

## **Views from the Pews - The Tui**

Many will remember that Tui were referred to as 'parson birds', on account of the white throat feathers that contrast with their overall black plumage. This recalls the early workaday dress of ministers from many denominations; overall black relieved by white bands at the collar. Think of Marsden or Selwyn. Think too of Father Ben Ong.

In his book 'Kāwai', Monty Soutar has crafted an historian's novel of life on the East Coast from 1818 onwards. A key theme is interaction between tribes, and between Māori and Pakeha in the first half of that turbulent century. Life is short, and trouble usually comes by sea, firstly in the form of northern tribes looking for plunder and for slaves, later in the form of European ships who are anxious to trade. Muskets and venereal disease change the course of history. The protagonists and their social groups are always off balance. There is little political stability.

Then the Tui arrive, just one or two, accompanied by lay preachers. In this case of course Soutar is referring to those very parsons who remind the Waiapu peoples of their favourite native bird. They make an immediate impression. They bring back former captives who had been enslaved by those northern marauders. But the Tuis' claim to be agents of but one God, E-Ihowa, is challenged by older tohunga. How can conflicting world views possibly be reconciled? Younger tohunga see a middle path; the Tuis' God must be influential, because the Tui were able to negotiate the release of those captives – possible because of their standing with northern tribes.

We under-estimate to work of the Tui at our peril. The Gospel was received in this country for many reasons, some practical, some economic, but primarily because it offered choice to Māori who were too often locked into endless cycles of utu, and who were going to grab any opportunity for independent negotiators to break deadlocks. Skilled go-betweens who had no tribal loyalties were in demand. We know this trust was obtained and largely maintained because the Treaty would surely have remained unsigned unless explained by clergy who were not of the Crown.

Clergy retain that role today; you may have seen the Bishop of Te Tai Tokerau at the dawn service at Waitangi. Faced with what was probably a serious breach of tikanga he stepped forward to restore peace. Tui retain their influence.

*- Richard Swarbrick*