

Buffalo – a story about Regional Care Co-operatives and nudge economics

He had wondered if the corporate clothing policy could be extended to include a black stetson. He hadn't enquired preferring to keep that part of his life to himself.

Besides he knew that most of them had worn bowler hats. He had one of them on his desk. Most people thought he had it because it was to do with 'Business.' It amused him. 'He don't disabuse them', he said to himself as though he were another.

The boots were definitely a step too far; he contented himself with a wry smile. Those cowboy boots were a Hollywood creation. Most wore round ordinary boots. He wore some too and most thought it showed him to be a 'weekend biker.'

He still thought he might be able to do the bootlace tie.

Brian Brein,' 'I before 'E' except after Brian' his classmates had said, frequently. His teacher regularly commented that he did not know how had his family had let someone steal away the 'O'. He hadn't understood.

That changed, a little, after he'd been top of the class in the first year. He'd become Brian Brains, ' he doesn't know if he's coming or going'.

He had always been interested in bison from the very first time he'd seen them on a wild life television programme. They said there were thousands, millions, and the ground had shook as much as an earthquake when they moved. In winter they stood still, waiting the winter out. That much power and passivity intrigued him, and terrified him. Irrational, he'd argued away his fears to himself.

Awful, they were in the true sense of the word. Not awesome as it was used by first youth, then the wider population. They were 'Well more' than some. He was full of awe for them.

He wasn't a bison. Or a native American Indian. Awe full. If he had been more public with his interests he would have been called a cowboy but he knew more accurately he was a pelter, a skinner. He knew he was. In his ethics and actions he stood in the tradition.

He wasn't a man of vision. He was procedural. It took an unerring stoicism to kill that many of the beasts.

The Native Americans were like the wolves, in tune with the natural ways. They made the bison move; running them for hours to tire them, then it was safe to get close and to bring them down through blood loss from the arrows fired into their

sides.

He was altogether more industrial, the application of scientific business methods. Objective, he asserted to himself at the start, and now he wrote and spoke of it being grounded in 'contemporary business practice'. It was an industry, a market, that he was shaping and managing.

Early on he had become captivated by the western theme, he saw the work as trailblazing, pioneering, setting off like the wagon trains into uncharted territory. He was deep down aware that although they had been going where there were no maps that they followed routes preceded by many before them. What was actually already existing in these lands he knew not. 'Ignorance is part of pioneering' he thought he'd read somewhere. 'Go as far as you can till you get your feet wet'. 'Ain't no one alive today who walks on water so when you get there turn around and look for somewhere in between.' He wasn't sure he was making all of this up.

He didn't know much about anthropology and what he did know he didn't want to know much more. History has two sides and he was definitely on another than those who declared a destruction of an ecology. Apologists for not making the most effective use of investment and resources. Living close to Nature inevitably meant exploiting it he thought and we do it more effectively and efficiently than they do. It all ends up the same way whether the bison dies from old age, an arrow or a rifle. He realised he spoke like a hunter. He was with the hunters all right.

Somebody, late on in the process when almost all that needed to be done had been, said it was an 'economics of vengeance'. He knew otherwise, it was vindication, of the drive that had to be made into that powerful herd.

Inchoate at first, shaped and managed into life, in its infancy it tottered. The partnership that was important, two sides of a contracted relationship working together, moving towards a contract that would lead to a market. Later Government invested millions into a Commissioning Support Programme, technical and directive, a sort of parenting programme that developed their skills as parents that had nothing to do with being a parent.

The providers were not endowed. Their development would have to be by their own hand.

It never came. Providers he thought remained like lone bison, weak, cumbersome, clumsy, unaware without the peripheral vision provided by others. It made his and others job all the easier.

Stealthily, by degrees, taking pains not to spook a stampede, they had moved till they were collected together, then directed.

He was wistful remembering lone bison. They could never survive. But there was something noble of it happening at all. There was of course the danger of the lone bison being lost. Bewildered made it all the easier to be nice to them to get what he wanted.

Others grew to be bigger. Small herds, family groups, specialised feeding areas. Yet more grouped together headed by one dominant creature. These could be dangerous when in movement.

There had been a series of unconscious steps to gathering them in this valley. The unrealised, unreleased, gave way.

And now they were there. The skill had been to make them immobile, to choose as much as bison chooses at all, and then to remove their feeding grounds. They had done this in two ways, to remove their ability to go to fresh feeding grounds, or to enfeeble where they now were, lichens were not pasture, in this valley. They had been gathered into a valley from which there was only one exit, the way they had come.

They cleaved together, in fear. It was what any animal does when treated harshly for so long. Either get close, collude, comply, do anything. Or find a safe space, get some distance, or get together in numbers. It had worked before, it was their story.

He was mournful in advance of their coming winter. They would stand waiting for a Spring that would never come for many of them. Winter hides were the best after the savagery.

It was inevitable, that sooner or later they would have to move, to run for their life.

And this also was inevitable that they would be there at the valley. For them as they charged there would be no opening only an ending. More lead than a horse could carry, and powder enough for a wagon.

Something he'd heard a long time ago and he couldn't remember who said it or who they'd said it about.

'What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night; the breath of a buffalo in the winter time; the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset'.

He looked it up. It was attributed to Crowfoot, chief of the Canadian Blackfoot tribe.

And now all the bison were gone or safely on reserves. A reminder of what once was and won't be again.

Dammit. Now he found himself a farmer. No need for hunters now. He wasn't prepared to be a farmer.

Metaphorically there was blood on his hands. There had been in his mind, even the salty taste that reminds him of childhood cuts from which he still had the scars. 'Suck it,' his mother had said, 'Keep I there till it's finished bleeding.'

Except the blood wasn't on his hands but on his assistants'. They had been the ones who he'd directed in negotiations. He sat there mouthing words as they made a deal, then he'd lean back and after a few minutes invariably would say 'Phone them back and tell them we're not paying that, we've found someone cheaper, and when they complain say there's no contract, and we know they've got a vacancy, they're losing money, and we're ready. 10 per cent.' They would do as they were told. Even reducing a further 5 per cent.

He liked to see his team sweat a little imagining if it was like this here in the land of plenty it was harder still down the line. 'Swimming in sweat they are.'

Fewer providers telephoned seeking referrals. Not that he was worried. Plenty more out there still he cheered even though he knew the sector had lost choice and quality

He'd got his job after most homes had closed. That was in the day of local authorities running homes. The buildings were everywhere. The big ones were converted into private elderly homes. The small ones not let to the private sector but sold. Those campus sites were taken as offices or sold for another housing estate on a village' outskirts. They showed no sign of their history.

'Summer hides.' He was making a link to buffalo again meaning threadbare, defenceless, small homes. 'Like orphaned calves stumbling, no experience to get them through the Winter, not knowing what comes next, where the water runs. Always living in the Present. Just about enough to live on, stressed out. A cheap deal to be done. Volume is Value,' he said to himself a few times.

He had kept some homes running well.

Now he was ready for the final big company. They were big and that was why they had all agreed to keep them sweet. If all else failed it was always possible to pay a smaller premium than to others. No longer. What they thought was territory where they would always roam without hindrance they would not find fenced. They would cut this herd into smaller ones paying some for some, and less for less, and none for none.

The contract had been the brass powder container. Everyone agreed to every clause. It was reasonable, indisputable sound sense.

The lead bullets were the variations he'd got through. If you agreed to the contract, sound sense, then how could you not agree to a variation. Each one was small. The way each bullet was small. You might not die from one bullet. If you were lithe you could dodge. If you were big enough you might be wounded but keep going. 'Poisoning'll do.' But if you took a few bullets you were dead either through life functions giving up, or through lying down letting blood ooze away, warm at first, even comforting that you were still alive, then sticking and sweet smelling, odd how could you become as you were aware of the heat surrounding you.

He caught himself. He was thinking he'd remembered something else that he'd probably heard once. He didn't understand it then and he didn't now. He wasn't going to spend any time wondering why.

In beauty we must walk ... love the land ... don't try to own it, we're but a branch of an ancient tree. We are tears in river that longs for the arms of the sea.'