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Café flirtations, embroidery threads and maps: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

At the airport bookshop on one of my recent trips back from the UK (Helen writing here), I spotted a couple of books I wanted. As it was one of those three-for-the-price-of-two offers, I speculatively bunged in “Pretty girl in crimson rose” by Sandy Balfour. One of its many pleasures has been identifying with the process of an émigré becoming a resident, by making sense of the culture through learning the rules for solving its fragmentary clues as well as crossword clues. This sense of our remaining outsiders in French culture and in a small French village, whilst relishing the occasional small insights, links the following episodes of everyday life.

We often look at the carved inscriptions in the pink sandstone above local village doorways. When we first arrived, Entre-deux-Eaux’s finest old doorway was part of a ruined house, which has since been demolished, though the lintel is incorporated into a “feature” on the site of the old public lavatories near the church. However, neighbouring Mandray has retained many elaborate doorways and even produced a booklet about them. It is interesting how the act of clutching a booklet makes it quite acceptable, even flattering, to stare at someone’s house without being intrusive. Visiting friend Ann H. and I talked to many Mandray inhabitants as we familiarised ourselves with changing door and window architectural styles. The family returning from school for lunch to the most imposing *maison de maitre*, where we started our tour, were not the descendants of the original peasant-made-good. But the dear old man, whose garden we so fervently admired at the end of our stroll, had lived all his life in his house with the trough of running water outside, as had his parents and grandparents. And I recently saw a lovely little old woman outside; I wonder whether she is his sister or wife?.

Clutching our guide book labelled us firmly as tourists, and this definition seemed to give us a validity. We also impressed ourselves, by the end, by being able to recognise a *chapeau de gendarme* window lintel and an *ostensoir* carved symbol. Flushed with pleasure, Ann H. and I retired to their village bar.

Despite recent renovations, the inside of the bar was chaotic, with only two tables free of junk. The large table had three generations of bar family and dog consuming lunch. The small table had an elderly man with a wine glass. With a wave of his hand we were summoned over to his table and coffees ordered. There was a curious atmosphere, a certain deference, as our companion’s wine glass was frequently refilled: a valuable customer, but not a respected one. Everybody else silently watched our conversation unfold. Our companion was an engineer, a German who’d worked and raised his family in Lorraine after the war, and who’d been settled in Mandray for many years in retirement. But still obviously, like us, an outsider

He later called his friend over from the big table to join our table. His friend, a typical Vosgian villager in his blue overalls, eyed us speculatively. “Since my wife died, I’ve had to pay the café to feed me every day. Are you married?” he

asked. Ann H. and I beat a gracious retreat! We strolled to the last of the four Mandray water mills, which was converted at the turn of the last century into a saw mill and recently restored to working order.

John and I have always wished we knew more of the history of our village. What were the two waters between which its name implies it lies? Did it have as many water mills as Mandray, or has lack of water always been a problem? Last week we added a few more fragments of information. Whilst John's sister Ann and her husband Derek were staying with us, we received a tentative request to help sort out Danielle Laine's sister Giselle's embroidery threads. (She had bought an American pattern by mail order which most unfairly only had the colours listed by their English (not US) names and numbers, whereas her huge box of threads of all colours of the rainbow contained only French threads. There would seem to be scope for an EU directive standardising embroidery thread numbers). Now, Giselle is the mother of our farmer Dominique Duhaut (the more prosperous one, of more ample proportions). She lives in the downstairs floor of the large family farm, next to the barns and old milking parlour, whilst Dominique and his wife have the upstairs floor. Given Ann's interest and expertise in embroidery and cross stitch (not to mention the opportunity to see inside a working farm) we stopped off to help.

Once the appropriate threads for the pattern had been identified, we were ushered from the large farmhouse kitchen table to see all her canvas, embroidery and cross-stitch masterpieces, framed in the parlour. Local farmhouse parlours are like the parlours of our grandparents with their heavy furniture, dark pictures, ornate chairs and best china and glass - and probably as infrequently entered. But my eyes focussed on the table. There lay scrolls of maps showing all Dominique's plots of grazing land owned and rented across swathes of the commune.

So just as everyone was poised to leave, we had a fascinating discussion starting with field names. Giselle and Dominique both said that the names like our *les Irotes* no longer meant anything. (I'd already heard that they were the names written down after the French Revolution by enumerators from the distant capital, who would not have understood the Vosgian dialect and accents). They reeled off their meaningless field names, including *le Moulin*, the mill. But no, they'd never heard of there being a water mill in Entre-deux-Eaux in the old days. In fact Giselle had heard the village name came from *deux hauts* (two heights or hills) rather than *deux eaux* (confirming John's friend Tony's suggestion). But there used to be an old potato flour mill opposite retired Farmer Gaunand's. From that ensued a discussion of potatoes (the chute under their parlour carpet for emptying potatoes into the storage bin in the cellar), and the wartime use of potatoes for making wine (dreadful stuff), in the pre-regulation days when everyone still had their own still.

This led to the inevitable war stories, and one that was new to us. We knew that our house was home to five daughters, their mother and father (the village electrician and small holder, known since childhood as *le capitaine* from his habit of bossing everyone around) and an elderly aunt (whose separate kitchen and parlour/ bedroom were still in evidence when we moved in). Apparently the elderly aunt was kind to the German officers during the

war, and it was due to her that Entre-deux-Eaux, unlike the surrounding villages, was not destroyed when the Germans retreated at the end of the war in front of the American liberating troops. Perhaps it should be taken with a pinch of salt – this was after all her great-niece who was telling the tale!

This being the week of the D-day celebrations, perhaps we should include another war-time story, this time told by Jean-Robert (who, incidentally, has retired on grounds of ill-health from his ailing, or bankrupt, patisserie shop). His father, a baker, was deported with all the able-bodied men of St Dié during the war. He was not imprisoned as his trade was useful. He was treated as one of the family by his German “host” family and slept in their house, whereas the Russian deportees had to sleep with the animals in the barns. He was one of the few fortunate deportees from St Dié to return home after the war.

Somehow Jean-Robert’s wartime tales got interwoven with tales of a notorious Mandray family (was he hinting that they were collaborators or black marketeers during the war?). Anyway, if you nowadays want freezers full of illegally poached meat or a false driving permit (if you have too many speeding endorsements on yours), sleepy, charming Mandray is the centre of such criminality. Now that’s not in our little guide book.

One of the things we like about the Sunday flea markets is the way they re-animate hamlets which look almost deserted when you drive through at other times. One of the first flea markets this year was at Nompatelize. A barn wall by the main road records in large letters the dates when World War I and World War II battles brought death and destruction to the village. That had previously been, for us, its only identifying feature. That Sunday, stalls wound up a back street we’d never noticed. There were more stalls in the hidden main square outside the *Mairie* and schoolhouse, and below the hill-top church. Though, as the wind got up, the unfortunate stall-holders at the highest point had to scurry to retrieve or hold down their flapping exhibits.

The real treasure trove lay within the *Mairie* outbuildings, where old school maps were being sold off. Do you remember those old oil cloth maps which would be hung from an easel or blackboard? The teacher would point with a cane to all the shiny pink parts of the world and we would obediently chant their names. Or there were all those Useful Products of the World charts with corn, rubber and pig iron. We were much taken with these French equivalents with their different highlighted colonies, and would have liked to acquire a French railway or canal map, had they not been priced with dealers rather than bargain-hunters in mind. For a price, we could also have acquired some dusty ceremonial French standards to unfurl on Bastille Day, a fire extinguisher or some firemen’s and policemen’s uniforms.

I wonder when those maps were last used in the school. I once accidentally went into a classroom in Mandray. We were looking for an art exhibition which we thought might be in the *Mairie*. The room was so silent from the outside that it was easy to mistake it for a salon for art-works rather than excitable eight-year-olds. The children were sitting at desks in rows and writing industriously. Without any cautionary words to them, the young schoolmaster came out onto the square and pointed us in the right direction. Not a squeak

from within. It felt like a time warp.

If there is a sense of our groping to make a picture out of these jigsaw puzzle pieces, and to imagine people's lives from the goods that they are selling off, I wonder what picture a French person would form of us from the discarded goods we are scooping up. So far at flea markets this year, our purchases (average price £1.50) have been a flamboyant ceramic bowl (with handle) embossed with ducks and water-lilies, a plastic battery-operated dancing bullock (clothed), a mechanical calculator, a pierced metal plate with a crusader/knight embracing or stabbing a winged lion and an extremely rusty cast iron casserole.

Why? Well we can just see some of Nicola's potted plants, especially orchids in the bowl, and what better birthday present for her than a dancing bullock? (a small revenge for that irritating croaking frog and that twee garden gnome water sprinkler). A second mechanical calculator obviously marks a start to a mechanical calculator collection (and reminds John of his school days when they learnt to use them). The collection may remain at two, though, as the next one we saw was priced at over £50. The metal plate came from our favourite flea market this year, at Denipaire. A real village community spirit. The primary school had obviously been studying artists, with bold paintings in the style of Matisse and Picasso exhibited round the playground, and a bridge over the stream "wrapped" in the style of Christo. (Their project notes indicated profound regret that France Telecom wouldn't let them wrap the phone box, and the *maire* had refused to permit the street light to become an artistic installation). There was a horse and barouche giving rides round the village streets. And the men were organising a great barbecue production line. So I just had to buy something there, even though not in need of a plate with holes. As for the casserole... Our final visit with Ann and Derek was to the Staub kitchenware factory shop in Turkheim. Similar sized cast iron casseroles there cost around £70, so a seventy pence one was irresistible. "All it needs is a bit of elbow grease" said the owner encouragingly. All went well as John scrubbed it with abrasive sand, but unfortunately the French rust-remover he'd purchased some time ago turned out to be a thick black paint coating as well. John's fingers are still black and he needs to put the maltreated casserole on the bonfire to burn off the paint before it will be useful in the kitchen!

In between these fragments of everyday life, we haven't omitted more touristy activities. This was, after all, Ann and Derek's first trip, and we wanted them to see as much as possible after the scattering of John and Ann's parents' ashes in the peace and quiet of our orchard, which they'd loved. So we also have happy memories of the storks and patisseries of Munster, the exhilarating dry sledge run at the Col de la Schlucht (and the late May views of snow), the intricate crystal glass museum at Baccarat, Kaiser Wilhelm's restored castle at Haut Koenigsburg, strolls through the vineyards round the old walls of St Hippolyte and around Senones, and the art nouveau splendour of Nancy. And their souvenirs? A cast iron Staub casserole and ridged grill platter (purchased en route to the airport). Unfortunately Basel Airport wouldn't allow the latter offensive weapon onto the plane as hand luggage. Fortunately we'd stayed behind as they went through the baggage check. It will join us on our drive to the UK in a fortnight, along with their casserole.

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