

Concern for Creation

LIVING ON COUNTRY IN A 20TH CENTURY WAY

TIM MATTONJOHNSON

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Living on country in a 21st century way

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Introduction

Living on country in a twenty-first century way

I have always believed that in some way everything is connected to everything else. I also recognise that the limitations of one person's life means that a comprehensive theory of everything is an impossible task. This piece of writing is simply an attempt to connect together some themes that have become significant in shaping my spirituality as an Aboriginal Christian living in a world that is entering into a time of great challenge.

For the last few years, I have been experimenting with something called 'living on country in a twenty-first century way'. Where I got that name from, I am not sure. I don't think I invented it! So much has changed over the two centuries or so from the way of living with country/land of precolonial times. So how, in these very different circumstances we find ourselves in today, do we develop a relationship with country/land: how might we develop a relationship that informs us at multiple levels, socially, spiritually, intellectually, and physically? How do you do that in a very different context? One thing for sure is that I could end up annoying my neighbours considerably if I started using fire as a land management tool! There are also many other structures and underlying assumptions within contemporary society and mainstream civilization that make it difficult to think about living on country/land in a pre-colonial way. But are there not some principles from the old ways that still work? How then does one learn to love the country/land you are on? Special places, sacred sites, the mountains, the tall forests, pristine beaches, places that inspire and lift the heart are easy to love. But how do you love the places where you live and work? Sometimes where we spend most of

our lives feels much smaller and removed from nature. We might be living in a high-rise apartment somewhere in the middle of a big city, or sometimes, like me, on a rural residential property where you have a few more options but are still constrained by the regulations and conventions of mainstream society.

On our half a hectare block I have been experimenting with trying to enhance the life of the country/land I am on. I try to think about it in two ways. Thinking about it in terms of the block of land that the house is on and at the same time thinking about it as the whole of ecosphere earth. So, I try to do things that are ecologically good things to be doing both locally and as a small contribution to the global effort. In terms of technology, we included such things as solar panels, good insulation, double glazing and orienting the house to the sun to try and maximise energy efficiency. I could not help noticing that most of the other owners, on what was still a new estate, did not bother with much with these kinds of measures. Given more than half a hectare to play with, yet they still oriented their houses to the boundary whichever direction that happened to be pointing. It was as though they were still in suburbia on blocks a tenth of the size, having little thought for things like passive solar gain in the winter.

When it comes to working ecologically, we started with a patch of grazing land. The plan was to grow some of our own food and to find ways to enhance the ecosystem by planting trees and shrubs, including a high proportion of native species. We also wanted to try some endangered Tasmanian native species. One of these was the Morrisby Gum. We are a little outside its natural range, but they seemed to work ok. I became emotionally impacted in a good way over time with these trees. A couple of years ago two of these Morrisby Gums flowered and last summer I was able to collect some seed from them. I was able to propagate the seed. Now I've got second generation trees on our property.

From the practical point of view, I am not engineer, a gardener or a horticulturalist. I am not professionally trained in any appropriate discipline for implementing or designing many of the ideas that have been a part of developing the block. The point is if an amateur like me can make progress on living on country/land in a twenty-first century way all of us can. We will return to this practical theme later. For now, it is important to give some insight into the perspective from which this book is written by way of understanding the cultural dimension

which shapes my thinking as a person of aboriginal heritage living in the land of my ancestors.

While this book is basically concerned with theology the reader will notice that other disciplines, such as history, economics, and science, appear from time to time. There will also be passages of my own spirituality and life journey appearing here and there. The theme that everything is connected is at the base of aboriginal thought. A range of voices need to be heard to provide context and connection for a theology that might shape life. The reader is invited into this way of thinking through the theology not as a siloed discipline but as something that is intimately connected to the reality of life lived in our times. With this in mind it is important introduce myself a little before continuing this introduction.

Personal history of reclamation of Aboriginal identity

When I first began engaging with UAICC Tasmania a couple of the elders challenged me to do family research to find out what connection, if any, I had to early colonial history. Two connections were uncovered. First, the story of my ancestor Mary Ann Coates, a Tasmanian Aboriginal girl stolen from her people. The other was the story of the McCoy family. They arrived in Tasmania as free settlers from Ireland and were granted fifty acres of land, not very far from where I now live. It is possible but difficult to prove that they could have been involved in 'clearing' the 'natives' out of the district. It is possible that they could have also been part of the black line. This was the biggest mobilisation per capita ever in Australia, with the objective of removing all the remaining Aboriginal people from the 'settled districts' of Van Diemen's Land. It was not a very successful strategy, but it was a very determined effort.

Learning about Mary Ann was not entirely a surprise. There were pointers and hints in this direction here and there since early childhood.

Perhaps the earliest of these was a story that my mother used to tell whenever the subject of family history came up. She would tell us the story that her grandmother used to say to her that she must have been swapped in the hospital. This related to the fact that she was born with dark hair, olive skin and brown eyes. Whereas her sister was blonde, fair skinned and blue eyed, like the rest of the family. When

mum told this story she was clearly troubled by it and interpreting it to mean that she didn't belong. It was only years later that I began to understand that there was something racist underlying this story. Great grandmother was clearly concerned that mum's appearance might well bring back into the light of day some sort of mixed race but deeply buried incident in the family history. Mum was born in 1934 just one year after Adolf Hitler had become chancellor of Germany. At a time when most major Western powers had racist policies of some sort. Any notion of an Aboriginal connexion anywhere in the family could have significant downside for the children. Great grandma wanted this story to stay buried, for very good reasons.

Another pointer in this direction was the family's willingness to have Aboriginal children from the Methodist missions coming to stay with us during school holidays. I can remember at least five different children coming to stay with us between about 1960 to the early 70s. It was only much later that I realised these children were a part of what we now know as the stolen generation. Why else would they have come to us for holidays and not returned to their own communities and families?

When I was in primary school in grade four, we were taught quite clearly that there were no Aboriginal people in Tasmania. This had been so since the death of Truganina almost 100 years before. That same year I had the opportunity to visit Flinders Island on the Anzac Day long weekend. My stepfather was an Air Force chaplain so was leading the service. As a part of the service all the school children lined up on the parade ground. I could not help but notice many Aboriginal faces amongst the children. I questioned this. My stepfather responded by saying, 'they're not really Aboriginal children they are octoroons.' This is a very difficult and racist word. Thankfully it is not heard very often these days. To call people this is a dehumanising phrase. From that time, I began to question the history I was being taught in school.

Another feature of my childhood was the beginning of spirituality focused on creation and country/land. As a four-year-old, I was out with my father and older brother on the farm. It was lambing season. We came across a sheep giving birth. My father called us both over to witness the birth. I was distracted by seeing sunlight coming through the clouds in that particular manner that was used in the style of artwork from my children's Bible to indicate an epiphany. When I got

there the lamb had just been born. My brother said that I had missed it. I spoke up and said I had seen it coming from God. My father was a Methodist lay preacher and simply accepted my statement as valid. In a four-year-old way I was already engaging in creation theology.

Just a few months later my father, Jack Matton, died suddenly in the middle of the night. This event had a profound impact on all of our lives. Back in 1961 it was not the 'done thing' for young children to attend funerals. Mum had felt uneasy about this. In response she decided to take us to visit the grave after she had picked us up from the babysitters. She claimed that the short sermon I gave in the car on the way home from the visit to the cemetery was much better than the one she heard in the funeral service. The toddler theologian in action again! I can still picture the occasion but have no memory of what I actually said.

The next thing that happened was our foster sister was removed from the family after being with us for two years or so. Mum had become a young widow with four small children to look after. The youngest, my sister, was only five months old and had a serious heart condition. She also found herself with a dairy farm to manage. And much later I discovered that she was also having to deal with predatory males who saw a young widow as a legitimate target. She managed for a little over two years but in the end decided to sell up and move to the city. Shortly after this she remarried a very different kind of man than her first husband.

During this time my spirituality of creation/country/land began to develop in an unusual way. After reflection I think that what happened was the basic trust that had been centred on my father became increasingly centred on Tasmania's Mountain country/land. Two trips to cradle mountain as a six-year-old were significant in this process. Of special note, on the first trip, is when, for the first time, I walked through a patch of rainforest as the sun came through the leaves. It was like walking into a cathedral, a holy place. All the different shades of green and brown, of Moss and lichen bark and leaves. It seemed to me to be a place of safety and wonder.

It is about this time that my habit of looking into country/land, examining my feelings and asking questions of country/land began. Simple questions like; am I safe here? do I feel at home? do I feel welcome? or do I feel somehow an alien? Asking questions and seeking answers; all part of establishing a relationship with country/land wherever I was.

While I was not surprised to discover Aboriginal connection all the way back to Mary Ann, the question of identification as an Aboriginal person was not so simple. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, there was no connexion I could find between Mary Ann and the better-known Aboriginal groups whose descent clearly went back to colonial times. Second, there was a large gap between my generation and my grandmother's generation during which the Aboriginal connexion was a closely guarded secret. By the time my research had identified Mary Ann as Aboriginal, I could no longer ask my grandmother for further information. She had died some years earlier. Had she known something about the decision to hide this connection, she had kept it quiet. Within the context of identity politics, both within and outside of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, this gap of at least two generations, I felt, at the time, this would make it difficult to argue a strong case re cultural continuity. Consequently it seemed best not to self-identify.

Over the next couple of years, I was twice identified as Aboriginal by community elders despite having not told them anything about my family history. The first time was during a session break at a meeting in Melbourne. An Aboriginal elder from Robinvale up on the Murray River told me that by looking into my eyes she could tell I was Aboriginal. I was totally unsure how to handle this and struggled to understand how such a thing could even be possible. So, I again stayed silent about my family history.

The second occasion was far more significant. In mid-2007 Lynne and I were in Darwin at UCA Ministers' conference which was centred around the theme of covenanting between the UCA and the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. We had also elected to go on an extension tour following the conference. This tour took us to Yirrkala, in Yolngu country/land (East Arnhem Land). We were there for several days as a part of the community. During this stay I could sense that our group of ministers, of which we were a part, was being closely observed and, at times, even tested by various elders.

While we were there, the newly elected Prime Minister, Keven Rudd, decided to hold his first 'Community Cabinet meeting' in Yirrkala. This caused a change of plans for our tour. Originally, we were meant to meet with some elders on an outstation, but this became impossible because all the elders were coming into Yirrkala to present ideas to the cabinet. Instead of flying to an outstation, we were invited

to sit in and listen to them as they met to decide what they would bring up with the Prime Minister and cabinet. However, this also had to change because some government officials also wanted to be in on this meeting.

The elders clearly did not want these officials briefing the Prime Minister on their discussions. But if we were invited to listen then how could they be refused? It was decided that all should leave after the formal opening of the meeting. I wondered how this could be done in a proper respectful way. When I was picked by the Chairman of the meeting to open the meeting with prayer it dawned on me that I was the one picked to manage this exit in the proper way. I led what I thought was an appropriate prayer, then shook hands with the elder closest to me and then continued shaking hands all around the circle and realised that all the others, both ministers and the officials were following me around and out the door. If this was a test, I think I passed!

On the last night we were there we had a farewell gathering with all the people we had met. Lynne and I were sitting opposite a couple of elders we had spent much of our time with during the visit. Towards the end of our meal the husband leaned across the table and touched me on the arm and said, 'My wife thinks you are Aboriginal'. I had been avoiding telling anyone about my family history but felt after this statement I had to open up. I told them the story of Mary Ann and they were both delighted by this confirmation of their insight.

It was only much later that I realised that it may not have been the conversations and my passing the obvious test, that in the end, led to this identification as Aboriginal. One of the other things I was frequently doing on this trip was looking into country/land in the way I described earlier as a lifetime habit. I would have been observed doing this and maybe it was a clue that revealed the nature of my relation to country/land as having Aboriginal character.

Not long after this Yirrkala visit the issue of self-identification came up in the context of UAICC TAS committee meeting. We were discussing who might go to the next national conference. Only Aboriginal delegates could vote at these conferences. If I was prepared to self-identify and this was endorsed by our elder, then I could be accepted as Aboriginal for the purposes of this conference. One of the other Aboriginal men in the meeting warned me that identifying could lead to a world of pain, from racism and the politics of identity.

He was dead right about this. But after being identified as Aboriginal twice by elders from two completely different parts of Australia how could I not start down this journey into ancient identity that was to be overfilled with both moments of, belonging and joy, and also deep pain? I do not regret choosing to identify even though it has been a roller-coaster ride.

Outlining the scope of this book

I have come to understand myself as both an Aboriginal person and a Christian theologian. I have learnt much about the Aboriginal culture and long history of our people in this land. I have also been educated by the western university system with its emphasis on critical thinking. There is a strong sense in which my life has been a walking in two cultures. In the chapters that follow the perspective of what is written will therefore reflect both. It is the intention to explore the theology and spirituality that underpins what I call living on country/land in a twenty-first century way. I believe that this project is of vital importance as the world faces the challenge of climate change and ecological collapse.

In the first part of this book, I will try to describe, what has been described as the existential threat of our time, climate change and the implications it may have for human civilisation. At the moment, it seems that this crisis is largely being seen in terms of a technological issue on which considerable progress is and can be made. However, without major cultural, economic, and political changes to address the major drivers that have brought us all into this space, advances in technology will not save us from disaster.

There is also need for significant cultural change in the way we go about human civilisation. It is not incremental change or tinkering around the edges of our current civilisation but change that is transformative and leads towards a whole different way of being a human community living on the a planet that is an ecological marvel.

It is not the intention of this book to provide a comprehensive account of the current state of play on all of the complexity of issues involved in the ecological crisis we face. I do not have the level of expertise needed to do so. Instead, the intention is to provide enough commentary such that a realistic understanding of the situation can be achieved, without too much blame and fear. I will also try to point

towards positive work already begun by others in order to allow some room for hope rather than fuelling despair and tempting readers to put it all into the 'to hard basket'.

In the second part of this book, I will explore my aboriginal self-understanding by working with the theology of Woorrady. He was a Nuenonne man from Southeast Tasmania. He lived from circa 1790 to 1842 and was a witness to the almost total destruction of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, their culture and country/land. I will use his traditional stories, as recorded in colonial records, as a theological case study.

In the third part of the book, I will explore a particular theme that emerges from this traditional Aboriginal theology, the Wraeggowraper designation. In western philosophy the closest parallel to this is usually know as 'the problem of evil' or 'why do good people suffer from evil'. This theme will be worked through from the perspective of western philosophy, scientific ways of understanding our world, biblical and theological responses to this theme. The intention is to eventually illuminate a way of living meaningfully with hope through the challenges of the future.

It is hoped that this will bring a renewed focus on a way of understanding our world through a spirituality that begins to change personal attitudes towards country/land may assist larger social change in ways that provide for a more hopeful transition over the coming decades of increasing challenge. Changing hearts and minds needs to be a part of the process. The practice of learning to live on country/land in a twenty-first century way has certainly begun to change me in holistic ways. There has been a distinct shift in my emotional, spiritual, and physical lifestyle.



Part 1 Climate Change and Associated Issues