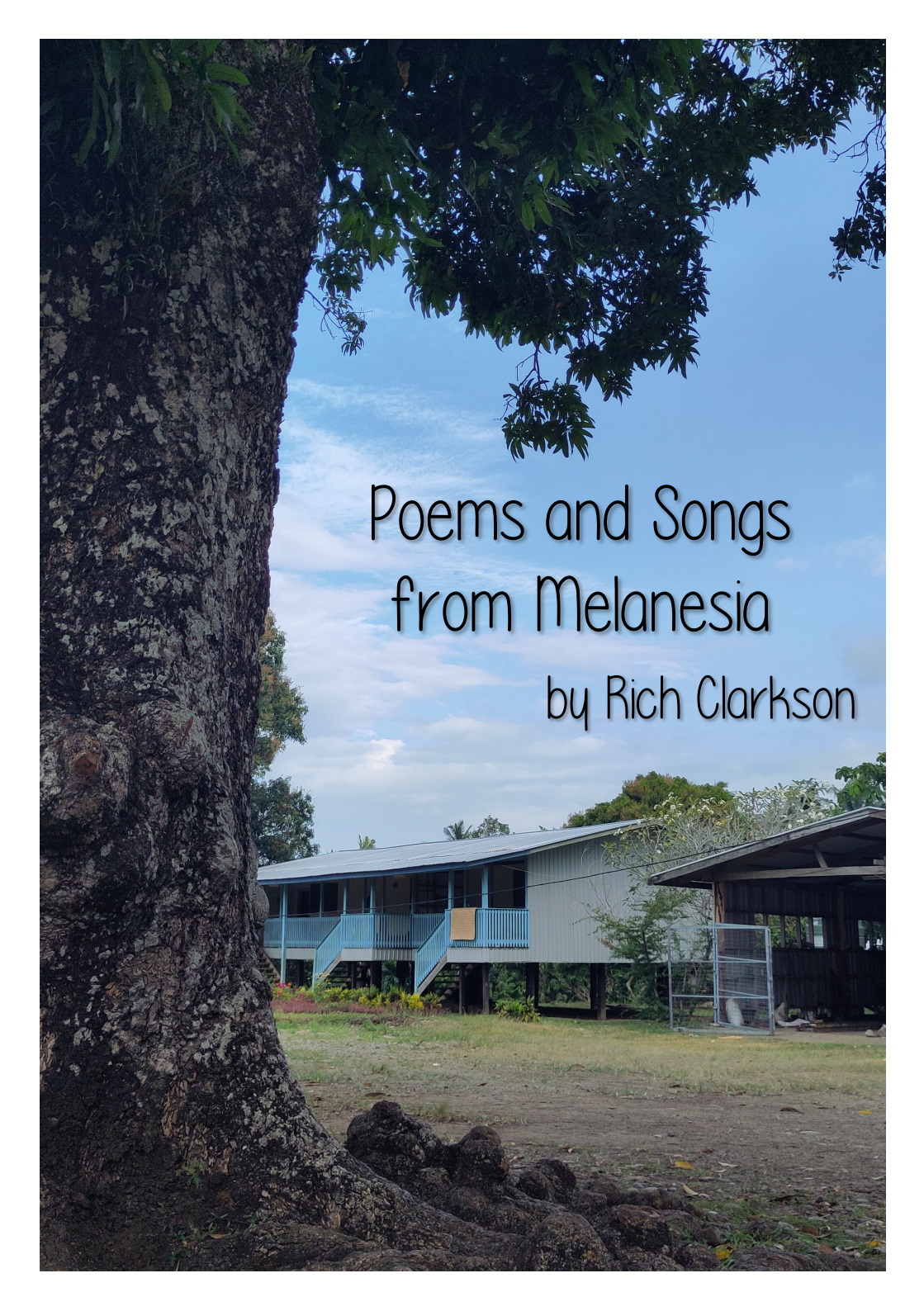




Poems and Songs from Melanesia

by Rich Clarkson

George Augustus Selwyn

I wrote this poem while I was on the flight out to Melanesia. It's a long way to go so I had plenty of time! George Augustus Selwyn was the first Anglican Bishop of Auckland, which included Melanesia, and he later returned to be Bishop of my own Diocese of Lichfield, which is how I found myself following in his footsteps a century and a half later.

In 1841 George Selwyn sailed
to Auckland as a Missionary Bishop.
But on arrival found that it entailed
(due to an administrative mishap)
not just the many islands of New Zealand
but somehow all of Melanesia too!
He set out on a ship to go and see them
with local guides to help him and his crew.
Five times he sailed around these happy isles
and gave to them a Bishop of their own
then, after thirty years of joys and trials,
in Lichfield Bishop Selwyn was enthroned.
His ministry set deep roots and encouraged
the Melanesian people's faith to flourish.



Blackbird

Bishop Selwyn (see previous page) appointed John Coleridge Patteson as the first Bishop of Melanesia. He was well loved and respected, but got caught up and killed in a dispute over the practice of 'blackbirding', stealing or coercing young men from Pacific islands into forced labour on plantations in Australia—a practice that continued well into the 20th Century. The island where Patteson was killed, Nakupu, still carries the shame of that mistake.

Out in the Pacific there's
A tiny coral island where
A hundred strong community
All live off the abundance of the reef
The soil is fertile here
And has been for three thousand years
The fruit hangs heavy on the trees
Nakupu giving everything they need

And the waters rise under endless skies
And the blackbirds fly and steal the future away
And the waters swirl as the outside world
Comes crashing in, what will it bring?

Back in 1871
A trading vessel came along
At gunpoint stole five men away
And sold them in Australia as slaves
When this cruel deed was done
Came peaceful bishop Patteson
Mistaking them for slavers too
They killed the bishop and two of his crew

And the waters rise under endless skies
And the blackbirds fly and steal the future away
And the waters swirl as the outside world
Comes crashing in, what will it bring?

But when they realised what they had done
They did their best to make amends
'cos if the violent cycle carries on
Where will it end?

I met a man named Patrick whose
Grandfather ran the island school
He told me "we are peaceful men,
Don't judge us by the worst thing we have done"
But now the rising seas
Are ending this community
I said to him "forgive me too,
This is the worst thing we will ever do"

And the waters rise under endless skies
And the blackbirds fly and steal the future away
And the waters swirl as the outside world
Comes crashing through, what will we do?



Parallels

For my first few days in Melanesia I was overwhelmed by just how different everything was, but as I settled into it I started to notice the parallels with life at home and I wrote this poem.

A mother anxiously comforts her baby
An old man groans as he sits on a chair
Children giggle as they enter the classroom
People are people everywhere

Schools that don't have enough equipment
Farms that struggle for lack of rain
Big corporations that do what they want to
Ten thousand miles, but life's still the same

Birds sing out as the sun is rising
Stars shine brightly through gaps in the clouds
A cool breeze blows through an open window
At home or away these blessings are found

A helping hand from a kindly stranger
A wordless grin in a crowded hall
A moment of laughter that transcends language
The world is not so big after all



Waves

As I was preparing for my visit to Melanesia I had a conversation with a priest from Guadalcanal I asked him about the impact of Climate Change on his islands and he spoke about the work they are doing to protect themselves, building sea walls and moving inland, but then he said "but the waves keep coming." I wrote this song based on that phrase, the character in the story is fictional but it is an all too real story

As a child he sailed beyond the reef where all is sky and ocean
He learned to trust the wind and waves, their rhythm and their motion
Out there on the endless blue he fell in love with water
His island was his own canoe, his lifeline and supporter

But the waves keep coming and the waves keep coming
And the waves keep coming and they're washing it all away

He built his house beside the shore, a stones throw from the coastline
Looking out towards the sea where he would spend the most time
Casting out his fishing nets and hauling in his quota
Hoping that at market time he'd keep his world afloat

But the waves keep coming...

It didn't happen all at once, it took a while to spot it
The slow surrender of the beach 'till nobody could stop it
The water which he'd learned to trust around him now was rising
This skilled seafarer could not stop his island from capsizing

And the waves keep coming...

He lives up on the mainland now, safe distance from the water
He works a steady job and has a wife, a son, a daughter
But when he sees those distant waves he fills up with emotion
The quiet tears roll down his cheek... salt water, like the ocean

And the waves keep coming and the waves keep coming
And the waves keep coming and they're washing it all away
The waves keep coming and the waves keep coming
And the waves keep coming and they're washing the world away

Umbilical Tree

While I was in Melanesia I gave a talk on creation care at the Bishop Patteson Theological College in Kohimarama. After I had spoken we had a long and deep conversation, where the staff, students, and their families shared some of their stories. This is a poetic description of just one part of that conversation

I

There is a small Pacific Island where
when a child is born they cut the cord
and plant it in the ground with a new tree
so that, however far away they sail,
they will forever be linked with their home.

II

I met a man today, a priest, who knows
the place where his umbilical tree is growing.
It is a source of life and strength to him,
a tangible connection to the earth,
to God's creation, to his ancestral home.

III

That cord was severed many years before,
but now he fears it will be cut again
and this time he's not sure if he'll survive
the separation from his source of life.

IV

His island home is being washed away
and with it goes a part of who he is,
while we sit by and watch — or worse, do not.
We are presiding over his destruction.

V

I looked him in the eye then turned away
in sorrow and in shame for what we've done,
yet still he greeted me as his own brother,
a fellow child of God and, trembling, I
returned his gaze once more and said "I'm sorry
for all that we have done to you my friend".

VI

Our actions or complacency are not
without their consequences in this world
but every day we have to make the choice:
Do we give life and seek forgiveness, or
do we keep cutting that life-giving cord?



Rough Winds

While I was staying at Tabalia, the headquarters of the Melanesian Brotherhood, I met a Novice whose name was 'Alric Roughwind' because, he told me, he was born in the middle of a stormy night. This song drew inspiration from that (though not from Alric's life!)

I was born in the middle of a stormy night
Under darkened skies I pushed towards the light
I was born in the middle of a stormy night.
And those rough winds have followed me all my life.

I was born in the middle of a lightning storm
As the clouds were torn by the flashes and the thorns
I was born in the middle of a thunderstorm
And those rough winds have followed me all my life.

I entered the world as the flood waters swirled
And the sky came crashing down
And all I can do is just keep pushing through
Keep my head up and try not to drown

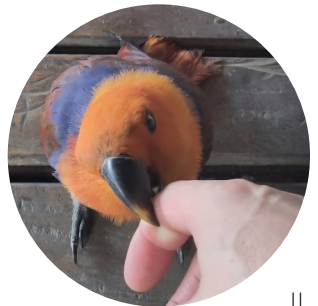
I was born in the middle of a hurricane.
As the wind and the rain swirled around again and again
I was born in the middle of a hurricane.
And those rough winds have followed me all my life.



Jesse

Another friend I made at Tabalia was a young child called Jesse. He was playing with a tiny kitten (called 'gift'), and was saying the rhyme that my mum used to say – "rat a tat tat, who's that? Only grandma's pussy cat. Where's your money? In my pocket. Where's your pocket? I forgot it. Oh you silly pussy cat!" He was delighted when I joined in with the rhyme and we became firm friends for the next few days.

I met a kid called Jesse, maybe 4
or 5 years old. His dad was visiting
the place where I was staying. On the porch
a kitten and a parrot with a wing
that wouldn't work. At first he was quite shy
but soon he opened up and we would chat
in broken English and in Pigin - I
could never quite get confident with that.
The kitten, like the child, was only young.
The parrot, like the child, was filled with joy.
And I, just like the child, felt small. Among
These holy men of faith I am a boy.
But then the words of Jesus come to mind:
Be like this child - God's Kingdom you will find.



Falling

One of the most moving encounters in my time in Melanesia was with George. He moved to his village when he was a child from his home island of Sikaiana, which is about 100 miles out into the Pacific. He showed me a tree on the shoreline where he prays every day, but because of Climate Change the tree is threatened by the rising sea levels and he said to me "if the tree falls I will too". His community only has about 10 years left before their village will be washed away by the sea.

He landed here when he was only eight
Crossed a hundred miles of ocean on the way
Left his island and his heart
To make a brand new start
In this strange and unfamiliar place

When he left his boat he sat under a tree
It was only small, like him, but he could see
The horizon far away
And he knew beyond it lay
His home, his heart, his history

And the tree grew bigger as the years passed by
And he built a life here under strange new skies
But the tree was watered by the tears he'd cry
For his far off far off home

He watched with pride as all his children grew
And then he watched his grandchildren too
As they laid down their roots
And started to bear fruit
In the only place they ever knew

His tree became a refuge for his soul
His confidante, his muse, his hiding hole
He would visit every day
To sit, and watch, and pray
To restore his heart and be made whole

And the tree grew bigger as the years passed by
And he built a life here under strange new skies
But the tree was watered by the tears he'd cry
For his far off far off home

One day while he was walking to the shore
It seemed a little closer than before
As slowly day by day
The land was washed away
And his tree wasn't safe there anymore

For the second time in his life he knew
What this meant and what they'd have to do
It was time to move on
Before his tree was gone
Because if it fell he knew that he would too

And so the tree grew smaller as they sailed away
In search of a new life and a brighter day
But the tears feel freely as he bid goodbye
To his far off far off home



The Ballad of Tetete Ni Kolivuti

Tetete Ni Kolivuti (which means 'hill of prayer' in the Gela language) is the headquarters of the Community of the Sisters of the Church in Solomon Islands. It was originally built as a lookout hill by American soldiers in the second World War, before being turned from a 'hill of war' to a 'hill of prayer'.

The soldiers arrived in '42
With their guns and their packs and their marching boots too
They unloaded their ships and they made their way through
In search of a place to call home
They built a new hill on a flat piece of ground
Cleared the coconut trees from the bush all around
Made a fortified lookout on top of the mound
At Tetete ni Leleu — the Hill of War

The sisters arrived in 71,
The trees had returned now the soldiers had gone
They faithfully followed as God led them on
In search of a place to call home
They built their first chapel up on the hill there
The community grew as together they shared
what little they had with compassion and care
At Tetete ni Kolivuti — the Hill of Prayer

The flood waters rose in '23
Submerging the land all the way to the sea
And the people all round had to climb up the trees
In search of a place to call home
The hill was an island for several days
Like Noah and Jonah the sisters all prayed
In the swirling of waters as together they stayed
At Tetete lia Kokomu — the Island Hill

For nearly a century the hill has stood
Through war and disaster, through wildfire and flood
As a beacon of light and a wellspring of good
Tetete Ni Kolivuti
This community of sisters still hold on to the spark
in this hill which has been an island, a refuge, an ark,
In a turbulent world where so much is dark
From the hill of war came the hill of prayer
The island hill is still standing there
Tetete Ni Kolivuti (the Hill of Prayer)



A Conversation Outside The Charles Elliot Fox Library At Kohimarama

After spending time with the students at Kohimarama (see page 8) I had a tour of the college. The library is named after Bishop Charles Elliot Fox who, my guide told me, was fondly remembered for how he used to talk to the animals and how the Myna Birds would sometimes even reply

'The birds around here speak sometimes', he said,
'the smallish brown ones with the yellow eyes.
You have to pay attention though, they spread
their mottled wings, glance back, say their goodbyes
and then before you know it they have gone,
packed up their conversation and moved on.'

'We used to have a bishop here,' he said,
'who was well known for talking to the birds
and other creatures. Once the rats all fled
from the cassava patch at just a word
from Bishop Fox. His grave is over there.
It's said the birds still join with him in prayer.'

I tried to pay attention like he said,
but though I watched and listened for a week,
I talked to them, sang songs, and shared my bread,
I never once did hear the Myna speak.
Beside the Charles Fox library, filled with words,
I sit in silence, praying with the birds.



Pacific Sunrise

I started to write this song while watching the sun rise over the Pacific towards the end of my time in Melanesia. I wanted to try and capture something of the peaceful beauty of the place.

Morning is breaking over the Islands
A new day awaiting the warmth of the sun
Fishing boats bobbing out in the ocean
Bid their farewell to the stars
Myna birds argue
Kauri Trees rustle
As I greet the sunrise
On these happy isles

Morning is breaking over the coral
Turtles awaiting the flow of the tide
A frigate bird saunters down from the mountains
As parrots pair off in the trees
Coconuts falling
mangoes are ripening
As I greet the sunrise
On these happy isles

Morning is breaking over the village
Children awaiting the long walk to school
Dusty roads bringing vans full of people
Waving as they journey by
Dock workers calling
Worshippers singing
As I greet the sunrise
On these happy isles



Vulnerable

One of the final poems I wrote before leaving Melanesia was this, reflecting on the tension between hope and vulnerability in these beautiful and endangered islands.

There is a vulnerability in these
small islands where the challenges they face
are mostly not of their own making. Seas
are rising, trees are being felled, the race
for land and for development is fierce -
their magnitude could flood the roads with tears.

But vulnerable does not mean powerless.
Developing does not mean uninformed.
These islands, villages, and towns are getting
ready now to face the gathering storm.
Stone by stone, day by day, resisting
those forces that would stop them from existing

Here, where land and sea are in a battle aeons long,
a fragile hope against all odds has always been their song.





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