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Creole and *Criollo*: A Caribbean culture clash

In April this year, Sarah Barber finally realised an ambition to visit a part of the Caribbean which tourism seldom reaches. It creates a dilemma: if outsiders knew about it, they could lobby to protect a culture which that same tourism would destroy.

To the Iberian American community a *criollo* is an American-born European: to the British, a creole is an American of African descent. Both live in the Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, tiny islands 140 miles off Nicaragua.

Since 1928 it has been a province within the Republic of Colombia, accessed via Bogotá or Panama City. Allegiances on the islands are therefore complex, and had early 20th-century history been different, could have joined the USA. But about a third of the populations of each island, known as *Raizal* (literally, ‘rooty’) refer to their homeland as St Andrew, Old Providence (to distinguish it from New Providence in the Bahamas) and St Catherine’s – “we’re not Colombians” – and their culture, albeit threatened, is akin to Barbados, Jamaica or St Kitts and Nevis.

In the seventeenth century Europeans competed for space and liberty in Atlantic tropical waters, and fresh from defeating the Armada, the English saw here an opportunity to build an isolated Protestant New Jerusalem and to sock it to the Catholic tyrant on the Spanish Main. In 1630, the Calvinist lords active at the court of Charles I established the Providence Island Company, which staved off Spanish attack for ten years. After 1655, half way between Jamaica and the central American mainland, settlers in the former used the islands as an outpost to attack Spanish shipping. The pirate, Sir Henry Morgan, also known as the Governor of Jamaica, gave his name to several geographical features, including a pair of rounded mountain peaks separated by a crack – *Culo del Morgan* – and a point on Santa Catalina marked by ‘his cannon’ purported to be where heretics were burnt. When in 1699 the Company of Scotland failed to establish a colony at Darién, Panamá, many sailed away to the Archipelago. The flag of San Andres is a blue and white saltire.

But the people left behind – the British rather than Spanish definition of creole-born – were slaves. As a general rule of thumb, speak in Spanish to the islands’ Hispanics – pejoratively, ‘Spanes’: formula one star Juan Pablo Montoya has a holiday hideaway at Maracaibo Bay – and in English to the African-Caribbean *Raizals*. The roots’ people live in wooden boarded...
houses of a kind once common on Barbados (the English were obsessed with turning forest into planks), and are Protestant. In the centre of San Andres is the Presbyterian Church at Mission Hill. Gemelia, the grandmother who runs the Bush Rum shop at Mountain, Providence, worships at the Salt Creek Baptist. At the New Jerusalem Baptist overlooking Providence’s turquoise south coast, the Sunday School teacher is discussing Elijah, and the pastor is answering questions about the last days, prophesied by extreme weather conditions, when man will have to compete for water with the animals. There has been no rain for months here and little incentive for young people to be farmers of the drought.

Bush Rum distils from imported Colombian sugar, but around the islands patches of cane grow in scrubby clearings of a third of an acre. A man at Salt Creek mills with a petrol-driven crusher and boils in a giant wok-shaped ‘copper’. I did not find Alfredo Hernández McNish – “many McNish here” – but at The Hill, San Andres, a cattle-mill (using a pony) grinds cane, and sells pots of molasses and glasses of ‘liquor’. Though the main town looks like the uglier end of Benidorm, the descendants of British slavery keep alive their masters’ original definition of the dignity of planting, which gave mankind the right to a share of Eden. Nowadays they see the defence of their culture as keeping their traditional housing, language, and industries – farming, though that is under threat, and fishing which is under attack from the search for oil. Providence, in particular, is determined to preserve is isolation from the worst ravages of the tourist industry and market itself as an ecological haven and unique biosphere. Defeating the oil explorers was the Raizals last great victory. They were constituted an indigenous or tribal people under the International Labour Organisation Convention No.169 and Articles 329 and 330 of the National Constitution, guarantee the community’s rights to participate in the decisions related to the exploitation of natural resources. In both cases, failure to consult the Raizals in development decisions that infringed a way of life established in 1630, were deemed to have been infringed.

Sarah Barber’s book, The Disputatious Caribbean will be out in December. In the meantime, the English history of Providence is told by Karen Kupperman, Providence Island, 1630-1641: the other Puritan Colony (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
Left: from this house in the region of northeast Providence, built in the typical ‘chattel-house’ style of the English Caribbean is sold the rum of the island, ‘Old Providence Bush Rum’. Available as white rum or dark rum, the island does not have sufficient cane of its own to produce dark rum and so in the spring, Bush Rum is reliant on imports of sugar from Colombia and colouring it with vanilla.

Right: this is a cane mill in San Andres. In the 17th and into the 18th century, maps of the Caribbean noted the location of windmills and ‘cattle-mills’. While accounts seemed to show industrialised scales of production, what was marked on a map as a cattle-mill would have looked like this. The substitution of a pony for an ox, the plastic barrel and the pick-up truck are the only 21st century updates. Rather than fields of hundreds of acres of sugar cane, most cane grows in the scrub land, and is around 1/3 acre.

Right: this cannon pointing out into the bay at Santa Catalina is said to mark the spot on which the Spanish burnt English heretics and hung English pirates.

Left: this is a poster from one of the many campaigns of Creoles of the Raizal tradition. This one is part of the ‘Slaves in the Sea’ campaign of the Colombian archipelago of islands, but there is also a Raizal community on the Miskito coast of Nicaragua.
Histfest 2014: Collaborations and Connections

Co-ordinator, Vanessa Londen reports on this year’s postgraduate conference.

The 19th Annual Postgraduate Conference, Histfest, was run by History Postgraduates at Lancaster University from 20-22 June.

Collaboration extends from the organizing committee and successful delegates, but also to members of the Department of History, while photographer and History alumnus, Matthew Fleming, assisted with designing the programme’s cover and permitted the inclusion of his image. Further networks and promotion were established via social media and digital communication, which demonstrates the ease with which knowledge and information can be conveyed and received nowadays. In addition, the embracing of technology also acknowledges the move towards digitization as a mode of preservation within academia itself.

The event has grown exponentially in recent years, attracting students from other disciplines and institutions. Geographical transcendence was reflected in the programme itself. For instance, in Panel Six: ‘Local/Global’ were papers including: Tobias Anderson (Edinburgh), ‘Universal themes and local perspectives in the Chronicle of Khalīfa b. Khayyāt (d. 240 AH/854 CE)’; Anthony Mansfield (Keele), ‘Associating with Local Saints and Gods: The Sacred Territory of North Sea Aristocrats’ and Melanie Bashor (Oxford Brookes) whose paper was entitled: ‘Friends and Neighbours: “What shall we do now?” Examining Education Policies through Transnational Networks, 1944-1954’.

Keynote speaker was Keith Wrightson, Randolph W. Townsend Jr. Professor of History, and presented on ‘Micro-history, Global History and Entangled

Left: This year’s keynote speaker, Professor Keith Wrightson from Yale University, flanked by Professor Naomi Tadmor, and Lancaster graduate student and presenter at Histfest, Matthew Pawelski.
History’. His most recent book, Ralph Tailor’s Summer (2011) charts the history of a plague outbreak in 1636 from the perspective of a young scrivener appointed to write the wills of plague victims.

The work of delegate, Graeme William Tobyn (UCLAN) linked thematically with Professor Wrightson’s later research. His paper was ‘Plague remedies: the ‘Advice’ of the College of Physicians 1578’ within the panel ‘Growth/Decay’. Carrie de Silva of Harper Adams’ University presented on women in Agricultural Education and Research in England while current Masters’ student, Sophie Greenway (Warwick University) discussed ‘Growing well. Dirt, health and the home gardener in mid twentieth century Britain’ within the same panel.

The conference closed with a shift towards interdisciplinary methodologies. The seventh and final panel entitled simply ‘Approaches’ highlighted alternative ways of reading history through a range of different sources. York University’s Andrew Foster examined the use of charters and wills in the early Cartulary entries of religious institutions in York and London. Economic PhD candidate, Matthew Pawelski (Lancaster), followed on from Wrightson looking at ‘New Approaches to Accounting History and its benefits for Micro-History’. My own paper (‘All that Glitters: The Beautiful Freaks of Diane Arbus’) focused on the use of the photographic image as both a text and an historical source. The artist’s representations collapsed visual, spatial, geographical and social boundaries, as exemplified through the exploration of Arbus’s eccentric subjects, which she collected throughout her photographic career. Moving the focus from one mediation to another, the conference closed with Joe Henthorn’s paper, ‘History at Play: Studying the History of Science through Games’, which hybridized the traditional discipline of the History of Science with the rapidly developing field of Game Theory. Centred on rule-based interactions of play, the paper posed an alternative viewpoint from which to access and trace ‘futures past’. As we are on the threshold of Histfest’s twentieth anniversary, this seemed an appropriate end point as collaboration ultimately creates new forms and perspectives of the past.

After what was an intense but stimulating three days of presentations and discussions, Wrightson’s keynote address continues to play heavily on my mind. It did more than simply transcend the old roots of micro-history and highlight the new off-shoots of entangled history.

Moving away from nationalist confines and comparative histories which are often static and synchronic, imposing the artificiality of separate homogenised categories onto past narratives, Wrightson’s approach focus on closely studying the lived experience, while examining the connectedness of historical networks, transformative interactions and the shift toward tracing processes, human relations and transfers. What Keith Wrightson said rings true: ‘We live our life in many contexts’ and as academics, we constantly frame our research area and ‘define space’. Our areas of interest may have differed greatly but as Histfest demonstrated, while our worlds may not be fully integrated, they continue to develop and intersect at the most stimulating and remarkable junctures.
The region and its heritage

Lancaster University is setting up a new Regional Heritage Centre: drawing on the University’s experience and engaging with the regional community. Angus Winchester introduces it.

The History Department is now home to a new unit, the Regional Heritage Centre, which has been set up to foster interaction between the University and the regional community, working in the field of cultural heritage, as broadly defined. It builds on a long tradition of community engagement, particularly in the fields of local history and archaeology, not only in the History Department itself but also in the activities previously undertaken by the Centre for North West Regional Studies, founded back in the early 1970s. The strong links with the regional community, built up over many years, form the basis for an expanded programme of work. From the University’s perspective, the new Centre will contribute to Priority 3 of the University’s Strategy to 2020 – active engagement and civic leadership in the local and regional community, contributing to the social and cultural life of the region as well as bringing indirect benefits to the University.

The new Centre is directed by Professor Angus Winchester, who oversees a team consisting of Dr Sam Riches (Academic Coordinator), Dr Sarah Rose (Assistant Editor VCH Cumbria project) and Mrs Christine Wilkinson (Administrator). Other members of the History Department are increasingly becoming involved in aspects of the Centre’s work.
1. An annual programme of public events aimed at the knowledgeable lay audience in the North West, building on the programmes run for many years by Centre for North West Regional Studies. Keying into established networks, particularly in the fields of local history and archaeology, the programme disseminates the fruits of research into the region’s heritage. The core of the Centre’s programme are its Saturday study days and conferences: the schedule for 2014-15 includes days on topics as various as monastic houses, county maps, urban history, travel writing and oral history, as well as the long-established Archaeology Forum in March, at which the fruits of recent archaeological work in the region are presented. Study afternoons and a new Local & Regional History Seminar series also form part of the offerings, which aim to stimulate the grey cells of the many people, often deeply knowledgeable, for whom the region’s past holds an enduring fascination. Details of the programme and how to enrol will be found at http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/depts/cnwrs/.

2. Supporting the work of community heritage organisations. The Centre is developing ways of using the History Department’s expertise in the service of heritage organisations, large and small. This consultancy work will foster links between the University and both voluntary and public bodies, including local heritage groups. The Centre can offer a range of services, including academic underpinning, enabling outside bodies to draw on the research expertise of members of staff at Lancaster; student placements, whereby a student carries out research which will contribute to a project, as part of their scheme of study; specialist skills support and training, for example in oral history techniques or archival research; event organisation, to help organisations to disseminate their activities; and publication of the fruits of a project.

3. Regional Heritage in Schools Programme. A programme of interlocking engagement activities with secondary schools in the North West to tap into the increasing prominence of Local History at Key Stage 3 in the new school History curriculum. The idea is to use local and regional heritage as a channel for closer engagement with schools (something the History Department is keen to develop).

4. The Victoria County History (‘VCH’) of Cumbria project (website at http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk/) is also based in the Centre. This is an established, long-term project, supported by the Cumbria County History Trust, which works with volunteer amateur historians to research and write articles on the history of every community in Cumbria. The VCH is a national work of historical reference, co-ordinated from the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London. Since its inception in 2010, the VCH Cumbria project has built a strong network of volunteers (over 100 have contributed to date). It provides training events and materials and is pioneering new ways of working with volunteers to research and write for the VCH.

The fruits of the VCH Cumbria project, are in an online resource bank at http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk/data-bank. The RHC is seeking funds to digitise the records of working-class life in the region and plans electronic publishing of CNWRS Resource Papers.
More from Spatial Humanities

In Clio50 1.1 Chris Donaldson reported from the Spatial Humanities project. Here he introduces us to more graphical and digital representations of the region on our doorstep, and new ways to look at the familiar.

Right:
On the right is a line-density map, displaying the routes travelled by Gray, Young and Pennant. It indicates the relative frequency of places mentioned:

a.) Derwentwater;
b.) Ullswater;
c.) Windermere.

You can find out more information about the project at the website:

http://www.lancs.ac.uk/mappingthelakes/.
The Lake District has long been portrayed in poems, guidebooks and paintings and one of the project’s earliest pilot studies sought to show how GIS technology could analyse historical Lake District tourists’ accounts to show how perceptions of the region have changed over time.

In 1769, Thomas Gray published his epistolary journal of his tour while Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote notes of his ramble through the western fells in 1802. Although these texts are ostensibly accounts of the same landscape, a GIS mapping of them reveals a set of radically divergent patterns.

Gray’s tour was a fifteen-day trip by coach and horseback from Brough to Lancaster via the picturesque Ullswater, Keswick and Thirlmere. Coleridge, by contrast, went on a nine-day odyssey on foot from the writer’s house in Keswick to the coastal village of St. Bees, and thence famously over Scafell Pike to Eskdale and Coniston before returning homeward over Dunmail Raise. In some ways, these contrasting routes complemented the contrasting temperaments of the two authors themselves, with Gray’s linear, measured movements contrasting with Coleridge’s erratic meanderings. Yet, these routes also indicate crucial differences in touristic attitudes and practices.

Gray’s account, though famously one of the earliest documents of its kind, exemplifies many of the tendencies of later picturesque tourism in the Lake District. Gray travelled on coach roads, in a route that took him through densely populated areas to sites of visual grandeur and beauty. He was, in so many words, an outsider who came to the Lakes with a Claude-glass in his pocket and an itinerary in hand.

Coleridge, by contrast, was a resident of the region at the time he set off for the western fells, and his irregular route would seem to reflect a desire to avoid well-trodden paths and instead to seek new experiences and sensations. In short, whereas Gray was rather unabashedly what we would call a tourist, Coleridge would have likely seen himself as a traveller.

More recent developments have created more accurate analysis of Gray and his contemporary tourists, Arthur Young (1768), and Thomas Pennant, passing through in 1769 and 1772.

All relied on local carriage roads and turnpikes, drawing attention to improvements in local roadways during the 1750s and ’60s which influenced visitors’ tours.

These improvements established standard routes that afforded swifter and safer access to several of the region’s main settlements, but distinguished the places connected by, or at least visible from, these routes as the sites most worthy of the tourist’s attention. Thus, the parts most frequently travelled were located in the eastern half of the region (Ullswater, Derwentwater and Windermere), where the majority of road improvements occurred.

Neither Gray nor Young or even Pennant—who travelled through much more of Cumberland—set foot in the (now iconic) western valleys of Wasdale and Ennerdale. For although turnpike acts were passed to improve access to this area in 1750 and ’62, the roads in this remote part of the country remained in disrepair well into the nineteenth century.
In this year of anniversaries, much attention has already been given to commemorating two that had a profound effect on creating the society in which we live today – the outbreak of World War I and the beginning of the Hanoverian monarchy in 1714. 2014 also marks a much obscurer anniversary, but one that is worth commemorating in the spirit of historical curiosity, as much for the quirkiness of the person concerned as for his significance.

Anniversary of a recluse

Andrew Jotischky on one of this year’s lesser-known commemorations.

Eight hundred years ago a Cypriot monk, Neophytos, issued his Testamentary Rule for the Monastery of the Enkleistra. Neophytos, though little known today outside Cyprus, was one of the oddest religious figures of his or any other period. Born to a peasant family in Cyprus, at the age of eighteen Neophytos was engaged by his family to marry the daughter of a neighbouring family, but in horror at the prospect of a lifetime of marriage, children and working on the land, he escaped to join a monastery. There he learned to read and write, and was trained in the monastic liturgy. After only a few years, Neophytos seems to have become bored, and abandoned the monastery for the life of a wandering holy pilgrim. He crossed to the Holy Land and travelled around the holy sites for several months in search of a mentor – a hermit from whom he could learn the techniques of solitary religious life. Unable to find the right person, he...
returned disappointed to Cyprus, in the hope of setting off for Mt Latros, in Asia Minor, which was famous for its monastic colonies. He never made it there, because as he was waiting for a ship at the port of Paphos, he was robbed, arrested for vagrancy and thrown into prison. Paphos is now a popular beach resort, but in the twelfth century it was a sleepy port in a quiet Byzantine province. When he was released, the penniless Neophytos wandered into the hills to the east of the port, and found a cave in which to take shelter. In his Testamentary Rule he recalls the moment in September 1157 when he discovered the cave that was to be his home for the rest of his life. He decided that rather than looking for a guide in religious life, he would simply teach himself by living in the cave. Neophytos might have sunk into complete obscurity had it not been for the bishop of Paphos, Basil Kinnamos. Hearing about Neophytos, Basil decided that allowing him to live as an anchorite was wasting an opportunity, and persuaded him to take on other monks – to turn his cave-hermitage into a monastery. Neophytos agreed, on condition that he could determine how the monastery would be run. The result was an unique experiment in monastic living.

Neophytos, who began to refer to himself simply as The Recluse, remained in his cave cell, which he had extended by digging further into the cliff side into a suite containing chapel and private living quarters. His own cell contained the stone tomb in which he had already decided to be buried at his death. The monks had to construct their own cells further along the cliff, and the other necessary buildings were added in the ravine below the cliff, which was itself partially filled in. Although he directed the monastery, The Recluse never appeared to the other monks. Eventually he hollowed out a space for himself above the cave chapel with a hole through which he could peer down at the monks as they attended services. The hole appeared in the ceiling of the chapel at the centre of a painting of the Ascension, so that Neophytos occupied the space in the painting where the absent Jesus was ascending to heaven. In another painting, Neophytos had himself shown being taken up – presumably to heaven – by two angels. The Testamentary Rule prescribed in detail how the monks were to live – among other things, forbidding them from complaining about the food, and banning the female sex completely from the monastic precinct, even female animals. The Testamentary Rule also appointed Neophytos’ nephew, a monk at the Enkleistra, as his successor, and insisted that he should continue the tradition of running the monastery as The Recluse. When Neophytos died, however, the nephew thought better of this prescription, and continued to live among the monks. He did follow Neophytos’ last instruction, however, which was to bury The Recluse in the tomb in his cell, so that even after death The Recluse was still bodily present at the heart of this most unusual of monasteries.
Commemorations of the World Wars of the twentieth century are much more prominent throughout the media. Here, Alan Warburton explores one of the forgotten aspects of the D-Day landings.

The recent D-Day commemorations featured many extraordinary aspects of this vast operation seventy years ago. The veterans were duly welcomed by cheering crowds and bemused by the idiot questions of often rather excited but clearly dim journalists and reporters. There was even space for the odd historian, some of them seemingly on a par with their mass media colleagues: cue Dan Snow ... At Arromanches the media noted the gentle beach and on occasion zoomed to look at the remnants of the Mulberry Harbour. The significance of the caissons seemed to be lost upon most commentators and they would have benefitted from reading two dissertations on the matter by my students over the last few years. The harbours were one of the most extraordinary engineering achievements of the twentieth century, of course, and were the products of genius as well as the labour of thousands of workers in Britain. Had they failed on D-Day there would have been no D-Day+. Of only slightly less importance was the development of ‘the funnies,’ a series of special vehicles, usually tanks, that came ashore with the first waves and enabled strong German defences to be overcome. The Americans had never trusted such admittedly strange machines and did not use them. The British and Canadians used them to good effect even when clear of the beaches and moving inland. Again a couple of dissertations from the last few years would have informed the seemingly uninformed.

Perhaps the greatest and possibly even unforgiveable oversight involved the Canadians. The ‘funnies’ had been created in large measure because of the costly Dieppe ‘raid’ in 1942. On the 6 June 1944 the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division stormed ‘Juno’ beach and Canadian forces were a significant aspect of the Normandy campaign and the later hard-fighting to clear entrenched German forces from villages and ports all along the coast from Dieppe to Dunkirk. They are hardly ever mentioned. In the Great War the small population of Canada contributed four divisions and ought from early 1915 to the end in 1918. Canada was a founding member of NATO and Royal Canadian Air Force Sabre fighters formed the most significant initial air defence of Europe until after the Korean War. Hardly any of this is ever mentioned, either in the commemorations or during the normal discussions in the media of modern or military
The French have never forgotten Les Candiens, and a visit to Dieppe includes a fish supper from the many fine eateries and a stroll along the beach front. At regular intervals along the promenade are inscribed the mains of the units that raided the port in 1942; in Normandy more widely there are many reminders of the Canadians, as well as the other ‘liberators’ from German tyranny in 1944. And as you drive along the wonderful coastal roads you pass through villages and small towns, each usually with a stone or a plaque noting their liberation by the Canadians. The praise and ceremonies for the British and American forces involved in the Normandy campaign are undoubtedly richly deserved. There are many links formed seventy years ago that have quite rightly endured. But is it a forlorn hope that just a little of the emphasis lavished upon ‘Omaha’ beach and the extensive contributions of US forces in the days and weeks after 6 June 1944 might be a little more evenly distributed to include ‘Juno’ and the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division?

Clio50 apologises that it has been unable to find a suitable Canadian-themed image to accompany this article.

The images are taken from the 2012 11 November commemoration held at The National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire - “Where Our Nation Remembers”.

The images left are of some of the wreaths laid at the central ‘citadel’ memorial, and an image from one of several biker-groups who attended the ceremony that day. Chapel Ash is an area of Wolverhampton where there is a Harley Davidson showroom. Clio50 is not sure whether the group ‘The Spirit of Chapel Ash’ is still going.

Alan Warburton is a legendary teacher whose courses, ‘Total War, 1916-1920’ and ‘New World Order, 1919-1939’ are amongst the most popular in the department.
How astronomers discovered the moon’s drunken secret

Stephen Pumfrey, historian of Renaissance ideas, science and medicine, is also a keen observer of planets and stars.

Just before his trial before the Roman Inquisition in 1633, Galileo Galilei announced that he had made yet another discovery concerning the Moon. It was twenty years since he had discovered the mountains on the moon, using the new invention of the telescope to observe the changing shadows they cast. Now, he wrote in his native Tuscan language, his telescope had revealed that the moon showed clear signs of *titubazione*. *Titubazione* means the unsteady wobbling movement of someone who is drunk, or otherwise unsteady. Conservative Catholics were already upset by Galileo’s evidence that the Moon, supposedly a perfectly round heavenly body, had a surface that was as rough as the Earth’s; now they were supposed to accept that there was drunkenness in God’s heaven.

Does the Moon totter like a tippler? Since the Moon is by far the closest and most visible planet in the night sky, we ought to be able test Galileo’s claim. We can track the motion of the Moon as it orbits the Earth in the 29 days of a lunar month or moomth, or menstrual cycle. It appears first as a crescent “new moon” low in the western sky as the Sun sets, and rapidly follows the Sun below the horizon. Over the next few nights it appears earlier and higher in the sky, but sets soon afterwards. After a week (a quarter of a month), as the Sun sets and the sky darkens, you will see a half moon high in the sky and due south, which follows the path of the Sun and sets in the west around midnight. After 15 days (half a month) a full Moon rises in the east just as the Sun sets in the west. Astronomers and astrologers describe this as “the Sun and Moon in opposition”. Anyone with a good sense of geometry and optics will be able to work out why the Moon’s appearance changes in this way.

It is easier to track the Moon in the clear skies of Greece than in cloudy Britain, so it is no surprise that
ancient Greek philosophers and astronomers such as Aristotle and Ptolemy set Europe’s agenda about the nature of the Moon. Until the era of Copernicus and Galileo, the Moon was thought to be one of the seven planets which, like Venus, Mars and the Sun, orbited the central Earth. Indeed, Aristotle assumed that all the planets (most of which are hard to observe) behave like the Moon, which is very observable. He stated that the Moon always presents exactly the same face towards the Earth, and so all the planets did the same. It was an important step in the argument that planets and stars were carried around the Earth in a set of solid concentric spheres.

We can understand why Galileo was excited by his discovery of titubazione. As a Copernican, he was always on the lookout for evidence that Aristotle was wrong and that the Earth orbited the Sun. If the Moon was free to wobble in space then perhaps the planets were not locked into earth-centred spheres.

Does the “Man in the Moon” wobble or not? Was it he or Galileo who was drunk when Galileo looked through his telescope?

Modern astronomers call it lunar libration. If Aristotle had been right we would only ever see half of the Moon. In fact, as a result of lunar libration, over a month we can see 60%. There is a very revealing time-lapsed animation on Wikipedia, which shows how the moon appears to rock and roll over its monthly cycle (url: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunar_libration).

It is amazing to think that Galileo put this cinematic sequence together in his head when he came up with his concept of a drunken Moon. He was very pleased with it, and used it as proof that the telescope was transforming human knowledge of the heavens.

However, lunar libration was first discovered by an Englishman - forty years before Galileo, and twenty years before the invention of the telescope, by William Gilbert (1544-1603), a royal physician to Queen Elizabeth I. These days, very few people indeed have Gilbert’s observational skill and are able to see lunar libration using only their naked eyes.

The best way - Gilbert’s way - is to track the dark patch near the edge of the Moon, at about 2 o’clock on its face. Over a month the distance of this patch from the edge of the Moon’s disc changes, as the animation makes clear. Like Galileo, Gilbert was one of the first Copernicans: he argued that lunar libration showed that the Moon moved freely through empty space and that the solid celestial spheres were a myth. Since 1700 the feature has been known as Mare Crisium, the Sea of Crises – a vestige of Gilbert’s, Galileo’s and others’ belief that an Earth-like Moon must have its own seas and continents. When Gilbert drew a map of the Moon (see previous page, right), to help other people track the libration, he called it Britannia! Since Elizabeth styled herself the Queen of Britain, this was a great gift to his patron.

Time for the parrot to join the choir invisible?

James Taylor was one of the fortunate few who managed to get tickets for the Monty Python reunion, and he joined the other 14,999 for an evening in the London O2.

When the five surviving members of Monty Python announced last November that they would be reuniting for a one-off show at the O2 arena in 2014, cynics were quick to point to the group’s financial motivations.

Though rich men, they’d recently lost a lawsuit filed by the producer of their 1975 film Monty Python and the Holy Grail over royalties, while John Cleese has been candid about the costs of his multiple divorce settlements (his last outing was entitled ‘The Alimony Tour’). However, fans didn’t seem to mind, and when tickets sold out in 43.5 seconds, nine more dates were added by popular demand.

Like many others, I’d secured tickets on the grounds that this would be the last chance to see the Pythons perform together live, though as someone who’d seen the Rolling Stones at Wembley Stadium in 1995 on the same logic, I couldn’t help wondering.

The O2 is, it has to be said, a soulless corporate venue. What with the glossy branding, the shopping-mall stylings, and the chain eateries, you cannot help feeling that Alan Partridge, whose ‘favourite place in the world’ is Gatwick Village, is the only person who would feel at home here.

Was it an appropriate venue for the reunion? In many ways, yes. Because it soon became clear that the Pythons, in possession of a brand as lucrative as any to be seen at the O2, were here to cash in. Buying a concert programme, souvenir lumberjack shirt, tour T-shirt, and a bottle of Becks, for example, would have left you with 10p change from £100.

But on with the show! Could the five, who had not performed live together since 1980, still cut it? Yes and no. Concerned that five old men (combined age: 361) would not provide sufficient spectacle on such a large stage, Eric Idle, who put together the show, was keen to augment the sketches with song and dance numbers. These routines, performed by a huge troupe of dancers, and choreographed by Arlene Phillips, did make the show ‘bigger’. But in themselves, they were often not particularly funny, and ultimately came across as padding.

Sketches from the TV series formed the bulk of the show – there were no references to the Holy Grail or the Life of Brian, one assumes for legal reasons. Some of the sketches chose themselves – I think this time we all expected the Spanish Inquisition, and imagine the outcry if we’d gone home without seeing the Dead Parrot! But there were also a few surprising inclusions which provided some of the show’s highlights – such as Cleese having tremendous fun with Anne
From our vantage point high up in the dome (our seats came with a vertigo warning), it was easy to gauge the popularity of individual sketches by the number of mobile phones which lit up as fans began taking photographs. The entire O2 was a sea of stars when Michael Palin told us that he’d always wanted to be a lumberjack...

Inevitably, one spends most of a show like this following the action on the giant screens behind the performers, but these were used creatively, not always simply relaying what was unfolding on stage, but also displaying Terry Gilliam animations or clips from old shows. In this way, deceased Python Graham Chapman could be brought into proceedings, and his ‘appearances’ were particularly well received.

Why does material written 40+ years ago still enjoy such tremendous popularity? Python’s humour was always resolutely anti-satirical – the shows preferred surrealism and silliness over topical digs at Harold Wilson and Ted Heath which would of course mean little today. Nor was Python characterised by the kind of sexual or racial politics that make revivals of other 70s favourites like the Benny Hill Show and Love Thy Neighbour unlikely. That said, you could sense buttocks clenching when Idle began ‘I Like Chinese’, but some subtle lyrical reworking reduced the risk of offence.

The evening’s entertainment was buoyed along by a generous helping of goodwill – the audience loved the spectacle of Pythons forgetting lines or corpsing, which more than one did during the opening Yorkshiremen sketch. Given the latitude this offered the performers, Terry Jones – certainly the weakest Python on the night – took the needless precaution of reading out his lines from a cue card during some of the sketches.

Though relatively few fans dressed up as their favourite characters – I saw only a handful of Spanish Inquisitors and a lone Gumby during the interval – it is clear that for many, the evening had a special significance. I am sure the man sitting next to me was not the only one reciting the lines to most of the sketches just before they were said on stage (I tried not to find this annoying). There is something sacred about these sketches for many Python fans, and there was something of the religious ritual about the evening.

And thanks to the souvenir stands, after making their pilgrimage to the O2, they could buy all the relics they wanted.
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