an enjoyable time chatting about all sorts of things and he told us that people are beginning to come to see him about the usual things that blight our lives, such as depression. He and his wife are practising Catholics of an attractively and actively liberal sort, who at home in Cape Town endure with charity a somewhat less than liberal priest in 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 here on his own so isolated a spot.

From them we went straight on, in the cold and damp, to Trina and Lars for a meal. A lovely evening with them on their own, though just as we were leaving Debbie and John (their daughter visiting from England with her husband) came in and so we were able to enjoy a little banter. Their house is called “Brick Front”, the reason being that Lars built it with a concrete-brick front due to the difficulty of getting the soft and dressable stone from which the gables are built. He was the first on the island to do so. From a photo of his house being built I was able to establish that the traditional house we saw a day or two ago, with its small undressed boulder back wall, is indeed just how it was done traditionally.

Lars was one of the twelve Advance Party that went back to prepare 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, though precisely why I am not sure, there can have been no market for fish at that time. They had to shoot the dogs before they left the island,

but two were left and 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. They actually witnessed the sea red with blood from whale-murdering Russian or Norwegian ships.

Lars and Trina quite 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 would have cost far more. His son Paul with Geraldine his wife and child have returned from England and have 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, far, far cheaper than you would do it England, South Africa or Australia. Lar's and Trina's place is really lovely, homely, sparkling and comfortable although in origin it is a simple, ordinary, traditional house, now much extended and beautifully equipped.

Lars has very much involved in the life of St Mary's since he was fifteen. His job on the island for most of his life was the paymaster and money man of the Fishing Company. Retired for about nine years, he has a great sense of humour and is full of wise little saws. They recall my father as being a man who got things done and of severe rectitude, but also humorous and remembered with joy and pleasure. We had a fine dinner of beef hot pot, tinned peas and corn, with baked Tristan potatoes, the Island's prized speciality as an extra for spuds were in the hot pot as well and some home grown and vinegared beetroot. There was also cold chicken. There followed traditional 'spotted dick' (cooked in cloth and delicious, though made from wheat flour rather than potatoes), there was also a fine caramel topped milk tart. Afterwards and to our surprise we were shown a DVD, brought from England for the island archives and 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 on board. So there were lots of pictures of my father, and occasional ones even of us children. Best of all it was in colour and so showed off the island as I remember it. All in all a lovely evening.

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 costs were paid for them in England too. They were married in the same church and on the same day as another island couple, food was provided and privileges accorded them because they were celebrities at that time.

We talked about the previous priests on the island, one of them an unutterable drunk, and of having to warn another of the dangers of ordering drinks because folk are so lavish in pouring the stuff. Light beer is without doubt the safest drink. Most of the priests that have served the Island seem to be looked back on with pleasure. An interesting little sliver of information, apparently no one married on the island has ever been divorced.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (13)

Sunday 23 September, 2012 6.25am

.....I turned the crayfish we received from the factory into a crayfish mayonnaise for lunch, with diced tomato and peas in it. Lovely, though the flavour is so delicate it is almost lost in the mayonnaise. As is so often the case with food, texture is all important. It is the denseness of crayfish and prawns that lifts them a peg or two above most other fish, whereas with Orange Roughy it is the delicate softness of the flesh that makes it so special. Fr Michael told me that a favoured way of serving crayfish in America is with melted butter, each morsel of fish is dipped in the butter and

it is delicious. It sounds very good to me, except of course there is no butter available on the island.

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, again regretting the flotsam and jetsam of plastic bottles, broken buoys, bits of rope, plastic and so on. From the Gulch we went through the gate to look over the golf course, which comprises the flattest area of ground on the plateau. It is dotted with several white painted, scientific monitoring stations and used to be used for football, cricket and other games and probably still is, for in the middle we discovered a concrete cricket pitch over which the grass has not been allowed to grow. With its spongy turf instead of well rolled, compacted and cropped greens, putting would be a nightmare. Cattle also graze the course regularly, so soft cow pats more than bunkers are hazards to avoid. The cliff edge is now attractively dry-stone walled, a wise precaution. The views of the beach and cliffs to the west are stunning. We walked past the generating station, not at all noisy, a large iron shed with four generators, the fishing company, I believe, providing two of them.

In the evening, before we set out for a fiftieth birthday party, Diana began to feel nauseous. After allowing the nausea to have its way she felt too fragile to go to the party and so I went alone. Her nausea is associated in her mind with the crayfish and so I will be eating this delicacy on my own from now on. The party was rather smaller than others we have attended and popular music blared. Again though, I was warmly welcomed. I had a good chat to Fr Michael, the Robertsons and young Geoffroy. An islander who had plucked up the courage in so small a community to go and see Brian the psychiatrist told me how good he had been and how pleased with he was with his diagnosis. He said he would call in to have a chat with me before I left. Generous offers of booze were urged

upon me, but I managed to limit myself to three small light beers before making my way home, passing the Administrator and wife on their way up. They and Brian tell me there is a fair amount of gastric trouble going the rounds, so it might not be my crayfish mayonnaise that caused Diana's problem, but I fear that she and that delicacy are sworn enemies from now on.

Monday 24 September, 2012 10.15am

It apparently rained most of the night and was doing so very well when we awoke at about six, but it stopped soon thereafter. A pleasing surprise was the phone ringing and hearing son Peter who is staying this weekend with Lil in Benalla because Nathan is in Canberra. All is well with them, though it took me some time to work out who it was talking to me, because there was the sound of children in the background, it was a man's voice but not Nathan's. Yesterday was a quiet day with Diana taking things easy. She didn't come to church, but that went well enough with about 65 present, the only expatriate being Bob the Scottish dental technician who said he had made a copy of the DVD from the nineteen fifties and which features our family and that he would copy one for us, so I have bought a blank DVD and will take it up to him.

My sermon fell into the vacuum of island reticence, a reticence that appears to be collective rather than individual, because if you encounter folk one for one, or as a little family unit, they are very forthcoming. I didn't do a kids talk because there appeared to be only one child present.

In the afternoon I went for a walk on my own along the cliffs west of the harbour, a lovely walk over some mighty cliffs and gulches. I saw the donkeys and photographed them, though they are much wilder and wary of human beings than they were in my youth. I walked along the bottom of the primitive golf course and then right up to the Hill Piece. It was necessary to travel inland a bit to cross some of the gulches, but it was all well worth it and not all that windy in the lee of the hill. Only when I went a little way round

it did it begin seriously to blow. Even going back along the road I took my jacket off it was so warm.

We read a good chunk of the fascinating diary of Mrs Barrow, the island's priest's wife from the first decade of the twentieth century. We also baked a perfect loaf of bread in the bread maker and ate a couple of pieces fresh, it was also good as toast this morning. No butter though, only margarine sadly.

This morning on the way to mattins we observed two waterfalls tumbling down the mountain. It was windy with quite a bit of blue to the sky and periods of sun. A pleasant change. The wind was blowing the water of one fall right back on itself. The rocks of the mountain glistened in the sun, very lovely. The weather is a constant preoccupation of my mother's diaries from the fifties. I find that it is much the same with my own in 2012.

We went to the shop for this and that, and having acquired a good supply of lemons Diana is making some lemon curd with which we will treat the Church Council at a meeting here at half past five. Francoise called to see how Diana is getting on and also to say that the weather might be alright to attempt a trip to Nightingale tomorrow or Wednesday. We had a chat with Anderson and his wife on the way back from church. They told us that the weather forecast is not at all promising.

Wednesday 26 September, 2012 9.00am

I have just been up to say mattins and to prepare the church for the 10.00am Eucharist. It is a cold morning with a high blanket of grey cloud over all the sky, the mountain clear and for the first time, I think, the wind is very definitely in the east, both the flags on the way up indicating this. There was condensation on the windows of the church for the first time too, probably because the church is less sheltered from the east than the west, but also possibly because it is a bit colder. On Monday, as I recall, we did little of any great moment. However there was the PCC to which

came 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). There were apologies from Robin Repetto, Judy Green and Kirsty Green. It was an amiable affair with me taking 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. We trust that it is the variety of flu that we suffered from early in our Australian winter. It was a good and happy meeting, though with some disgruntlement expressed at the Diocese for not having found a priest for the island for over two years. When 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. This is the downside of close community and fellowship.

We talked yesterday briefly to Jim Kerr the Educational adviser from England who said that island incomes are low. Teachers receive only a couple of hundred pounds a month. What has been killing the local economy for some years has been the cost of medicine, hence the new income tax now and a nominal fee for hospital treatment. For example, new knees and the like have up until now all been at little or no cost in private hospitals in Cape Town. It is unsustainable.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (14)

Wednesday 26 September, 2012 (continued)

Yesterday was a sunny and fine day and after our usual stroll to the church to say mattins and a brief visit to the internet café and to the shop, we called in on Carlene at her office. She wasn't there,

but at the potato patches, so we reported our empty gas cylinder and lack of hot water to her efficient deputy, Desiree. While chatting over our front garden wall to Jim Kerr shortly afterwards the gas bottle was efficiently changed and we went to the Tourist Centre to watch a demonstration of traditional carding and spinning of wool and to see one of the makers of the model long boats display his wares.

In days gone by the Tristan longboats were renowned for their seaworthiness and buoyancy. They were made of painted canvas tightly stretched over a wooden frame, but they have been overtaken by modern techniques and designs and so are no longer made or used. The advantage of glass fibre over canvas is obvious, one mild encounter with a rock and canvas is rent, not so with glass fibre. The longboats stored alongside the Administrator's house which are made of glass fibre, don't ever seem to be used.

After this, it being a fine day, we went for a walk westward. The wind had died down to nothing and so I was in my shirt sleeves and Diana in little more than hers, the sun warm on our backs. I wore my sun hat for only the second time since our arrival. We passed the ridge over to the potato patches and decided to carry on to Burntwood, the westernmost point of the settlement plateau and from where you are supposed to be able to sight Nightingale Island, the closest we are likely to get to it I fear. As we got half way across the very pleasing grassland past the potato patches, so the wind suddenly picked up coldly from the west. It was hard to explain why, because at more or less the same place on the way back it died back once more. It is all to do with the island's lee.

The mountain as always was fascinating to behold with great gulches galore, some of them making deep gashes in the plateau itself, others spreading debris and boulders over wider, surface areas of the plateau. We passed through a gate and sheep mustering paddock, across one of the stone debris littered areas where there was a great cement mixer and a pile of sand. Apparently to make

concrete needed for the construction of a half completed shed close to the cliff at the bottom of a large paddock full of sheep with many lovely little lambs, a few of them coal black. The shed at present is only girders set into concrete, the girders all securely roped, perhaps from before when the concrete was poured, or possibly still considered necessary in so very exposed a position. We pressed on to the end of the plateau into a very cold wind, finding finally a pristine black sand beach where, in the dry areas, it was whipped up by the wind to sand blast our skin smooth of all warts, wrinkles and hair. Very smooth, fine sand with tiny specks of glitter in it, possibly mica. We walked the beach appreciative of the sand, but not for long in so chill a wind. We then settled down in a grassed and sheltered gully to eat an apple and to be lulled by the roar of the breakers and awed by a shining, endless ocean vista.

We made our way back along the cliff tops and through the potato patches, which we found strange and fascinating. Tiny fields that are considerably lower than the pastureland in which they stand, all of them surrounded by stone walls. The soil here appears far deeper than in most places on the island and there are lots of strange, conical hummocks and hillocks made up of volcanic rocks and aggregate, into some of which have been hacked sheltered spaces for small holiday dwellings to which the islanders come sometimes for weekends. The gas cylinders and elaborate rain-catching drums and plumbing were evidence of some level of comfort in these buildings.

There were some patches being hoed and worked by family groups as we passed. This manner of growing potatoes has evolved over many years and is an important part of Island culture. The potato in years gone by was an all important staple and still features importantly in people's diet. When I was a boy on the island, much of the pastry made for puddings used potatoes rather than flour and to my appreciative young taste buds was none the worse for that. Whole families go out to plant, cultivate and harvest the potatoes and to spend weekends there. There is also an annual "ratting day"

during which the stone walls are pulled apart to enable the dogs to pounce and kill the disturbed rodents.

We wandered around in warm sunshine and looked down from the cliff top upon Runaway Beach which looked very inviting with both sand and interesting rock pools. We took some photos of the Hill Piece from the West, stopped in a grassy valley to eat our second apple and made our way home to an egg, baked beans and toast supper and to watch “Law and order U K” on the box.

Later: 1.15pm

I have returned from an interesting morning. After the 10.00am Eucharist I did six Home Communion and, as nearly always, was moved by the fortitude and courage of old folk who remain stoically humorous in adversity. I took photos of most of those I visited, their faces full of character. The first was an old lady called Winnie, the mother in law of Cynthia who remained with us through the service. The weather as always proved a good opening conversational gambit, and all seem to think the east wind heralds rain. It should however assist the overdue supply ship, Baltic Trader, in its slow journey towards us. My next visit was to another old and wistful looking lady, she was on her own, but obviously well cared for by her relatives, her home very old-style and in its way attractively so. The next visit was to Frances, a fine and acute old woman, apparently the daughter of “Big Mary”, an important figure and character well remembered from my boyhood. Then on to Gabriel, who is the husband of Mary who was one of the two islanders at the 10.30am Eucharist, a lovely couple. When I said I was wanting to buy eggs she gave me a half dozen. There is a fairly large New Zealand Pohutukawa tree in her yard, trees which the authorities are trying to eradicate from the island, this I regret, though they do appear to be very invasive. I then went on to a lovely woman called Irene who lives with members of her family in a really beautifully decorated and maintained home. She showed me a fine photo of herself and her husband to be, when they were courting, she, touchingly, with a bible or prayer book in her hand.

My last visit was to a young man, in his forties, injured in a motorbike accident when looking for the man who was tragically drowned some months ago. Apparently the place where he was drowned was beyond Burntwood where we were yesterday. People sometimes walk round the bluff at sea level to somewhere called the Caves. It was while making this walk that a rogue wave took him. We had a good chat and laugh together about sheep farming in Australia compared to Tristan, my stories about gathering sheep manure and being piddled on by ewes in the shed above were much appreciated. The young man has a lot about him and is one of the cray fishermen as well as a mechanic. They are reticent about pay and I obviously don't push, but it does seem that the average wage would be only about two hundred quid a month. The crayfish fellows get fifteen quid for a hundred pounds of fish, which they consider peanuts.

On getting home Diana was not there, probably still at the church, so I went on to the internet café, but couldn't get on line though I noticed the French boys had their own computers socketed in. Back home to write up this diary.

Thursday 27 September, 2012 9.27am

For lunch yesterday I tarted up the left overs of the left overs of the macaroni lunch we had for lunch on Tuesday. I did so by successfully adding a tin of tomato, chili and peppers.

We were reflecting this morning on boils, carbuncles and sties in the eyes and such like. All of these were a feature, I seem to remember, of life here on the island when I was a child. In the Tristan diary from the very early 1900s that we are reading the author uses poultices a lot as a remedy for all sorts of things and I remember my father using them on me, bread poultices so hot that they really hurt.

In the afternoon I twice visited the internet café. The first time it was crowded, the second time, a brief visit, revealed no

interesting emails. However I did learn that there is a cord on the other side of the room which allows one's own laptop to be connected up, so I must give this a go sometime.

I have a visitor coming to see me at 10.00 today, a talkative person who I know will be time consuming, with all sorts of problems to be talked over. I also need to knock next Sunday's sermon on the head today so as to have it printed tomorrow before Carlene's office closes.

There was an awards ceremony yesterday in the village hall. A large swag of medals to honour the Queen's Jubilee were handed out by the Administrator, all recipients being men except for one female constable who did at least receive two medals. The life boat crew and mountain rescue team all received a medal though Diana was told that unless the tide is right, the harbour is too shallow to allow for the lifeboat's use. At the ceremony Kobus informed me that £200 would be about right as the average wage, though fishermen can earn considerably more. I chatted to the "Education Adviser" Jim Kerr. He told me that he had attended church a bit at Norfolk when at home there, not least because he was friendly with the local vicar who was on the Board of the school he worked at, though it was not a church school. When I asked about his personal belief he gave a commendably honest answer: "I am working at it". We have arranged to have a prayer session for their little granddaughter in England seriously ill.

I also had a long chat to Anne, the principal of the school and also on the Island Council. She is a Roman Catholic and very articulate and sensible. She will let me know when I can go in and do a School Assembly for them. Her views on the volcano chimed with those of Harold, for she too emphasised that the volcano experience and exile had taught islanders that "outsiders" were not special and didn't need automatically deferring too. The difficulties of wielding leadership in a small, close knit community were also acknowledged, but she thought such difficulties these days were

pretty successfully coped with, though obviously when it comes to criticism or censure of folk within the community, it is more easily administered by outsiders.

We got back relatively early and idled time away with TV instead of more productively. Bob brought round the video I had asked for and I have been able to put it on to my little computer and so can leave the disk with Sue in Cape Town.

Diana has done great work in tidying up the vestry, far more sensitively than I would have done, not throwing anything away that wasn't very, very obviously rubbish. The wind is in the North today, the sea rough, the weather warmer, the cloud down and the wind not so strong. We met Amy and Harold waiting for the bus to take them to the potato patches again, always a delight to encounter, he full of fun and wise observations. I also met Gerald Repetto, a lively little boy with whom we used to play many years ago. Still an amiable fellow though not I think much of a church goer.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (15)

Friday 28 September 2012 3.30pm

I sit in the Internet Café using my own little travelling computer connected properly to the net for the first time and so now all my “dropbox” files are up to date. I have even taken a quick look at the St Augustine's pew sheets for the last two weeks. John Southerden appears to be doing well and suggests that so productive is the Rectory vegetable garden Diana and I should consider ourselves market gardeners.

The weather was pretty foul yesterday and we didn't do much worthy of note, though it was an enjoyable enough day. The most fascinating feature of the weather here is the “lee”. When a calm stillness bathes the settlement area and the two flags in front of the Prince Phillip Hall hang limp, the same is not necessarily so out to

the east and west. Go too far in either direction and as likely as not there begins greyness, misty rain and wind, while out at sea the waves are white capped and wind whipped. The island's lee is complicated, perhaps, I speculate, forming some sort of vacuum, like a boat's sail, the vacuum in the case of a boat being what propels or rather pulls it along. Here the lee of so mighty an obstruction as a 6,760 foot mountain appears to pull in the wind round either side of an actual and fairly intense lee. All very interesting.

In the evening we took out of the fridge what we thought was a joint of lamb, but it turned out to be beef. Pieces of somewhat cartilaginous "hamstring" of all things, so I boiled them all up and we changed menus and had toad-in-the-hole. I turned the meat into what became a very tasty curry.

Earlier in the day we visited Judy, where I dandled her grandchild, Kirsty's little boy. Kirsty is the organist at the Church and Judy is my mother's godchild.

I have done a sermon of sorts and now have to get on and prepare a little prayer service for the young girl who is so grievously ill in England. The weather has now brightened up and Diana is in the vestry with some women fixing up the funeral pall which has deteriorated with age and is in dire need of repair work. We ate the curry appreciatively for lunch as there is another party tonight.

Saturday 29 September, 2012 5.35pm

We learned that the Kerrs had made a private arrangement to go to Nightingale Island yesterday or the day before, but the boat they were going on conked a little way out to sea and they had to hang around for an hour or two in a gentle swell waiting to be rescued.

We awoke to the sound of a gong at about a quarter to six, the

day still with a calm sea though little sun due to a covering of high cloud. It is now misty, there has been some light rain and the horizon has blurred itself out of existence. We have had an idle day at home. I thought about walking up the Hill Piece, but didn't bother. The only outing we made was to Garden Gate beach to gaze into the remaining rock pools. There I caught sight of two of the sort of little fish we used to catch as boys, but only a glimpse as they darted off. The pools were nowhere near as magically and mysteriously lovely as my memory tells me they were. Mind you the tide wasn't far enough out to do them justice either.

Yesterday's party was enjoyable. In part it was a farewell from the Island to Bob the Dental Technician who has been coming to Tristan regularly for years and is much loved. He gave a speech in so broad a Scots accent that I could only catch about one word in three. He is truly a delightful fellow. The party was also in honour of the sixty fifth birthday of a near contemporary of mine, Barbara, who must have been at school with me all those years ago and again a friendly and lovely person. The visiting Dentist's little girl's third birthday was also acknowledged to her great excitement. We stayed on a bit and indulged in some fairly frenetic dancing, the music Country and Western and easy to dance to because of its usually so solid beat. It was a good, old fashioned dance in that the elderly danced as much as anyone if not more, and little kids were having a go as well. I danced mostly with Diana, but once with an island lass who asked me, and once with Carlene. We left at about half ten, me wringing with sweat for it was as hot as Hades inside the hall and I had been kicking my heels up in wild, terpsichorean frenzy.

Jim told me, when I was pruning the hydrangeas outside today, that their trip to Nightingale had hardly taken them out of the harbour before one of the boat's two engines, burnt out, its propellor choked on kelp, and the other wouldn't start. So they had well over an hour adrift before being rescued and towed in. In the evening we went round to their place for a party. It was most pleasant and being in a house was of necessity more exclusive,

rather than open slather to one and all. We left as the invitation directed, at 7.30pm and came home to watch a bit of TV and then, while Diana continued her repair of the funeral pall, I read aloud and finished K. Barrow's "Three Years on Tristan da Cunha", a fascinating read. The book can be downloaded free as an e-book from the "Gutenberg Project".

Sunday 30 September, 2012 11.18am

The supply ship, the Baltic Trader, is here. It arrived in the middle of the night after what appears to have been a difficult voyage. It is a cargo ship leased to the Fishing Company apparently with a Russian crew not noted for easy cooperation with the locals and so it takes far longer to unload than does the Edinburgh. It arrived during the night and was the vessel that we were booked on when our berths on the Agulhas were taken from us. We are grateful that space on the Agulhas was found for us in the end, because this voyage on the Baltic trader was by all accounts less than delightful. It took ten days, so fierce was the weather. They sometimes made only one knot and had to head north for two days to avoid too violent a swell. It would have meant a mere six days on the island for us and no Sunday!

After church we went down and watched a pontoon come in and be offloaded, quite dangerous it seemed to me, for the crane loads swing around a fair bit, even in the relative calm of the little harbour. Fortunately the day is calm, though it was raining when we got up and lightly when I walked to church. Any passengers are offloaded by crane in a little covered cubicle, in itself this would be quite scary or exhilarating, I would imagine. If the cubicle swung enough to hit the side of the ship it would rattle false teeth. We are told that given the slowness of the crew and the amount to be unloaded it will take four or five days for the job to be done. There are apparently a couple of cars to be offloaded, one apparently for the Administrator, though I never saw any evidence of it, to my way of thinking he should be setting an example and not bothering with a car at all! The most dangerous load was a pile of reinforcing

mesh, the bottom sheet of which became detached and swung around most nastily.

The island appears to have a very leisurely work ethic, something to be proud of not ashamed, and every weekend seems to be a sort of long weekend. The shop closes at 2.30 pm on Fridays, as does everything else, or pretty well so. A sociologist or social anthropologist might well find the place worthy of a thesis. In some ways it appears to be a benignly functioning socialist state in microcosm. There is much that is commendable and attractive about this, like support for each other, especially the sick and elderly, strict egalitarianism in such things as the common ownership of land, the number of cattle and sheep allowed to each islander, (two cows per family and I think two sheep per person) and so on. However, as you would expect, local leadership is difficult if it involves censure or penalising of islanders, all of whom are related to each other in some way. Wages by world standards are modest and there are few folk, if any who earn really substantial ones. To be a crayfish catcher augments a daytime job very nicely for the fifty or so days a year that are fishing days, however, if you are a Head of Department you are not allowed days off to fish and so many of the best men prefer to be number two to number one.

We were somewhat light in numbers at church this morning, presumably because the Baltic Trader is here and requires all sorts of primary and secondary labour and possibly too because folk were required to deal with the crayfish caught yesterday. The catch was apparently a better one than the last time, four and a half tons instead of three, the females are now being caught as well. However Marina the Administrator's wife was present at church as too the two older Kerrs. My sermon was a partly autobiographical narrative based around the old fellow's comment on his need to return to Tristan, because in England he could no longer "hear the voice of God". Narrative sermonising nearly always goes down well and for the first time I felt folk were with me. Later, on the way

down to the harbour, I got my first direct comment on a sermon from a younger islander in her thirties: “that was a nice sermon you gave Father”. It was my last sermon on the island. I have still to gather prayers to form an appropriate little service for the youngster ill in England and also think about a School Assembly for tomorrow.

I intend making fishcakes tonight, so there is a great nog of unidentified fish defrosting as I write.

Monday 1 October, 2012 6.07pm

I have just returned from a trip up to the top of Hill Piece with Jim Kerr, Simon, Emily, Bethany, and a little girl friend of Bethany’s called Chloe. The Hill Piece is a green hill, stepped all the way up and round by generation after generation of grazing sheep and cattle. It is a “Piece” of hill because the sea is gradually eroding it away and on the seaward side there is a lividly coloured, red-brown and ochre precipitous slope and cliff falling down to a wild sea. There were stunning views from the top, but an icy wind as well.

Jim told me on the way that during his earlier stint on the island as a teacher he would take kids regularly up the Base mountain from behind the Settlement and that in those days he would be up the mountain three or four times a week. He must have been very fit. They had a project counting and ringing albatrosses nesting there. He says that there are a variety of possible routes up the two thousand feet, but until well familiar with them anyone would need a guide.

We are on a list to go to Nightingale tomorrow, but it still depends upon the weather and there was a strong and cold wind on top of Hill Piece. At the house it has been still all day. As I have noted the lee is a strange thing.

On the way back I saw my first rat, a dead and squashed one

on the road. I also noticed that the barge from the ship was heading in a strange direction on its way back from the Baltic Trader, so I went down to the harbour to see what was happening.

I have to say that the groups of men standing round evince such a lack of willingness to communicate in anyway as to make me not much want to bother. However I am sure it is not animosity, though there is certainly a barrier of some sort, perhaps a macho solidarity that resists anything not artisan, or a mild xenophobia, or a lack of social grace, I don't know. At dances many of the men hang out on their own outside and at parties in people's houses, as often as not they disappear to a room on their own. However, once I had made an effort they were friendly and communicative and it turns out that the barge was picking up a few cray fish pots they had dropped on the way out to the ship.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (16)

Monday 1 October, 2012 (*continued*)

The visit to my old school, *St Mary's, Tristan da Cunha*, to take the Assembly was great fun. Diana had printed the Twelve Disciples' names on pieces of paper for me and so I called individual children up to hold them and I talked about each disciple as I did so.

The school building is not the one I attended, nor is it in the same place, so there was little sense of déjà vu. It was interesting to see the inside of the place though. In its centre there is a sort of glassed-in cloister around a quadrangle of lawn, which is rather pleasing and appropriate for wild weather. It gives an impression of openness without allowing any of its disadvantages. It was odd to see a class room with desks for just two pupils in it. There are only about thirty five children in all, their ages ranging from five to fifteen.

Each class is made up of two years' worth of youngsters and there are a couple of relatively large groupings and several very tiny ones. In their Assemblies they use a BBC book of children's songs with an accompanying pair of CDs which I think might well be worth ordering for our Family Service in Shepparton. (This I have since done and it has provided some splendid songs with interesting descants for the 8.30 Eucharist, let alone the 10.30)

The small Prayer Meeting that I was asked to conduct for the recovery of a little girl ill in England also went well. There was quite a group of us in the home of her grandparents Jim and Susan Kerr and so we had to share my little order of service. This had been put together without all the resources that I have built up over the years in my bookshelves and on my computer. The son of Jim and Susan, Simon, who is visiting the island like us for the duration of the Aghulas' stay, was not present, but I had a good chat with him on the way back from the Hill Piece. He works for an engineering firm and lives in a little Norfolk village where he and his partner have just bought a house. Bethany his daughter is to stay with the grandparents on the island until December, a wonderful experience for her.

Wednesday 3 October, 2012 9.00am

I have been over to print a little order of service for a House Blessing to be done this afternoon for Geraldine and Paul Repetto. Paul is Lars and Trina's son. The external drive I brought with me containing all my computed resources for this sort of thing has malfunctioned and so I had to troll a slow internet to help put together something suitable. I used as a basis a not unpleasing document that while being Anglican and indeed Anglo-Catholic in origin, did nonethe-less need exorcising of its rather too robust concern with cleansing dwellings of "demonic forces". I have also had printed the minutes of our PCC for distribution.

It is a lovely morning here in the village, though over in the west, out of the direct lee, white horses are in evidence and so there

is no likelihood of a trip to Nightingale Island. The Baltic Trader is now “backloading”. Crates are going back to the ship as well as the frozen crawfish. It should sail tomorrow.

We met the new Doctors, a man and wife team, both recently retired and from Dundee. They arrived on the Baltic Trader and said that passengers were very restricted as regards space, unlike on the Agulhas where passengers are welcome pretty well everywhere. However they enjoyed the trip, rough though it was, and they said that the two stewards allocated to the nine passengers couldn't have been more helpful. Pam, the female of the doctor pair had met Diana about the island earlier and on the strength of this popped in to see us to get a bit of a low down on the place. She is a delightful and friendly person and of course well familiar with Invergowrie, next door to Dundee, where I did a very happy parish swap in 2000 for three months.

Yesterday afternoon I did some visiting on my own. I visited Daphne and Ernest, she had done housework for us when I was a child on the island. Ernest is now apparently the oldest man on the island at about 86. I then called in on James Green, a school contemporary from all those years ago and who during that time fell off the cliff and all but broke his back. He now has Parkinson's disease but appears well and was pleased to see me. He has had six children and is now a widower. He offered me a beer but I declined, it being too early for me. I then met Harold on the road who asked me in to his place and so I went and had a chat with him and Amy. It was his birthday and as I was leaving Geoffroy, the young Frenchman, walked in to wish him well. It was a good and informative chat and he expressed the hope of me coming back to be Island padre. I was non committal. There is so far no deep sense of this being at all the right thing. I suspect I would find it stultifying at my time of life, though like the two doctors, a six month stint might just be possible.

From there I went to visit Monica whose wedding my father

took in the fifties and of which we have several photos. She is now a lovely and merry, elderly woman whom I had already met at church. I learned that she is the mother of Conrad the policeman. She said that her wedding dress was brought out to the Island by the Captain of the *Tristania* and was pink in colour. I gave both her and James a blessing as I left.

In the evening we went round to Kobus and Linda's for dinner, he being the Island's CEO under the Administrator. Linda, a very kindly person is his wife and we became friendly with her on the ship. She lives in Cape Town as a lawyer, unwilling to abandon her beloved cats. Cats are forbidden on Tristan, for obvious reasons.

It proved to be an interesting evening with a splendid spread of food and the conversation did not flag. We closely interrogated Kobus about the island and without being at all indiscreet he was most interesting. The great challenge is to ensure that the island is viable, which it very nearly is, the only ongoing cost to Britain being the salaries of the doctor, Kobus himself, the Administrator, the Education Adviser and perhaps one or two others. Other than occasional large infrastructure costs the aim is for the Island to pay its own way.

Apparently the pension scheme is a drain on finances for the simple reason that contributions do not balance pay outs. He reaffirmed that the probable average wage on the island is close to a modest £200 a month, and that the only ones who make much more than this are the fishermen.

He himself is very happy on Tristan and admires the islanders enormously. He speculates that one of the greatest drawbacks to island life might well be boredom. In days gone by there were organisations like Scouts and Guides, and Sport and Sports Days, all of which are now gone, so there can tend to be a generalised and sometimes more focussed sense of ennui. Leadership, as we have already identified, is difficult in such a close knit and interrelated community. Diana asked him if there are any role models for the

boys, most of the top administrative jobs being in the hands of women. He agreed that this could well be a problem.

When we got on to the problem of litter and rubbish he said that the Authorities have looked very seriously into recycling. The possibility of compressing aluminium and tin cans in order to ship them back to South Africa had been explored, but it proved to be economically unfeasible, freight is simply too expensive. They do break up and grind glass to put into concrete, and apparently waste matter is now dumped according to type, with an eye on possible future salvage. Cars he said will have ultimately to be sunk out at sea, few of them, needless to say, are imported new, they have to contend with a salty atmosphere, but of course don't notch up huge mileages.

That the island is largely self sufficient is remarkable. Islanders, understandably, tend to be wary of expatriates with extravagant plans for innovation and change. New ideas and ways of doing things have to be introduced cautiously, preferably in a way that allows them to be "owned" by the Islanders.

Linda is a believer in rocks, crystals and their so called mystic properties. Kobus is a Buddhist. They are lovers of fresh air, all the doors of their house were open and the place was cold. While we were present her maid called from Cape Town to report on the welfare of the cats, the maid's name: "Sweetness".

I have returned from my last Eucharist on the island, seven of us all told. Afterwards I went to see Maria and anoint her as she will be travelling on the Agulhas with us to go to Cape Town as a precaution, there being a few little worries about her baby. Trina was at the mass and five other hugely faithful old girls.

Thursday 4 October, 2012 6.30am

One of the attractive little things about life on the island, linking it for me with the medieval world, is the frequent and

pleasing cock-a-doodle-doing of roosters.

Yesterday, as I was doing my priestly duties about the village, a team of ten folk had climbed the Base mountain which made me rather envious. Had they offered me the trip I would probably have forsaken duty and gone. As it was I was able to achieve things that otherwise were unlikely to be achieved if today, as I hope, we at last make it to Nightingale, our very last chance.

The Agulhas is now due to leave on Friday evening, which means today is our last full day on the Island. Diana is relieved to have written and posted all the cards we have purchased. They have a 25 pence Tristan stamp on them and whether this means that they travel surface mail from Cape Town onwards I know not. Is there such a thing as surface mail these days I wonder?

In the afternoon we went to bless the new house of Geraldine and Paul who is the son of Lars and looks and talks just like him. They have a house behind the supermarket on what used to be a quadrangle of land with a flag post in its centre and called "*the Quarterdeck*". It was used for parades and other ceremonial occasions. Their new house is a fine one with three bedrooms, a bath and utility room combined in one, and a toilet. The living area and kitchen are spacious and open plan. There are no eaves or verandah, but verandahs are absent from most island houses. They have two little girls Chantelle and Katie and hope to move into the new house some time next week. They were most appreciative and gave us each a Tristan mug, useful ones in that they have sealed tops and so are good for travelling

After this we wrapped up little gifts and took them, with the PCC Minutes, to all our Councillors. We also dropped off a little gift for each of the three servers. We managed all of this in the afternoon before six, when there was a school performance of songs and little dances from the young pupils, and a fashion parade from the older ones. The clothes modelled were all made of recycled

material by the children themselves. A new trainee islander teacher called Poppy was the inspiration for this. The Administrator in his words of appreciation said how appropriate it was that the school children were promoting recycling, for it was a priority of the Island Administration. There was also a dance routine from the older children. The hall was packed, pretty well the whole island was present, nearly all 270 of them. Afterwards I had a word with the male member of the doctor team about their trip up the Base Mountain. They had found it stunningly beautiful and encountered a good number of yellow-nosed albatrosses sitting on their nests.

If we don't get to Nightingale we will take our sandwiches and go to Runaway beach. This is the rather fine looking one we gazed down to from the potato patches. Diana said the gong for a fishing day went off this morning well before half past five. I didn't hear it and wondered therefore if she had dreamt the gong, but there is a lot of activity, the sea is calm and so she is probably right. It is rare that I don't wake up for such things.

The cows have been wandering the village. Pasturage is scarce on the Island and so the cattle rotate almost the whole plateau, including the village itself. We watched one munching a small Pohutukawa tree in the churchyard and a fair number of them have a go at the New Zealand flax which they seem to enjoy. They chew out the greenness to leave a fibrous and stringy end to any leaves that they can reach.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (17)

Thursday 4 October, 2012

..... It is now ten minutes to seven in the morning. Soon after seven we should hear about going to Nightingale Island.

I look out to a calm sea over a dry stone wall upon this side

of which grow nasturtiums in more yellow than orange flower and arum lilies which seem to grow with ease in all sorts of remote places. They are as much a feature of St Helena as Tristan.

The insides of windows on these cold, still mornings are heavy with condensation. It makes me wonder how low the humidity ever falls on the island. On the internet forecasts it has never been lower than the mid sixties.

Later 3.35pm. Well we made it to Nightingale after all. We first rang the Kerrs, at about a quarter to eight, and Susan said she presumed it was off, but before heading to mattins we rang up Dawn from the Tourist Office and she said she thought it was on and that we should soon receive a call, as indeed we did, telling us to be on the wharf by half past eight, as indeed we were. The boat we were to travel on was a RIB (a Rigid Inflatable Boat) with two large outboards. As we waited I wandered around and behind some containers and discovered a big piece of pumice, not the pale and delicate variety, upon lumps of which we used to scrape smooth our calloused feet after a bath, but coarse black rock, like aerated chocolate. Then walking out on the wharf I noticed that in the central gap of the base mountain, from out at the wharf's very end, I could just see the snow covered peak of the island. Always invisible from the settlement proper.

We eventually clambered down into the boat and I went up to the front. Diana, very sensibly, sat in the rear where there were a few seats. It transpires that the trip had indeed been called off because the boat's owner and captain wanted a day off to have a barbecue. However, Françoise, the visiting psychiatrist's wife, questioned with some asperity those responsible and insisted, the day being perfect, that it would be iniquitous if we didn't go. So we went, the amiable brother of the boat's owner at the wheel!

There was an elderly Norwegian man with us. He had come on the Baltic Trader and was due to leave on it. Disappointingly,

because it was to sail for Cape Town at three o'clock, our visit would have to be curtailed, though he did indicate that he could if necessary return to Cape Town on the Agulhas. He is doing a story on Tristan all to do with a Norwegian expedition to the island in 1937, which apparently mapped the island most efficiently. The curtailing of our trip didn't please me at all until I realised that he had probably been relegated to the *Baltic Trader* having been squeezed off the Agulhas, as we very nearly were, and so I ought to be charitable. He was cumbered with huge cameras and took a lot of time to take photos and on our departure from Nightingale, when getting onto the little dinghy from the rock to go out to the RIB, he simply left us holding his socking great cameras so that we had to take the risk of dropping them into the sea during this tricky manoeuvre. I would like to look up the article he eventually produced and critique it severely, but as it will be written in Norwegian and for a financial magazine, this is unlikely.

The voyage to Nightingale on the RIB was like nothing I have ever experienced. Simon and I had the worst of it because we were the furthest forward. The boat went like the clappers, but the price paid for this is not riding naturally with the swell, over and down the waves, but rather blundering and bouncing forward in spite of them. The front of the boat cracked down with force enough to shatter your spine. Truly awful, especially as I had no cushion or anything soft and so sat on the flat, hard bottom. Ideally you would sit on the boat's side which is air-filled and springy, but this appeared too risky. The sea was in fact fairly calm, but as always out in the great ocean, there was a good swell and we were jarred every minute of two. I eventually learned to deal with this in a way that spared my back. Instead of sitting on my backside, I squatted on my hunkers, riding each fall of the boat with my thigh muscles. Clever and adaptive of me, but when I got off the boat my ham's were so strained I could hardly walk for a while and I still feel week in the legs.

It was the most exhilarating of trips though. The view of

Tristan as we roared past Burntwood in bright sunshine was glorious. The snow covered peak shone brilliantly in bright sunlight and the livid greenness of the mountainside contrasted impressively with the blackness of gorge and shadow.

The crossing is twenty five miles and the waters are deep. Apparently Nightingale and Inaccessible, the two uninhabited islands that are close to Tristan and make up its archipelago are far older than Tristan and not as closely related geologically as used to be thought. There being no shelf between Tristan and the other two islands, the water is immensely deep.

The weather on Nightingale is more benign than Tristan. This is because it is so much lower and so less cloudy with less orographic rainfall. There were plenty of birds skimming the waves and we stopped by a fishing boat to watch them pull up a pot of crayfish, it being a fishing day today.

At last, after about an hour or more of exhilarating but bone-jarring travel, we arrived at the island, a tussocky fragment in the middle of nowhere, with an attractive, small, conical peak, and a guano-whitened, rock shoreline.

I was glad to be there. When boys on Tristan my brother and I were considered too young to make the trip, but my sister Susan, with a couple of friends, did. In those days they sailed over in longboats and stayed several nights. They went to collect guano or birds eggs, or bird carcasses to eat or render down for fat. I can still remember frying albatross eggs, a single one filling the pan, and eating boiled rock-hopper penguin eggs, their whites a pale translucent blue. As with the aborigines in Australia, the islanders are granted certain rights to some traditional practices and so they can still harvest sea bird eggs, though in a carefully monitored and sustainable fashion. However with the wreck on Nightingale of the huge soya bean laden bulk carrier MS Olivia in 2011, and its devastating oil-spill havoc, which led to insurance claims asserting

loss of livelihood, the harvesting of eggs at this time is suspended. So no fishy egg yolk gobbling for me on this trip. Thousands of oil-damaged penguins were rescued, penned and fed by islanders.

As we approached the island it was almost impossible to take photos because until right into the lee, both my hands were occupied in keeping myself from harm. There is no beach to land on. Access to the island is by way of a sloping slab of rock, less than ideal even in calm weather, impossible in just moderately bad. On the slab were three or four seals. The young islander with us on the boat leapt out as we drew near the rock and then we backed off until he got help from the naturalists who are at present camping on the island, to drag down the small dinghy that is pulled up high on the rock. We transferred from the RIB to the dinghy in two trips and then were helped out onto the slippery rock. Diana got a foot wet but otherwise our precautions to protect ourselves from a predicted dousing (sou'westers and waterproof trousers) were not necessary. Spray even on the way across was minimal. However it was cold enough for a beanie, jersey and my wind proof jacket.

As soon as we were ashore and in sheltered sunlight we realised that it was going to be warm. We left a lot of gear down at the landing place, high above any likelihood of it getting wet, but took my haversack with its lunch, not realising then that we would be back almost before lunch because of our kill-joy Norwegian. It meant we never got to the island's ponds or had a comprehensive view of the place. On the way to where we turned back however, we did pass lots of Yellow nosed albatrosses on their nests, beautiful birds, nesting serenely on or next door to the path, unperturbed by human proximity. The path was littered with the carcasses of little "night birds" a type of prion that burrows to nest. They are killed by the skuas which abound and dive bombed us whenever we passed by their great green eggs laid in the grass with no nesting material at all. We also saw the endemic buntings and the starchies, a fairly vicious little thrush-like bird that feeds off the prion carcasses and apparently is not beyond killing them itself and their fledglings.

The whole island appears to be honeycombed with nesting burrows and has the unmistakable smell that such seabird colonies always have. When I was Rector of Skipton and Ararat we nearly always holidayed at Koroit between Warnambool and Port Fairy and on the last evening would take fish and chips to eat in the shearwater rookery as the birds silently plopped out of the sky in the dusk and dark and scurried down their nesting holes. The scent on Nightingale took me right back to those happy occasions.

Before we headed up the pathway we passed a smallish colony of rockhopper penguins which were delightful to behold. They have golden tassels and looked sleek and healthy.

All too soon because of the Norwegian cuckoo in our nest, we had to return, though the doughty Francoise did try and persuade the island lads that he was well able to return on the Agulhas, but to no avail. So we ate our three day old sandwiches in bright sunlight on the landing rock and made our way back into the dinghy and then the RIB. Diana had repacked our haversack in a way that I could use it as a cushion and so I settled myself down with my back against the wheel house. Unfortunately two of us were urged forward to provide a better ballast, so I was back in the position that I occupied on the way to the island, though thankfully on the other side and so exercising different muscles and with a haversack to sit on. The return was certainly better, I didn't use my hunkers and leg muscles except when I anticipated a truly shocking drop.

Best of all though, we were taken straight back to Tristan, not to its west and so came upon another fishing boat for which we stopped for a short period, watching them pull in a fair number of crayfish. We then turned east and so in fact circumnavigated the whole island, approaching it at its southernmost tip, Stonyhill Point. There, there is a black lava flow not at all dissimilar to the 1961 extrusion of lava at the Settlement. We then were treated to close views of the forbidding Tristan cliffs and the great and sometimes cavernous gulches of the island all the way round to the Settlement.

Because the island was for the most part under cloud and not in sunlight, the cliffs appeared more than usually black and forbidding though we did pass some stony beaches and small areas of pasture at sea level with grazing cattle on them.

Sandy Point was especially interesting because there was a really good stand of tall conifers, and a green roofed hut. Apparently the cattle got in and ruined all the apple trees whose fruit that we used to go by boat to collect in the fifties. We passed some thin but flowing waterfalls and truly awe inspiring gulches, evidence of frequent and heavy rain, though the two thousand foot cliffs are proof of the sea being more effective at erosion than rain. So we rounded the Bluff and into sight of the Settlement, passing the Agulhas and the Baltic Trader and so into the harbour, glad to have made it to Nightingale and to have circumnavigated Tristan.

RETURN TO TRISTAN DA CUNHA (18)

The trip to Nightingale Island was a fitting climax to our stay. On our return, nervous about our passports which we had left with the Purser on the Agulhas and so they had gone on to Gough Island without us, we made a quick visit to the Administration Building to establish that they would be brought ashore and stamped. We did not want the South African Immigration officials wondering how it was we had left the country only to return from nowhere. The Admin. Offices were closed, but we saw Sean, the Administrator himself on the way back and he said that our passports would be seen to as a matter of course and there would be nothing to worry about.

Peggy called in with a little present for us, as too did Rhianna, Lars and Trina. The Parish Council and Congregation gave us a model island longboat made by Peggy's husband.

In the evening I ate with great pleasure the tails of the two

whole crayfish in the fridge and Diana heated up leftovers from the lamb we had had the night before, for which I had had to take the baked potatoes out of the oven in order to fry them brown, the oven not being up to the task. Very good though.

Our luggage tomorrow is to be picked up at 10.00am and we are to be at the helicopter field at 3.00pm. Since the return from Nightingale I have titled and transferred all our photos of the last few days onto the little computer.

Friday 5 October, 2012 7.45am

We will be off to Mattins for the last time in a few minutes. We have eaten the last piece of bread as toast for breakfast and a wash is on the clothes line. It is another fishing day today, the gong went at about half past five though it looks a little windy. The Island's lee is elsewhere perhaps. I see the ride in the RIB has left me with the legacy of a broken blister on my elbow as well as aches and pains in my thigh muscles which are a little better this morning.

We have now just returned from our last Mattins on the island. These have been lovely sessions for which we have used the South African rite, sitting in a pew looking out over low cottage roofs and flax to the great ocean. We have missed only one day since being here and that was yesterday as we waited to field a phone call about the Nightingale trip.

It appears that if you give someone a little gift here it almost invariably brings a return gift. Agnes called round up with first day cover Tristan Stamps on an envelope and a little note, very sweet of her. I took some of our ancient carrots up to the cows roaming the village to see if they would eat them with the same gusto that they seem to eat potatoes. One cow obligingly ate one, the others were disdainful of them, though I suspect that they will return to them later, for they appear to eat pretty well anything.

Later 10.55pm South Atlantic:

We are now safely aboard the Agulhas. The day went as final days tend to, mostly in tidying up. I did manage a trip down to Garden Gate beach where I was able to take a photo of the old rock pools with the tide far out and I sighted several of the fish we used to catch as boys, darting at great speed from one pool to another. One of them initially in a small corner of a pool of the sort from which we used to catch them. I also got some good shots of a pair of lovely Tristan terns.

So we arrived at the field to be helicoptered off, kissing many but missing others, because those without immediate family to bid farewell tended to stand behind the stone wall not in front of it in the field itself. We are now back on the ship and in the same room. We had to go down to the hold to get our suitcases which had been collected from the front of the house at about 10.30. I had eaten three of the four eggs left well before lunch, two of them duck eggs, I trust there will be no evil consequences! Our last meal was split-pea dhal and because we had packed the two sauces it was so bland it is best forgotten. We followed it with tinned fruit, enjoying mightily, as we have all holiday, the South African pineapple.

We were surprised to notice the number of caves and a little beach or two beneath the low, black cliffs of Mordor (the lava plateau). I noticed from the helicopter that an arch had been worn into the black cliffs as well, obviously some of the lava is softer than the rest. For dinner on board we sat down next to the returning and retired doctor and partner (dread word). Also at the table was the returning dentist and her little daughter, Scottish she lives in Sweden. Delightful.

Later on I was able to talk to several islanders about their views of their home island. I asked one who had been just visiting if he would like to return permanently. He said not yet, because the pace of the island is too leisurely for him, he is still “too full of steam” to find it tolerable.

Interestingly I was also told that the fishermen can make £200 to £300 each in a single day and that as both spouses in a couple work, poverty is not really an issue on the island except for pensioners. I asked about ennui and was told that this is indeed a problem because no longer are there the traditional pastimes of days gone by: the sport and games they played, the sea scouts, the rituals around Christmas that involved the selection and killing of a sheep and the whole island making broth.... Nostalgia of course, but in fact activities now are few and far between and so drink does become a problem. I also talked to someone who had worked for a while on super tankers. One of the frightening things about them, he said, is that they actually twist in heavy weather, you can see them doing so if you look from the bridge forward. It is only dangerous if they don't, because that means they might well break!

We had mixed feelings as we watched the towering island get smaller and smaller. There was no head wind as we headed east for Cape Town, what wind there was came from behind and must have been blowing at much the same speed as we were travelling. Standing at the bow we watched the effortless soaring and water skimming of the Skuas. They rarely had to flap their wings at all. The top of the mountain was clouded, though runnels of snow were just visible for a while below the cloud.

How mixed the feelings of my parents must have been when they left in 1956. Having lived there for three and a half years they left a mark on the island and its life that the mere three and half week visit by us could in no way match. Their time on Tristan proved to be the great pivot of their lives, changing their outlook and focus forever. The place remained always a topic of conversation, reminiscence and interest for ever afterwards. They left thinking that they would never ever see any of the islanders again, for in those days there was little movement away from the island. However they were on long leave from Rhodesia in England in 1961 or 1962, after the volcanic eruption when the whole population was evacuated to Britain and so, to their great delight,

they did meet up with them all again.

I am the only member of our family to make the trip back to Tristan. It is not an easy place to get to and it takes time and money, though the actual voyage from Cape Town and back we did not think at all prohibitive. Perhaps too I am the one member of my family for whom the island most became a sort of *Narnia*, a place of deep longing, a *Promised Land*, a *Garden of Eden*. Not only have I always wanted to return to the actual place I have also developed a wider penchant for windswept and isolated places in general. My first serious attempt to return was not to Tristan itself, but to the Falklands, where I very nearly did end up, but had to settle for St Helena instead when the priest on the Falklands renewed his contract. Tropical islands do not interest me anywhere near as much as temperate or sub arctic or antarctic ones.

Our 2012 trip was hugely memorable. The most poignant moment of all was standing on the deck as we drew near to the settlement and seeing once more, with adult eyes, the beautiful, strange, remote pivot of my whole family's life, a small, homely village, lit up by early morning sun in a stiff, cold breeze, defying the sublime vastness of great mountain and wild ocean. It was a sort of home-coming and although much had changed, there was no sense of disillusionment. The islanders them-selves were as remembered; different, hospitable, kind, reticent and resourceful. Though of course also very human and fallible with the quirks, oddities and eccentricities common to humanity with a few extra, peculiar to isolated island life which add to rather than detract from their attractiveness.

Both Diana and I left feeling immensely privileged and enriched by our visit and were half tempted to offer ourselves for a stint as priest and wife. However the Island needs someone younger and able to commit to several years, not a retired nostalgic like myself. The post of Chaplain to the Island has been readvertised, and once I get to England I will challenge every comfortable parish

priest I see with the allurements of a vocation on the most interesting island fragment in the world. Irresistible surely to anyone with a sense of adventure.



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