2021 Nature Writing Prize – Winner of The Rosina Joy Buckman Award for Highly Commended Essay

The Lone Tree of Mackay by Dave Witty

How the tree has survived is a mystery. How, in all its two hundred or so years, it has not succumbed to the wild axe of human progress. When the blue gums fell and the jungle was torn from the ground, the Leichhardt tree remained. When the great cyclone of 1918 came through, the wind stripped its leaves but the trunk was not damaged. The tree persisted as the warehouses flourished. And when, in the nineteen eighties, the Pioneer River Improvement Trust constructed a levee wall along the river, the tree's roots were avoided by a sharp dog-leg in the bricks. Somehow the Leichhardt tree, in its quiet, mysterious way, has demanded our subservience as if a transcendental power flutters softly above its crown. The tree survives as a guardian of the river, a watchful eye whose gaze may never cease. Perhaps its survival is down to nothing more than its importance as a post, a trunk to tie ropes around. Its scientific name is *Nauclea orientalis* which translates roughly as *ships from the east.* In what must be one of the few instances of binomial servility, the tree served, during the second half of the nineteenth century, as a docking point for ships arriving from the east, from islands such as the Solomon Islands andVanuatu, New Caledonia and New Guinea.

Once a week, I used to run past the Leichhardt tree. Leaving my house along Ungerer Street, a quiet piece of suburbia in the north of Mackay, I jogged across the Forgan bridge, passing Paxtons on my way to Sandfly Creek and Iluka Park. It is quite unusual for trees to be honoured with their own metal fenced enclosure so it was obvious this tree was important. Each time I ran past, I would feel the soft current of its mystery. The Paxtons building, a corrugated iron warehouse with wooden steps and timber floors, is another historical artefact still standing along this part of the river, one of the few surviving links to the old port and the wharves. During the muggy summer months, we would do yoga on its top floor and mosquitoes would flit around us as we held *Shavasanas* and *Chaturangas,* the sun setting and fading pink in the distance. On the way to the car, we would see the black outline of the Leichhardt tree watching over us. I'm not sure why we chose to return to Mackay after going travelling for a year. But somehow fate brought us back. That first week, I remember sitting in Bluewater Quay, having drinks under the tree's watchful shadow. We arrived in Mackay after driving twenty hours from Muswellbrook in the Hunter Valley. The weather had been calm until we neared Rockhampton. By Sarina, the rain was torrential, fierce gusts which

blackened the windscreen, making it impossible to see. By the time we arrived, the pools of water were ankle deep. In most towns, people would speak of adownpour like this with fascination and quiet reverence, but here it was just another day.

Mackay has always attracted tough spirits and few came tougher than one of its early settlers, John Spiller, a rather gruff man who wore his long, shovel-shaped beard like a plate of armour.For the first couple of years, Spiller lived in a grass humpy on the north side of the Pioneer River. He had been attracted to this area by the rich meadow grasses which soared to heights close to those of a human, grasses so thick it was sometimes impossible for a horse to push through. Spiller enjoyed duck shooting on the lagoons near to his property. On one occasion, while passing through a dense patch of reeds, he watched as his cattle dog was attacked by a crocodile. Spiller, his hands nervous with excitement, eyed up his target, raised his gun to his shoulder and put a bullet through the crocodile's head.

With the assistance of Percy Crees, Spiller grew fields of maize, cotton and sugar cane. Mackay had the right soils, the right temperature, the right rainfall to grow cane, but there was one thing it needed. Labour. People to wake up at five or six in the morning and finish with the onset of dusk. People to clear trees and burn grasses, to plough the land and to plant crops between March and September. On a Wednesday in the middle of May 1867, the *Prima Donna* sailed through the mouth of the Pioneer River with seventy workers on board, men from the SolomonIslands and Vanuatu, from islands with short but mellifluous names: Epi, Mai, Efate, Togoa and Tanna. It is hard to know how those first arrivals felt. They were fit and healthy but looked uncomfortable in their new and unflattering European clothes. They were mustered onto the land, herded like sheep towards the primitive settlement. The significance of the occasion was not lost on the journalist at the time. It was an event, the paper said, which was *"fraught with the highest importance."*[1]

One must remember, when imagining the scene, that Mackay was still scrub at this stage, a mixture of mangroves, palms, rainforest, gums and melaleuca. One only needs to go a few kilometres from the present township to walk the dusty paths of Reliance Creek National Park and reawaken that riparian wilderness, the luscious vegetation which, fringing the banks on bothsides of the river, would have greeted the South Sea arrivals. Here, the fronds of Alexander palms (*Archontophoenix alexandrae*), artistic and brash, radiate like pretty starlets against the lush, messy backdrop of the jungle. A green haze of swamp box (*Lophostemon suaveolens*) mixes with weeping paperbark (*Melaleuca*

leucadendra). Vines of native grape (*Cissus oblonga*) and supplejack

---

[1] Mackay Mercury, cited in *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay* – Clive Moore (1985), p.124

(*Flagellaria indica*) hang from the trees. In this environment, the Leichhardt is one tree among many. Part of the emergent layer, it sits above the forest canopy like a sentry, an arboreal watchtower. The garish fruits of the brush cherry (*Syzygium australe*) and the Damson plum (*Terminalia microcarpa*) fall amid the large, pulsing roots of the green fig *(Ficus virens)* and the wavering buttress roots of the brown tulip oak (*Argyrodendron polyandrum*). Birds skitter throughthe canopy. Sunlight stipples patterns in the leaves. The rustling of ground debris indicates a brush turkey walking by.

Approaching the area in 1860, close to today's township of Marian, Andrew Murray described the scenery as *"quite picturesque with clumps of palms and other tropical vegetation, unlike anything we had previously seen."*[2] Interspersed with this picturesque jungle were large patches of grassland, beautiful grasses such as blady grass (*Imperata cylindrica*), kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra)* and native sorghum (*Sorghum nitida*). Murray was, along with John Mackay, part of that first Europeanexploration team. The meadows he observed were not quite as natural as he may have thought. For thousands of years, the traditional owners of the area had burnt the ground, flushing out prey and nurturing regrowth in the nutrient-rich ashen soils. We can only guess the true number, but perhaps one or two thousand people lived in the Pioneer Valley when the first European settlers arrived with sheep, cattle and ammunition. Stone axes, many thousands of years old, with notches crafted into each side to create hand grips, have been discovered in the Mount Jukes area near Mackay. These members of the *Yuwibara* language group ate, along with the fruits of Damson plums (*Terminalia microcarpa*), cocky apples (*Planchonia careya*) and pandanus (*Pandanus spp*), the wrinkled, lychee-like spheres of the Leichhardt tree which, when ripe, have an astringent but not unpalatable taste. They used the tree's large leaves for plates, and they infused its bark as a remedy for snake bite.

When John Mackay returned in 1883 to the town which bore his name, he witnessed a different place, the former hunting grounds now clothed in a monoculture of cane. *"Gazing round,"* he said, *"I saw on a plot, familiar to me in days of yore as an area fringed with mangrove swamp, an embryo city with well formed streets and stately buildings, while the background was studded with handsome villas, overlookingwell-tilled fields of sugar-cane as far as the eye could see."*[3] A town of five hundred non-Indigenous residents in 1869 had grown to seven thousand people by the early 1880s. A quarter of the *Yuwibara* died from disease during this time and around a quarter from calculated acts of slaughter. The small number of *Yuwibara* left by the early twentieth century would die in the

[2] Andrew Murray, cited in *Mackay Revisited* - K. H. Kennedy (2002), p.12

[3] John Mackay, cited in *A John Mackay Monument* – Daily Mercury (14 December 1928)

influenza epidemic in 1919, and the last two Indigenous Australians in the town centre were taken off in 1920 to the missionary reserve on Palm Island. The numbers of Melanesians meanwhile had increased, and by 1880, there were over two thousand Islanders in the district,roughly three Islander males for every white male.

How quickly the numbers had escalated since those first seventy labourers arrived on the *Prima Donna*. This was the beginning of the pejoratively-termed kanaka labour in Mackay, a trade whichwould be stained by the epithets of kidnapping and slavery. Some would be killed in the ruckus and confusion of recruiting, and up to one third of Islanders would pass away from disease. But these *sugar slaves* would, through their hard work and tenacity, ensure Mackay operated for decades as the capital of Australia's sugar industry. As the men walked towards the Alexandra plantation, passing through the streets we now think of as West Mackay, they would have looked in wonder as strange, smooth-barked trees began to appear among the increasingly familiar trees of the rainforest. Used to the scents and fragrances of back home, the smell of the eucalypts would have seemed captivating, a light, menthol fragrance hanging softly in the dank and humid air. Some of these trees, those we now call Queensland blues gums (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*), would show patterns on their bark, watercolour shadings of blue, grey and brown. Others would be marble-grey like the poplar gum (*Eucalyptus platyphylla*) and the Moreton Bay ash (*Corymbia tessellaris*), the latter with its blackened sock around the base. The labourers spent countless hourshacking down these trees, clearing the land for vast monocultures of sugar cane. The work was arduous and repetitive. Weeks were spent blasting the hard, rocky ground to create holes for planting. Months were spent trashing, a process that involved stripping off the dry leaves at the top to admit sunlight to the bottom. Harvesting could be back-breaking work, and, in the odious heat of the early afternoon, with the threat of the master's whip a constant worry, grief and homesickness would be ready emotions.

The etymology of the term blackbirding has been obscured over time, but it is possible that somewhere, in the annals of slavery's history, someone compared the recruitment of taking slaves to the pursuit of catching blackbirds. It has been estimated that around twenty-five to thirty per cent of recruits were deceived in some way. Not all were forcibly abducted. Some mayhave been lured with imaginary rewards. Others may have been ensnared by the false terms of service. The crimes would take place on isolated beaches, the footprints of struggle blown away by the overnight winds. The worst years for the Islanders were those first ones where morality drowned in the rip

currents of entitlement. One can hold up a dictionary and argue it wasn't slavery for the workers received a salary and a fixed term of employment. But if not slavery, it was bondage. The wages, while real, were as low as a fifth of an equivalent European worker. Onaverage, the Islanders would serve three years, *thirty-nine moons* they used to say, and they would toil for around twelve hours a day. Some accounts depict the workers as happy, but most present them as weary and sullen. Noel Fatnowna says sugar became a synonym for hard work and Islanders around the dinner table would say, *"hey, passem hard work here."*[4] Amid the confusion of foreign words and restless discomfort, there was only one rule in the cane fields: to follow the lead, or the whip, of one's master.

The success of recruitment would often centre upon the power of the lure. Beads, pigs, tobaccoand tomahawks were used as gestures of reward although the biggest drawcard was the firearm, promised upon completion of service, something that would revolutionise the terms of intertribal warfare. The ships were known as *thief ships, kill-kills* and *snatch-snatches*. The cramped conditions on the voyages over led to outbreaks of dysentery, colds, bronchitis and pneumonia. Many would arrive confused as to the terms of service, shocked to learn the length of their indenture. The luscious jungle which greeted those on the *Prima Donna* had, over a decade later,become a lonely, solitary tree. *Nauclea orientalis.* For most of the nineteenth century, in the absence of more formalised arrangements, ships would be tied to the firm, fissured bark of this tree.

There is a moving scene in the documentary *Sugar Slaves* where Joe Leo and his wife Monica return to the Pentecost Island in Vanuatu and walk along the beach where their relatives were kidnapped. A legend has flourished from this incident. Having to place the strange event within their own set of ideas, the Islanders assumed the recruits were taken to a nearby island where they were murdered and cannibalised in an act of premeditated revenge. But for every story of violent abduction, there is a story of Islanders volunteering, some excited by the adventure, others wishing to escape tribal punishment, and others simply succumbing to the pressures of overbearing relatives or friends. It is believed the majority of blackbirding, where people were kidnapped or deceived into service, took place in those early years, between 1865 and 1868, with a second burst when the trade moved to New Guinea in the 1880s. As Clive Moore suggested inan interview for *The Monthly:*

"Even from the 1860s, there were people going backwards and forwards between Queensland and the

islands –sometimes two or three times. It's demeaning to the intelligence of the Islanders to think that they just waited on the beaches for white men in rowing boats to scoop them up for forty years, without figuring out how to make thesystem work for them."[5]

4 Noel Fatnowna, cited in *The Forgotten People: A History of the Australian South Sea Island Community* – Clive Moore (1979), p.52

Clive drives out to the site of the old Habana Mill in his book *The Forgotten People*. His companionChristie Fatnowna points out the place where an eagle used to fly into the hut of his relatives.
They would talk to the eagle, give it food, and in return the eagle would offer them messages from the islands. *"It's not just a legend,"* he says. *"It did happen."*[6] Sorcery offered solace, but there was an even more powerful force, music, which provided both rhythm and relief for the Islanders. At the end of the working day, around six or seven in the evening, the workers would head back to camp where someone would unleash on a mouth organ and the others would sing or beat time with a piece of wood. On Saturdays they would finish at four and, not having to begin work again until six o'clock on Monday morning, they met up with Islanders from other plantations and enjoyed *sing-sings,* feasts and fishing. Stories would be swapped of their island homes. Fights with other tribes were not uncommon. It was not an easy life. In Tracey Banivanua-Mar's book on the violent and sad realities of the trade, she recalls the story of Ueuega, a labourer from Moresby Island, who said, after he finished cutting each day, he would return to the house where he would weep. People kept track of their length of service by cuttinga notch into a stick, one notch for every moon. Many were worn down by the experience.

When I returned to Mackay after a long absence, on this occasion visiting for a weekend, I walked down to Bluewater Quay. The Leichhardt tree looked different than I had remembered it. I stood in its shadow hoping it would speak to me, hoping, like the eagle in Christie Fatnowna's story, it would bring me messages from the islands or messages from its nineteenth century past. But its leaves were motionless. The few flowers on the tree, suspended like extravagant baubles, offered nothing in the way of emotion. To quote a poem written by a localnamed Dorothy Moffatt:

Straight and strong in your youth you
stood,Beside the tidal stream.
Black men lay in your summer
shade,Lost in a torpid stream.

The final lines are as pertinent now as they were when they were written:

In the hustle and bustle of Life
today,Few spare a thought for
you.[7]

[5] *Blackbirds: Australia's Hidden Slave Trade History* - Alex McKinnon in The Monthly (July 2019)
[6] Christie Fatnowna, cited in *The Forgotten People: A History of the Australian South Sea Island Community* – Clive Moore (1979), p.54

The Leichhardt tree reminds me of another solitary tree, one which has assumed almost fabled acclaim in the Australian narrative, the Lone Pine, the *"small ragged pine tree…"* that stood out, on the Turkish coast, *"very gauntly and conspicuously in that wilderness of stunted bushes."*[8] Despite the frenzied chaos of war hanging heavy in their air, the visual sadness of this tree was inescapable. Itstood like a hopeless statue above Anzac Cove, a natural memorial that pre-empted the cenotaphs and shrines which now permeate our battle-weary nations. This tree was orphaned with the same spirited industry that extirpated the landscape of Mackay. Many other Turkish red pines (*Pinus brutia*) had grown in the area before the war, but their trunks were repurposed as support beams and covers for makeshift, impromptu trenches. There could be no greater symbolfor the transience of life, the mortality of endeavour, than the perseverance of this one vestigial conifer. Its survival was not just a warning of what was to come, it was a reminder of everything that had been lost and destroyed.

It does not take long, as one stands along Bluewater Quay, to realise the Leichhardt tree has, over the years, borne the same symbolic burden as the Lone Pine. Stare at it for too long and an uneasiness slips into your veins. Within those happy, blustery leaves, there is a sadness for the mistakes of the past, and within the awkwardness of its branches, there is a warning. Today, the tree looks healthier than ever, bolstered by the decking and turf of the quay's redevelopment. It would be inconceivable for most walkers and cyclists to imagine that this pedestrianised walkway was once an area of dense rainforest, that the Leichhardt tree, once surrounded by tulip oaks and paperbarks, Damson plums and supplejack, is a living relic, an orphan from another time. Where once it heard the hack and slash of European axes, the tree now hears the rattle of prams or the rhythmic thud of trainers.

Around a thousand Islanders live in Mackay today, many of them descendants of the three thousand or so workers who stayed on in post-federation Australia. Recognition has been a slowprocess. Noel Fatnowna, in an interview for Clive Moore's *The Forgotten People,* said, *"in death they didn't even want us… Today when I drive around the district, I know the exact places where our people are buried. Unmarked graves in cane fields, some with roads going over them today."*[9] A gathering was held in

7 Dorothy Moffatt's poem 'To the Old Leichhardt Tree', cited in *If the Leichhardt Tree Could Talk: An Account of the Establishment of the Williams Family in Mackay, Queensland* – Lesley Williams (1987), p.ii

[8] Major Athelstan Markham Martyn, cited in *The Battle for Lone Pine: Four Days of Hell at the Heart of Gallipoli* – David W. Cameron (2012), p.46
[9] Noel Fatnowna, cited in *The Forgotten People: A History of the Australian South Sea Island Community* – Clive Moore (1979), p.52

July 2017 to recognise the hundred and fiftieth anniversary since the *Prima Donna*. There was nomore fitting place to meet than by the Leichhardt tree. This was a moment to look back in celebration as well as sadness. Starrett Vea Vea, chair of the MADASSIA[10] group and one of thepeople who spoke at the ceremony, sees the tree as a symbol of hope rather than a reminder of darkness:[11]

"It's like black burning and slavery, people don't want to talk about it. But as descendants, we're quite happy,we're quite proud of who we are and where we come from."[12]

At a time when statues of Cook and Flinders are desecrated with hostile graffiti, when people callfor monuments of the oppressed to counterbalance the imperial narrative, the Leichhardt tree provides a natural, unassuming tribute to the Islanders. Standing in its presence, one can hear the faint cries of the sugar slaves as they touch land for the first time, the dysentery pleas of the ill and the sobs of the imprisoned, the loud thrum of workers as they disembark and gather beneath its crown. Eventually this tree will pass away and these sounds, faint as they are, will disappear, subsumed by the endless lapping of water as it breaks slowly, laboriously against the metronomic pulse of the land. I wonder how a tree of such genial spirit can live with such darkness. But the tree makes no judgments. It is, and will only ever be, a passive observer, a neutral lens from which our history can be viewed.

[10] Mackay and District Australian and South Sea Islander Association
[11] Starrett Vea Vea, cited in *New Storyboards at Bluewater Quay* – Reuben Wylie in the Daily Mercury (21 April 2018)
[12] Starrett Vea Vea, cited in *Filmmaker Draws on Family History in her Documentary* – Lucy Smith in the Daily Mercury (6 June 2015)