

Year 2 weeks 21 – 29

Remembrance and Advent: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

Candles: years ago John bought some large “church” candles from a small shop in Loughborough, and stored them in his workshop here. Two of them provided our sole lighting in the farmhouse in December 1999, when the “tempest” brought down all the power lines for miles around. And on Saturday 8th November we lit another on the night John’s mother died. She had been quietly courageous for over ten years as she endured the spread of cancer. But after the death of John’s father eighteen months ago, she was ready to join him. Sunday, 9th November would have been his birthday. It was also Remembrance Sunday. We were so glad that we’d last seen her only a couple of weeks earlier when we visited in October. The scented candle flame burned steadily for several days until we set out for England for her funeral.

As we often remark, when you walk through the hills and forests around the farmhouse, you come across frequent unexpected reminders of the conflicts which have ravaged this tiny corner of Europe. On Remembrance Sunday we drove along a small road we had never explored; the map showed it winding up the hillside above the small village of Lusse, then stopping at the grazing pastures on top of the high ridge overlooking Alsace. A perfect place to catch the last of the autumn forest colours. We drove through Lusse, through the last hamlet of Trois Misons (which has a tiny chapel, more than three houses, and a garden with mechanical water-driven fantasy contraptions) and past the huntsmen in trilby hats (taking liquid refreshment at their hunters’ hut, Sunday being a permitted hunting day). We parked at the top where the road ran out. Shafts of sunlight lit up the autumn leaves and forest tracks. A small notice on a tree identified the spot as “Gare Lussehof, 820m”. We wished that we had our large dictionary with us to find a secondary meaning for “gare”, as this seemed too deserted and inaccessible a spot for a railway station. An equally small notice high up on another tree shed some light, labelling Le Tacot, where a certain M. Jean Joseph had discovered traces of the Lordonbahn narrow gauge line which ran, during the 1914-1918 war, between Villé and Wissembach to supply the German troops. A third tree was labelled “Terminus téléphérique “Eberhardtbahn” venant du Petit Rombach”. The internet has so far provided pictures of Lordonbahn locomotives, but I would like to find some old photos of the cable car from Petit Rombach. It is hard to visualise the substantial engineering projects to put in place for defences on the mountainous eastern border between France and Germany.

A couple of days previously, we’d walked along an engineering feat from a much earlier era, the so-called Pagan Wall. Its origins and purpose are uncertain, although it encircles a promontory which was fortified throughout the ages by castles and subsequently the convent of Ste Odile. The views across the Rhine valley from the convent are spectacular; but the wall itself is engulfed by forest. It was reconstructed at various times, and thorough archaeological investigations were undertaken throughout the Second World War, as the Germans wished to prove it was built by a Germanic tribe, and that therefore Alsace should be restored to German ownership. More recent opinion suggests late Celtic origins (250 – 100 BC), with the Romans using it as part of a vast defence *against* Germanic incursions.

On Armistice Day I joined Nicola at a wreath laying ceremony honouring the US dead of the “lost battalion” (the 141st of Texas, the regiment of Fort Alamo) and the 442nd. In my ignorance I was unaware of the battle of Bruyères / Biffontaine, which is said to be one of the ten most important in the history of the US; it is illustrated on the walls of the Pentagon; it also took a toll (killed or wounded) of 16,000 Americans, French and Germans. In October 1944, following the liberation of Bruyères, the 141st was surrounded and cut off above the tiny village of Biffontaine. In driving rain, under heavy fire, without munitions, water or food their situation was desperate. The 442nd was composed of men from Hawaii and from the internment camps set up in the US after Pearl Harbour for Americans of Japanese origin (which I found interesting after the vivid descriptions of the internees in “Snow Falling on Cedars”). They had recently arrived from Italy, covered in glory. It was the 442nd who then fought through to and freed the remains of the lost battalion. And their bravery subsequently led towards Hawaii becoming the 50th state of the USA.

We drove through mist and drizzle along forest tracks for several miles before we came to a small clearing with a memorial. Twenty minutes later, the official procession along this “Chemin de la Paix” emerged from the mist. The mayor of the small village, two flag bearers, two very young French soldiers, a few veterans and families descended from their cars (with taped music, sadly no musicians) and short speeches were made and wreaths laid. Afterwards we chatted to the old men, one of whom as a boy had led the liberating American army part of the way through the forest (until his mother said it was too dangerous). They were particularly pleased to have had Nicola as a representative of the US at their ceremony. They are still in contact with one of the veterans from Honolulu (it sounds as if he married a local French girl). They issued a warm invitation to go and inspect all the documentation some day!

Apart from these three unexpected encounters with history, life has continued quietly here. John’s summer and autumn garden centre prize money was spent on fig, medlar, and quince trees (more hole-digging!). The road into the village which was widened last autumn was inaugurated this October by Regional Deputy Poncelet (elections must be due soon). Un-awed by his august presence, we gave the ceremony a miss and concentrated on tree planting and bonfires (and collecting walnut windfalls).

Heavy colds meant that we both missed most of the Geography Festival (on the theme of Water this year). I did, however, revive in time for the Changing of Water into Wine. St Dié cathedral was packed for this debate between a theologian and geographer on the Marriage of Cana. The geographer got carried away discussing the grape types of Palestine, and the use of water to dilute the strong wine and at one point came out with the odd observation: “Of course we too are used from childhood to diluting wine, and drinking it with meals, unlike the English whose inebriation is due to always drinking wine without food at wine and cheese parties”. At question time I was tempted to diminish Anglo-French relations still further by asking whether the geographer had visited the UK since the fifties!

At the end of this lecture, the Museum Conservator who is used to giving tours of the Cathedral windows to small groups (I was once an audience of one) had a captive audience, and had to give his "tour" from the lectern to a seated audience of several hundred! The windows are all modern following the dynamiting of the Cathedral by the retreating German army shortly before St Die's liberation in November 1944 and are very dramatic.

The last flea markets of the year produced the usual interesting finds: I rescued a Wedgwood Peter Rabbit plate (the stall holders were most amused when I translated the English inscription for them of "Peter was not very well during the evening. His mother put him to bed and made some camomile tea; one tablespoonful to be taken at bedtime"). Nicola bought a charming tortoise-shaped night light. And at the last minute we beat down the price of a bakelite Ultra Fex camera that John had been eyeing up.

For much of October John had been looking forward to his birthday celebration and had selected "Aux Armes" in Ammerschwihir. It's become a tradition that we go gastronomically more extravagant on his birthday. This year his birthday fell on a Sunday and, when we sat down with a menu, we found that "Aux Armes" was only proposing one set 89 euro Sunday menu with no choices, with nothing on it any of us fancied. I also found the atmosphere unbearable haughty. It was with a sense of relief that we made our escape, and ended up with a choice of menus in a tiny restaurant in the ancient walls of Ribeauvillé (the wine village we'd stayed in on our first visit to Alsace some twenty years ago!) Later in the week, rather than a trip to one of the three-star restaurants in Strasbourg, we went to a small restaurant in Lièpvre run by the chef who'd demonstrated a trout and horseradish recipe at last year's Geography Festival. An excellent (and remarkably cheap) birthday meal was finally had!

Fanny's photographs of local barn door-ways and neighbours' rabbits and hens bore fruit at the Livestock Show at Etival-Clairefontaine at the end of October. The village community hall was packed with squawking birds, (the prize winning ones all seemed to be strutting and preening as if aware of their status). Fluffy rabbits shrank into the corners of their cages. Nicola, of course, wanted to buy all the rabbits that hadn't win a prize, but we distracted her by introducing her to fellow artist, Fanny. It turned out that they'd both painted the same house in Fouchifol! Although I recognised the doorways and windows, I have to admit that I couldn't identify which neighbours rabbits and chickens featured in the foregrounds. But we were amazed how many paintings she'd completed in a short time. She's very skilful.

Over in Nottingham it looked as if the Christmas illuminations had been up for at least a month. Here they won't be illuminated until Advent starts in December. Even the famous large Christmas Markets of Alsace didn't start until this weekend (29th / 30th November). One small Vosgian village of about 100 inhabitants near us had the idea, three years ago, of trying to do something similar to the Alsace markets. For just one night, the stables all around its village green are taken over by artists and craftsmen from neighbouring villages. So last night, we drove there through misty country lanes with no illumination.

As we got out of the car, we could hear the faint tinkle of sleigh bells and could see the lights round the stable doorways. Saint Nicholas, in his bishop's costume, walked up to us, along with his sinister companion Pere Fouettard (who terrifies small children as he checks up on their bad deeds during the past year). Fortunately our past misdemeanours were not investigated, and the good bishop offered us a lollipop and a clementine. In one barn strawberries were being coated in white chocolate, in another metal was being beaten into elegant candlesticks. We tasted or examined honey, ceramics with delicate dragonflies or fire breathing dragons, wooden toys, garlic pots, jars of snail delicacies, mulled wine, watercolours, jewellery, nougat, and beeswax candles.

This delightful start to Advent was followed by tonight's "around the nativity" concert in one of the large churches in St. Dié. There were old canticles and chants (including the "Alleluia" from the beautifully illuminated St Dié graduel), spirituals, a touch of Charles Aznavour, a Spanish dance, and even Snowman music. They sang in French, German, Latin, Italian, and even a heavily accented English. It has to be said that elegant Frenchmen singing negro spirituals in dinner jackets don't quite look the part - especially the one with a huge Jimmy Edwards handlebar moustache. And next time the "Snowman" music is piped through the shopping centre, just imagine you're hearing "wokking through zee errr."

As we prepare to put up our French decorations, we wish you all a peaceful month ahead. And our heartfelt thanks go to family and friends in the UK who lavished us with hospitality, support and friendship on both our October and November visits.