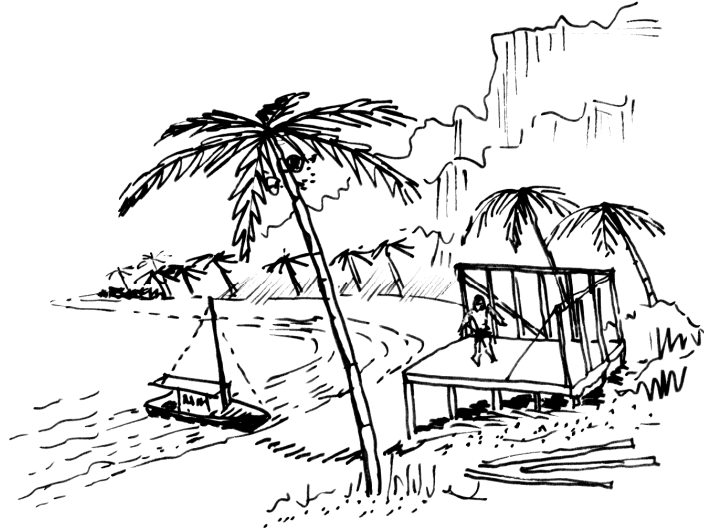


John Paton of Vanuatu

Part 2



Next morning a group of friendly villagers came weeping around the missionaries. “They say that today they are going to kill you all, plunder your house, then set fire to it. You can hear them coming now.” Sure enough the shouting of the warriors could be heard approaching their house. But then, above the sound of warriors came another, welcome sound. “Sail O!”

Were they imagining this or was it real? But the cry was repeated, “Sail O! Sail O!” The shouting of approaching warriors suddenly faded; the people seemed to have melted away. Was this just a trick to get them out of the house? John Paton cautiously peered out the door, and saw it was no trick, there was a ship sailing in to the harbour. The missionaries on Aneityum, having heard of the troubles on Tanna had sent Captain Hastings on his ship, the *Blue Bell*, with twenty armed men to rescue the missionaries, if they were still alive. The Mathieson’s belongings were packed and loaded on the *Blue Bell* with the help of the helpers from Aneityum and the next day they arrived safely at Aneityum.

The Mathiesons were both in poor health and Mrs. Mathieson died not long after they left Tanna, her husband only survived her by three months, which meant that John Paton was the only missionary left who could tell the story of those pioneering days on Tanna.

John Paton had seen the urgent need for a boat owned by the mission that could help them care for the islander teachers and missionaries stationed in isolated posts around the islands and extend the work of evangelism. Obtaining a boat meant raising money, so John agreed to visit Australia to stir up interest in such a project and gain the financial support of church congregations. After his visit to Australia, he returned home to Scotland to do the same. There he met his second wife, Margaret, who accompanied him back to Aneityum, in their own new mission boat called the *Dayspring*.

The islander people were amazed as the boat sailed from island to island. "How is this?" they exclaimed, "We drove them away, we killed many of them. We plundered their houses and robbed them. If we had been treated like that we would never return. But these people come back with a wonderful new ship and more and more missionaries!"

The Patons agreed not to return to Tanna, but to settle on a nearby island, Aniwa, about fifteen miles away. The *Dayspring* had to call at Tanna on the way to Aniwa and bad weather caused them to anchor in the harbour there for some days. The old friendly chief, Nowar, came out in his canoe to visit the Patons on the ship. "I'm very sad that you are not going to stay on my island," he said, "Won't you change your mind?"

After further discussion Nowar realised the Patons would definitely be living on Aniwa. So he called the Aniwan sacred man to him, removed the white shells, the token of chieftanship, from his own arm and tied them on the Aniwan's arm. He spoke firmly to the sacred man, "By these you promise to protect John Paton and his wife and child on Aniwa. Let no evil come to them, or I and my people will avenge it."

Settling on Aniwa meant first obtaining a plot of ground and negotiating with the village people to secure it. From past experience on Tanna they knew it must be higher ground, away from the swamps. Their first choice was not approved by the villagers who suggested another site covered with mounds that had to be cleared away. On clearing them they discovered heaps of bones, the remains of cannibal feasts from ages past. No-one but their sacred men were allowed to touch these bones and it became clear that they had been offered this land in the hope that their gods would strike them dead. The villagers stood around watching the missionaries and their islander helpers digging and clearing away the bones with no bad effect. The people of Aniwa had seen that the Jehovah God of the missionaries was stronger than their own idols and this understanding, even before they had heard any teaching about the Christian message, made it easier for them to receive and believe it.

The first Christian believer on Aniwa was an old chief named Namakei, on whose land the missionaries had built their houses. One day he brought his daughter, Litsi, to the mission house with the request, "Please, John, would you train Litsi for Jesus?" She was the appointed Queen of her tribe and her conversion exerted quite an influence on her followers. Shortly afterwards Namakei's brother brought his daughter to the mission house also, for the mothers of both girls had died. As often as they cared to, these two girls returned to their villages and told their relatives what they had learned. As a result many parents brought their children to the mission school and begged the missionaries to teach them about Jehovah God and His Son Jesus. Some of these children became the best missionaries for they spoke favourably of the mission and also spread the message of the gospel as they learned it.

In the early days those who attended Sunday worship came fully armed, bow and arrow, spear, tomahawk or club always at the ready. People were still very fearful and did not trust their neighbours. Much of their fear was generated by their life-time service of evil spirits. One morning a village man came to John saying, "I've killed the devil! He came to catch me last night but I called all the people and we fought him around the house with our clubs. At daybreak he came out and I killed him dead. We will have no more bad behaviour now. The devil is dead!"

John Paton went with the man to view the dead snake, which turned out to be a huge sea-snake. "You didn't kill the devil, my friend," explained John, "You just killed a snake. But it was good that you were brave enough to kill it." John knew that in time past snakes were the symbol of evil and men were afraid to kill them.

One day, as John was working on an extension to his house, a village man named Nelwang, tomahawk in hand, hovered nearby. "Can I help you, Nelwang?" asked Paton.

"If you will help me now I'll be your friend for ever," declared Nelwang. "I want you to help me get married."

"What do you want me to do?" asked John.

"The trouble is, the woman I want to marry is a chief's widow, Yakin, who lives up in an inland village."

"Then why don't you ask her to marry you?"

"There are thirty young men in the village looking for wives. Each one of them wants her, but no one is brave enough to take her because the others would kill him. Now, if you were in my position, what would you do?" asked Nelwang.

After some thought, John suggested a plan. Two of Nelwang's trusted friends were placed as lookouts one at each end of the coral rocks above the village. Nelwang cut a passage through the fence at the back that led into the bush. Then, at dead of night he carried off his bride and escaped into the seclusion of the bush. In the morning there was some outcry because Yakin's house was deserted, then on checking all houses, Nelwang's was also found to be deserted, so the conclusion was reached that they had run away together. For revenge their houses were plundered and the village people enjoyed a feast at the expense of the missing couple. It was thought they had escaped by canoe to Tanna.

Three weeks later Nelwang appeared again at the mission house when there was no one else around. "Hello," said Paton, "where have you come from? And where is Yakin?"

"I can't tell you yet, but I've come to keep my promise. I will help you and Yakin will help Mrs. Paton and we will be your friends. We will come and live with you until peace comes to our island."

So began a wonderful partnership as Nelwang became a faithful disciple helping John Paton in many ways, while Yakin soon learned to attend to cleaning, washing and cooking to assist Mrs Paton who spent much time teaching the women and girls to sew and to sing. They loved the music and were fascinated by the organ she played.

On the first Sunday after Nelwang and Yakin returned, John persuaded them to appear in church to announce their marriage. Nelwang came in a little cautiously, tomakawk in hand, just in case, and sat as near as he could to John. Then Yakin appeared at the door on the women's side. Nelwang held his tomahawk at the ready, poised across his shoulder, proudly watching as his bride entered the church. The day ended in peace, the village men accepted Nelwang's claim of Yakin as his bride, and bloodshed had been avoided.

Aniwa was a coral island, so there were no high mountains to attract rain clouds, which meant that shortage of water was a constant problem. John showed the people of the island how to dig a well to obtain underground water.

The village people did not believe that water could be obtained from the ground in this fashion.

“Come tomorrow,” said John, “and I hope and believe that Jehovah God will send you the rain water up from the earth.”

There was a great faith in John’s heart that there would be water, despite the doubts that it may be salty. The next morning he went out early to inspect the hole and sank a small hole a further two feet down. Suddenly water gushed up and began to fill the hole. Muddy though it was he tasted it eagerly. It was slightly brackish but not enough to prevent anyone drinking it. The chiefs had gathered nearby, waiting expectantly. John waited for the water to settle and clear, then he got a jug, allowed the chiefs to see it was empty, then went down the ladder to fill it with water from the well. The chiefs gathered round. Namakei shook the jug to see if it would spill. He touched it to see if it felt like water. Finally he tasted it, rolling the liquid around in his mouth for a moment. Then he swallowed it and cried, “Rain! Rain! Yes, it is rain! But how did you get it?”

“Jehovah God gave it out of His own earth in answer to our prayers and hard work. Go and see it springing up for yourselves.”

Although every one of them could scale a tree or a cliff without any difficulty, not one of these men dared to walk to the edge of the well and look in. To them this was miraculous, something to be feared. However, they overcame their problem by forming a line, holding hands, and one by one the man at the front looked into the well to view Jehovah’s rain, then passed to the end of the line until everyone had seen the water in the well.

When they had all seen the water with their own eyes the chief said, “How, wonderful is the work of your Jehovah God! No god of Aniwa ever helped us in this way. The world is turned upside down since Jehovah God came to Aniwa. But will it always rain up through the earth? Or will it come and go like the rain from the clouds?”

“There will always be water in the well, my friend. It is a good gift from Jehovah God for us to use,” John assured him. “You and your people and all the people of the island can come and drink and carry away as much as you please.”

The chief looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “What can we do to help now?” “You can help me build a fence around the well to make it stronger,” said John.

No sooner was this said than everyone rushed for the shore to bring back coral rocks and stones which John placed carefully in position, round and round the wall of the well.

When the well was finished and neatly fenced in the old chief Namakei said, "John, I think I could help you next Sunday. Will you let me preach a sermon?"

The people believed that the miracle of water appearing from the earth was due to the fact that John knew how to pray to his God. The chief thought that he too needed to pray to John Paton's God, in order for the water to keep springing up.

Word was passed around that the chief would be speaking on the Sunday so everyone was there waiting to hear what he had to say. "Friends," he began, "we have seen and heard many strange things since John Paton came to Aniwa, things too wonderful for us to understand, and we said they must be lies. The strangest of all was when he said rain could come from out of the earth. But now the world is turned upside down. We have seen rain come from the earth. Only John Paton's God could do this, our gods never could. The water was there under the ground all the time but we could not see it until the coral and sand were removed. Now it has been cleared away and we can see the water. I have been blind and could not believe in Jehovah God, but the sand has been taken from my mind and I promise to follow Him for the rest of my days. I am old now, but when I die I shall see Him with my own eyes.

If any of you listening to me feel as I do, then go and fetch the idols from your houses and bring them back here. We will burn and bury them. Let us follow Jehovah God and learn from John how to worship and serve Him."

That afternoon the chief and several of his friends returned to John's house bringing their idols to be disposed of. Day after day people in small groups came to add to the pile of idols outside the mission house. To the accompaniment of loud sobs and tears, there was a great, excited burning of all the wooden idols. A deep pit was dug in which stone idols were thrown, and a few were loaded into canoes and dropped out in the deep sea.

After the initial grand disposal of their idols, two men were appointed to search out anyone who pretended to get rid of everything heathen but was still holding on to an idol. These men had the task of encouraging the undecided to be wholehearted in serving God. John Paton wrote in his diary at that time, "In these intensely exciting days we 'stood still and saw the salvation of the Lord.'"

There was a complete change in the way of life of the people on Aniwa. They began to say a prayer of thanks before every meal, they conducted family prayers in their homes morning and evening.

The total population attended the Sunday worship service. One remarkable change was the increase of trust of each other regarding property. Before the mass conversion to Christianity everyone carried all their valuables with them; a brood of chickens or a litter of piglets would be carried in bags if the owner travelled any distance from his home. As a result there were some lively episodes during the Sunday services, with the chirping of chickens, the squealing of pigs and yapping of puppies accompanying the singing and preaching. The missionaries tolerated the interruptions rather than offend any of the people, until the time came when the people themselves voiced their objections.

“Surely now we are Christians we should be honest with everybody’s property,” the chiefs urged, “Couldn’t we all leave our things at home, then there won’t be interruptions to the worship times and we will all learn to be honest and trust each other.” A meeting of all the people was called to discuss the problem. Dishonesty was soundly condemned and everyone agreed to leave their animals at home.

They agreed on a system of fines for those who stole someone else’s property, and the chiefs worked hard to enforce the law. John Paton also encouraged the chiefs to use the Bible teaching they had to develop other laws fitting for their village way of life, repressing crime and encouraging a Christian way of life.

Soon the schools were crowded, for the islanders were eager to learn to read and write and study the Bible in their own tongue. John Paton had lost the printing press he had on Tanna, but there was an old dilapidated one on Aneityum with parts missing. He was handy with tools, so he made replacement parts from scrap metal or wood and eventually had the press in working order. He soon had passages from the book of Genesis, a hymn book and other smaller books in the local language printed on the renovated press.

The teachers from Aneityum were wholehearted in their support of the school teaching program and as the Aniwans learned enough of the Christian way of living they in turn became teachers of their own people. One of the most helpful of these was the good chief Namakei who became very interested in how John Paton could ‘make books speak’ When the passages from Genesis were printed Namakei listened eagerly as John Paton read from it.

“It speaks my language! Give me the book!” Namakei grasped it eagerly, waiting for it to speak to him, then when it was silent he handed it back to the missionary, a look of great disappointment on his face.

“It will not speak to me. Show me how to make it speak!”

“My friend,” said John, “you don’t know how to read yet, how to make it speak to you; but I will teach you to read, then it will speak to you as it does to me.”

Paton realised that Namakei was straining his eyes in trying to see the print, and suspected that his eyes were affected by age, so he found a pair of glasses that suited his eyes. After an initial reluctance to put on the glasses, fearing some magic, he looked through them and exclaimed in delight, "Oh I can see it all now! This is what you told us about Jesus. He opened the eyes of a blind man. The word of Jesus has just come to Aniwa. He has sent me these glass eyes and I've got back the sight I had when I was a boy. Missi, please make the book speak to me now."

John took Namakei out to the village public ground where he drew three large letters in the dust, A, B, C., then showed him those letters on the first page of the book. Soon he was back.

"I have lifted up A, B, C, They are here in my head and I will hold them fast. Give me another three," he said.

This was repeated time after time until he had mastered the whole alphabet and then was spelling out some simple words. He was so keen to learn that he actually memorised the whole book just by hearing John Paton read it to him, before he could actually read all the words. When people came around him he would say, "Come, hear how this book speaks our Aniwan language. You say it is hard to learn to read, but be strong and try. If an old man like me can do it, it ought to be easier for you."

He had a very retentive memory so he quickly learned to read what Paton printed and was his right hand helper in the conversion of the Aniwan people.

Another source of wonder and a useful tool in teaching the Christian message was the organ which Mrs. Paton played. The people loved the 'singing bokis' and whenever they heard it being played they flocked around to enjoy the singing. No sooner did they hear a song played than they would insist on learning it by heart and singing it as they worked on their plantations.

After three years of building, teaching and ministering on Aniwa people were becoming Christians and being baptized. Whenever John had to leave the island he could depend on the island leaders to maintain their Christian worship and the Christian village way of life.

In 1883, when he was 59 years old, he left the work on Aniwa, his son succeeding him, and spent the next 24 years still working hard to further the work of missions. He visited Great Britain, his homeland Scotland, North America, Australia, speaking frequently to churches and mission groups, raising financial support, and most importantly, inspiring young people to volunteer for mission work, which expanded until every island of the New Hebrides group had been evangelised.

When he was 76 years old John Paton and his wife returned to Aniwa to spend a year among their beloved friends, but Mrs. Paton was in poor health so they returned to live in Australia.

Mrs. Paton died in 1905 and John Paton a year later, at the age of 83, a grand old man with long white hair and long, flowing white beard, honoured and revered by Christians world-wide. An extract from some of his last writing speaks of the man he was:
“If God gave me back my life over again I would lay it on the altar to Christ, that He might use it especially among those who have never heard the name of Jesus.... God gave His best, His Son, for me, and I give back my best, my all, for Him.

Adapted from: *John G Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides, 1824-1907*, J. Theodore Mueller, Zondervan, 1941