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Bridging the Pacific: Ta'iisi O.F. Nelson, Australia and the Sāmoan Mau

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ABSTRACT
Illuminating unexplored dimensions of the Sāmoan interwar nationalist movement known as the Mau, this article tells the story of Australians who impacted the history of Indigenous protest in the League of Nations Mandated Territory of Western Samoa ruled by New Zealand. This is a story that bridges Pacific, colonial and Indigenous worlds with the Sāmoan nationalist leader, Ta'iisi O.F. Nelson, located at its epicentre. As well as shedding light on the roles played by Australians in the fraught politics of the 1920s and 1930s, it also establishes unknown or forgotten connections between Australia and the Polynesian Pacific, and of Sāmoans in Australia at this time.

This article has been peer reviewed.

KEYWORDS
Ta'iisi O.F. Nelson; Australia; Sāmoa; Mau movement; New Zealand; British Empire

On 11 March 1932, Ta'iisi O.F. Nelson and his daughter Noue left Auckland for Sydney.1 Ta'iisi was sailing to Australia to see to business matters, see friends and witness a great event about to take place in the city his family knew so well.2 Ta'iisi was the prominent Sāmoan businessman who was somewhat infamous at this time as he was considered the New Zealand government’s number one enemy in its fight against the persistent Sāmoan ‘agitation’ known as the Mau.3 Though the Mau involved the vast majority of Sāmoans, many New Zealand government officials saw
Ta’isi as the movement’s sole instigator and driver, or as one key official framed it, ‘as we said there was only ever one man in the Mau – Nelson.4

Ta’isi had initially welcomed New Zealand as Sāmoa’s new colonial ruler.5 At the same time that Australian forces occupied German New Guinea in the opening stages of the First World War, New Zealand’s rule over Sāmoa commenced when it occupied German Sāmoa in September 1914. Like Australia in New Guinea, New Zealand ruled Sāmoa with an Expeditionary Force until 1921 when the dominions’ status shifted to that of mandatory powers under the League of Nations. Before this, Sāmoa was devastated by the 1918 influenza epidemic that claimed the lives of over 20 per cent of the population, a loss many believed was due to administrative incompetence. The Mau, a protest movement that embraced non-violence, erupted as a result and dogged the Sāmoan mandate until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Ta’isi’s life was profoundly impacted by these events and he in turn shaped the ensuing history. Though an intriguing historical figure, Ta’isi has not been the subject of a dedicated study, a deficiency this article – part of a large biographical study – seeks to redress.6 To that end, this article reveals little-known aspects of Ta’isi’s life, political campaign and business affairs, all of which were connected to Australia. It also seeks to expand the most common frame through which historians have studied the Mau; a bilateral one confined to New Zealand and Sāmoa.7 Through his political campaign, travels and extensive networks Ta’isi took the Mau further, to the hearts of the British Empire in London, the League of Nations in Geneva and beyond.8

Ta’isi also linked the Mau to Australia. As we shall see, certain Australians played significant roles in the Mau story that have not received due recognition within the body of scholarship exploring trans-Tasman political and cultural exchange.9 As well as illuminating this aspect of a shared Sāmoan and Australian history, this article shines new light on the experience of Sāmoans in White Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, addressing the dearth of historical work on the largest Pasifika community in Australia today.10 It tells a story that connects a number of Pacific polities from Australia, Sāmoa, New Zealand, Hawai‘i, New Guinea and Tahiti via the Australian territory of Norfolk Island. In spanning this oceanic terrain this study presents

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4Arthur Braisby to George Richardson, 26 December 1934, Acheson Papers Box 9 5.2.1.1a University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.


6See O’Brien, Tautai.


10If the definition of ‘Pasifika’ also includes Māori, they have the highest population (128,000) rather than Sāmoans (nearly 56,000). Jioji Ravulo, Pacific Communities in Australia (Penrith: University of Western Sydney, 2015), accessed 12 February 2016. https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/923361/SPP568_Pacific_Communities_in_Aust_FA_LR.pdf.
entwined colonial presents and pasts that deepen our understandings of race and their historical impact across the Pacific region in the interwar years.\textsuperscript{11}

By 1932, Ta’isi knew Sydney well. Since 1919 his company had a Sydney office located on the first floor of 318 George Street near Palings Lane. He had many ‘bosom friends’ in the city and three of his daughters – Noue, Maleinafau and Piliopo – attended the Methodist Ladies College in Burwood in the inner-west.\textsuperscript{12} The girls’ schooling opened up all kinds of friendships and associations for the family, particularly those stemming from the Methodist Church in Sydney that too was strongly connected with Sāmoa.

The Methodist Church of Sāmoa was a branch of the New South Wales Conference of the Methodist Church of Australasia until 1964. This circumstance placed many Australian Methodist clergy in positions of considerable influence during the Mau maelstrom. Reverend George Skinkfield, who would lend his considerable support to the New Zealand administration from 1930, at first claimed (dubiously) he remained ‘scrupulously’ neutral.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, he had a ‘fierce controversy’ with Ta’isi dating back to 1923. Skinkfield, like so many others after him, could not understand why Ta’isi did not abandon the interests of ‘native’ Sāmoans in favour of his own political rise under New Zealand rule. In 1923 the reverend offended Ta’isi ‘ sorely by telling him he could not “ride the white horse and the brown horse together”’, implying Ta’isi had to choose between the two cultures he saw as indivisible within himself, his family and his wider community.\textsuperscript{14} Ta’isi refused to countenance the suggestion, commencing a rift with Australian Methodist clergy that widened as the political situation deteriorated. In January 1928, when tensions were running high, the New Zealand administrator appointed Reverend F.G. Lewis to the powerful position of Secretary of Native Affairs. Lewis was ‘an Australian who had served as a Chaplain with the A.I.F in Gallipoli and France and subsequently as a Missionary in Sāmoa and was for some years in charge of the Piula Methodist Native College’ on the island of Upolu.\textsuperscript{15} This appointment placed Lewis in a highly politicised and, from the Mau standpoint, compromised position.\textsuperscript{16}

Sydney was the part of Australia that Ta’isi knew best but he travelled all over Australia. According to the congratulatory letter he sent his acquaintance, William Forgan-Smith, upon his election as premier of Queensland in 1932, Ta’isi said he had been to every Australian state except Queensland.\textsuperscript{17} The longest period Ta’isi spent in Australia was in 1926 when he was based in Sydney, being treated for and recuperating from an unspecified illness for seven months. It was not all hardship during this trip


\textsuperscript{12}Translation of Samoan Supplement of the \textit{NZ Samoa Guardian}, 17 March 1932, in ANZ IT 284 EX 37/12 part 1 R17961901.


\textsuperscript{14}W.R. Tate to J.D. Gray, 7 February 1923, Tate Papers, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, MS-Papers-0264-04, MS-Copy-Micro-0082-02.

\textsuperscript{15}Richardson draft report on Native Affairs, 11 January 1928, ANZ IT 37 EX 1/238 part 9 R17961294.

\textsuperscript{16}Political Parsons in Sāmoa’, \textit{NZ Samoa Guardian}, 12 May 1932, 1, 4.

\textsuperscript{17}The two became acquainted when Forgan-Smith called on Ta’isi in Auckland. O.F. Nelson to William Forgan Smith, 16 June 1932, Unpublished Papers of Ta’isi O.F. Nelson, Tuafu, Apia (hereafter OFN), OFN 64.
however. He also travelled, visiting the soon to be opened Australian capital of Canberra where he took part in a card game with lucrative stakes – a set of opal earrings and necklace. Being an excellent card player from his youth, Ta’isi won the opals.18

During his 1926 stay in Sydney, news was reaching Ta’isi that discontent was on the rise again in Sāmoa. The Mau went quiet from 1923 when Sir General George Spafford Richardson, the former commander of New Zealand forces during the First World War, replaced Colonel Robert Tate who had clashed with discontented Sāmoans throughout his term. The new man, Richardson, appeared to be setting relations on a better course.19 But from 1925, he began exercising his powers over oppositional Sāmoans to excess, particularly by imposing internal exile and stripping *matai* (chiefly) titles for very petty and arbitrary acts by agitators.

Shortly after Ta’isi returned to Sāmoa from Sydney he chaired two public meetings in October and November 1926 that politically united three Sāmoan communities – Europeans, *afakasis* (or mixed race people like himself) and the majority of Sāmoans. This development alarmed Richardson and his heavy-handed responses would relaunch the Mau in March 1927. In July 1927, Ta’isi boarded the ship, the *Tofua*, the government steamer, en route to Wellington. Here he was to witness the high point of New Zealand government interest in the ‘Sāmoa Question’. This took the form of lengthy, fiery and very personal debate in New Zealand’s parliament over amending the *Samoa Act* to make exile without trial (especially Ta’isi’s exile) from Sāmoa legal. It was in these debates that Sir Māui Pōmare, Minister for the Cooks Islands from 1916 to 1928 and Ta’isi’s friend, famously broke ranks with the dominant conservatives to support the Mau, criticising his own government in stunning fashion.20 Then Ta’isi faced days of gruelling questions sparked by a Sāmoan petition as a parliamentary inquiry’s sole witness.21

When Ta’isi boarded the *Tofua* to travel into this political storm in Wellington he met two Australian politicians, Sir Joseph Carruthers and Ernest Farrar. Carruthers was the former premier of New South Wales and the longest serving member of the Legislative Council of the time, a politician who had long been a bastion of conservative politics in the state.22 Farrar, a man Ta’isi came to call ‘Ernie’ and who would call Ta’isi ‘Fred’, was also a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council, albeit from the other side of the political aisle.23 He had been a Labour Party man until he was expelled from the party for his support of conscription during the First World War.24 He was also a Methodist and a freemason, as was Ta’isi.

18Piliopo Maiai and Joan Tamasese, conversation with author, Vaimoso, Apia, 4 August 2015.
21For more on the 1927 Joint Sāmoan Petition Inquiry Committee see, O’Brien, *Tautai*, chap. 7.
23See letters exchanged between O.F. Nelson and E. Farrar in OFN 15.
This serendipitous meeting of the three men would impact the course of Mau history. Carruthers and Farrar were two rare political allies who aided the Mau cause. Ta’isi had other Australian political allies who were also of critical importance but they operated from the polity across the Tasman. Australian-born Harry Holland was a die-hard supporter of the Mau campaign from its beginnings in 1927 until his sudden death in 1933. Holland was the leader of the New Zealand Labour Party. He brought his brand of ‘militant socialism’, forged during the immense trauma of the 1890s Depression, into the heart of New Zealand’s staunchly conservative politics from 1916 when he played a leading role in the formation of New Zealand’s Labour Party, becoming an MP and then leader of the party in 1919. Holland’s critically important stance on Sāmoa was due to his political outlook as well as the unlikely, though professional and respectful, relationship he had with Ta’isi.25 After Holland’s sudden death in 1933 Michael Savage, also Australian-born, succeeded him. Savage’s political outlook was likewise forged in the turbulent landscape of Australian industrial strife.26 When Savage became New Zealand’s first Labour Prime Minister in late 1935 he set about ending the New Zealand government’s protracted punitive campaign against Ta’isi. These two Australian-born politicians made the Mau a cause célèbre for the New Zealand Labour Party that attacked the colonial excesses of the dominating conservatives in New Zealand – people Ta’isi characterised as ‘ultra Tories’.27 Ta’isi’s other great political supporter in New Zealand came from the conservative side of politics: Sir Māui Pōmare. Sir Māui’s attachment to the Mau and to his dear friend stemmed from his personal experience of Māori resistance to New Zealand settler colonialism in the nineteenth century. The experience of the non-violent community at Parihaka in Taranaki, where Sir Māui was raised as a child, became a guiding example for the Mau.28 To a lesser extent Sir Āpirana Ngata, who was elevated to a ministerial position in the Joseph Ward government from December 1928, disagreed with the harshest aspects of New Zealand’s rule. Though Ngata offered some support for the Mau, he was not a personal friend of Ta’isi.29 Apart from Sir Māui Pōmare and Sir Āpirana Ngata, New Zealand conservatives viewed and treated Ta’isi and the Mau with severity.

Due to this dominating atmosphere of hostility towards Ta’isi and the Mau in New Zealand, the support of Carruthers and Farrar from across the Tasman was crucial. After they met aboard the Tofua in mid-1927, it is clear Ta’isi made a strong impression on both men. Although Carruthers left the Tofua in Suva, he gave press interviews in Fiji and then Australia where he discussed the tense situation he had just

27O.F. Nelson to L. Thurston, 29 April 1931, OFN 52.
29Sir Āpirana Ngata and his friend Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) exchanged shifting views on Sāmoa over a number of years. Ngata appears to have been more sympathetic than Te Rangi though both held the view New Zealand and its Sāmoan administrators were well-intended. See M.P.K. Sorenson, Na To Hoa Aroha: From Your Dear Friend (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1986), 3 volumes; ‘The Samoan Mind’, NZ Samoa Guardian, 19 September 1929; and ‘The Maori Point of View’, The New Zealand Herald, 8 October 1930, 15.
witnessed in Sāmoa and offered to assist New Zealand in resolving the problems.\footnote{Position in Samoa: Impressions of a Neutral. A Chat with Sir J. Carruthers’, 6 June 1927, Fiji Times and Herald, CP, vol. 18. Many articles appeared in the New Zealand and Australian press generated by Carruthers’ remarks on Sāmoa at this time. See numerous articles in CP, vol. 18. Trove locates over 200 Australia-wide articles on Sāmoa around mid-1927 linked with Carruthers’ remarks.} Carruthers would later insist in correspondence with Sir George Richardson, that he did not discuss politics with Ta’isi during their time together aboard the Tofua; instead he claimed he spent most of the trip on the upper deck playing quoits during the day and bridge at night.\footnote{J.H. Carruthers to G.S. Richardson, 10 February 1929, CP, vol. 17.} Despite his denials to Richardson, it is clear Carruthers was immediately locked onto the Mau cause and his criticism was ‘greatly resented’ by the New Zealand government from the outset.\footnote{O.F. Nelson to L.D. Stewart, 27 July 1927, CP, vol. 17.}

Ta’isi’s association with Carruthers and Farrar grew after their first encounter and the three men became friends and interlocutors on numerous levels on the Sāmoan troubles. Carruthers began funnelling stories on Sāmoa to Charles Brunsdon Fletcher at the Sydney Morning Herald and other Australian papers.\footnote{C. Brunsdon Fletcher to J. Carruthers, 24 February 1928 and 20 March 1928, CP, vol. 17.} In turn, Ta’isi kept Carruthers briefed on all Mau matters to aid this information flow. To assist in generating a sympathetic view, Ta’isi supplied Carruthers and Farrar with photographs of himself and his daughters on request for possible publication in Australian papers (see Figure 1).\footnote{Ta’isi sent Farrar and Carruthers photographs of himself and his daughters, as Ta’isi explained to the manager of his Sydney office, L.D. Stewart, who was a regular correspondent with Sir Joseph on Ta’isi’s behalf. Farrar thought if Ta’isi was deported the photographs ‘would come in handy for publication in Australia’. O.F. Nelson to L.D. Stewart, 27 July 1927, CP, vol. 17.} Ta’isi also compiled a pamphlet ‘The reasons why the Samoan unrest affects Australia’ and sent it to Carruthers. The reasons he gave emphasised Australia’s proximity to Sāmoa and the threat to regional stability if the mandate should pass to another country due to New Zealand’s incompetence. It also stressed that what was happening in Sāmoa was ‘un-British’.\footnote{The reasons why the Samoan unrest affects Australia’, with Ta’isi’s Tuafu business card attached, is in CP, vol. 18. The Sāmoan-language supplement to the Samoa Guardian publicised this pamphlet to its readership, noting it was ‘widely distributed’; Annotated English translation of Sāmoan Supplement of Samoa Guardian, 12 April 1928, Auckland Public Library.}

As well as many written exchanges, Farrar and Carruthers would call on Ta’isi when they stopped in Auckland on their Pacific travels; Ta’isi would do likewise when he passed through Sydney. Though they often met in person, as tensions rose they kept their meetings clandestine, like when Carruthers came to Auckland in May 1929. Both he and Ta’isi agreed it would be best to keep their meeting out of the papers.\footnote{C. Brunsdon Fletcher to J. Carruthers, 1 August 1927; J. Carruthers to C. Brunsdon Fletcher, 24 February 1928 and 20 March 1928, CP, vol. 17.} Despite his closer friendship with Ta’isi, Farrar’s stance on the Mau was more muted than Carruthers’; Farrar also did not share Sir Joseph’s public stature. Instead he met with New Zealand political counterparts (as he did in August 1929 when he met with a range of government officials including former Prime Minister Coates) and raised his concerns about Sāmoa quietly.\footnote{C. Brunsdon Fletcher to J. Carruthers, 1 August 1927; J. Carruthers to C. Brunsdon Fletcher, 24 February 1928 and 20 March 1928, CP, vol. 17.} When Sir Joseph Ward replaced Coates as New Zealand Prime Minister in late 1928, Carruthers used his personal connection with Ward (he claimed him as ‘an old friend’ of 40 years’ standing)
to pass on his views on Sāmoa that became increasingly pointed and embarrassing to Ward.38

When Ta’isi returned to Sāmoa from New Zealand in 1927, he continued to push for reform despite the looming threat of exile. Administrator Richardson, now armed with the power by the New Zealand parliament to exile troublemakers without trial, ordered Ta’isi to leave Sāmoa in December 1927, nine months after the Mau’s reformation. In this predicament, Ta’isi again turned to Carruthers for support. Carruthers wrote letters to newspapers defending Sāmoa, gave Ta’isi legal advice and put Ta’isi in touch with H.V. Evatt, the prominent Australian barrister and future High Court judge and Labour Party leader. Carruthers and Evatt would stay in touch over Ta’isi’s predicament for some time.39

Against Evatt’s legal advice, Ta’isi left Sāmoa of his own accord in January 1928. He did this to preserve the peace rather than risk a violent clash he thought likely to happen if he waited to be arrested, jailed and tried as Evatt advised he do. Sāmoan anger ran dangerously high in late 1927. Ta’isi wrote that Sāmoans were ‘anxious to

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take up arms’ and break their pledge of non-violent resistance due to Richardson’s provocative act of ordering Ta’isi’s exile without trial (along with that of two others). 40

Peace was preserved in early 1928 thanks to Ta’isi’s rapid departure but this cooperation with the administration came with few compensations. One painful aspect of his exile was a concerted campaign of public disgrace conducted by the conservative press and conservative governments in New Zealand. As the Governor General of New Zealand put it, it was imperative to publicly ‘disgrace the agitator’. 41 As his exile ground on, many people with social ambition or associations with the government gave Ta’isi a wide berth. 42 The ostracism Ta’isi experienced in New Zealand made his friendship with Carruthers and Farrar all the more important. Despite being from very different backgrounds, all three men shared common ground. Ta’isi and Farrar were Methodists and although Sir Joseph was Anglican, his brother, James Carruthers, was a reverend in the Methodist Church. It was this familial connection that took Carruthers to Sāmoa in the first instance. Ta’isi knew James Carruthers also, but the reverend took care not to publicise the association. 43

Apart from religion and politics, the three men shared another common denominator: a love of fishing. Carruthers, who lived on the eastern shores of Sydney Harbour on Old South Head Road, and Farrar, who lived in Manly, were keen on the sport as was Ta’isi. In late 1928, Ta’isi wrote to Farrar. He updated him on the fact that Tupua Tamasese Lea’lofi III (the Mau leader who would be killed in the Black Saturday Massacre in December 1929) was en route to Auckland to serve his six-month prison sentence for not paying his taxes, a crime also committed by the vast majority of Sāmoans. Ta’isi told Farrar that ‘whenever the opportunity occurs for me to do anything it will be to continue my exhortations with the Samoans to preserve the peace at all costs’. He also told his friend he planned to be in Sydney in February to put the girls back in school. He hoped ‘we shall … have the opportunity to spend a weekend fishing in the National Park’. Ta’isi was probably referring to the Ku-ring-gai National Park north of Manly of which Farrar was a trustee. 44 The letter shows the depth of the friendship Ta’isi had with this politician. Carruthers also loved this pastime which may have given the men time together to discuss worldly matters. 45

What makes Farrar and Carruthers’ support for Ta’isi and the Mau puzzling is that both men were fierce defenders of the British Empire. Farrar was, despite his trade union background, very active in the Empire Parliamentary Association and British Empire Exhibition organisations. 46 Carruthers’ devotion to remembering British connections was more prominent still. In 1905, when he was premier of New South Wales he instituted ‘Empire Day’ so school children could remember the late Queen Victoria and reflect on ‘Empire virtues’. 47 Carruthers’ most prominent means of

41Charles Fergusson to Francis Bell, 13 December 1927, Bell Papers 5210-067, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
42See O’Brien, Tautai. See O.F. Nelson to J. Carruthers, 6 May 1931, CP, vol. 18 for discussion on this.
43J.E. Carruthers to O.F. Nelson, OFN 46.
44O.F. Nelson to E. Farrar, 21 December 1928, OFN 15.
46See E.H. Farrar Papers, Mitchell Library ML MSS 2098 box 2 for evidence of his connection to these organisations.
channelling his passion for Empire however was in memorialising Captain James Cook whom Carruthers feared was becoming lost to history in the late nineteenth century.

It is hard to conceive of a world where Captain Cook was a forgotten figure, but it was Carruthers’ mission to ensure this was reversed. When he was Minister for Lands in the George Reid-led government in New South Wales (1895 to 1901) he had ‘rescued’ Captain Cook’s 1770 landing site from private ownership at Kurnell, Botany Bay. In 1908, he sparked the campaign to have the first statue erected to Cook’s memory in London. In 1924 his adoration of Cook took him to Hawai’i and the site of Cook’s death at Kealakekua Bay. On this first visit to Hawai’i Carruthers was stunned to learn that Cook was a contested figure there. Carruthers set about trying to rectify this injustice by spearheading the campaign for a sesqui-centenary of Cook’s ‘discovery’ of the Hawaiian Islands that would be marked in 1928 (see Figure 2). Carruthers was appointed the Australian representative in this enterprise that took him to Hawai’i regularly from 1924 onwards.

Carruthers’ connections with Hawai’i and Captain Cook memorialising gave him eminence in the Pacific at a crucial time in Mau history. His travels regularly took him through the Pacific (he visited Sāmoa twice in 1927 and then again in 1928) and he developed a profile and Pacific networks that proved very useful indeed. The great paradox was that Carruthers used the prominence he derived from memorialising the founder of Britain’s Pacific empire to critique New Zealand – the dominion charged with running a possession on Britain’s behalf – and its rule over its mandated territory. This paradox is even more curious when it is considered that Carruthers was connected to contemporary empire personally because he was a part-owner of three plantations in Australia’s Territory of Papua. As a colonial and then state politician in New South Wales, he presided over one of the most egregious eras of government control over Australian Indigenous peoples that included the Stolen Generations. He had little to say about either colonial situation where there was a minefield of mistreatment, grievances and vocal resistance to colonial excesses.

Carruthers’ colossal colonial blindness notwithstanding, he endured intense public and private criticism over his Sāmoan stance from early 1929. This situation was sparked by an intersecting set of events played out around the globe. In the months before Carruthers’ triumphant commemoration of Captain Cook in Hawai’i in August 1928, Ta’isi made his way to Geneva to take the Sāmoan protest to the League of Nations, a move given wholehearted support by Carruthers. En route to London,
Ta’isi wrote to Carruthers updating him on matters and thanking him ‘once more for all the kindly interest you have taken in our case and the assistance you have rendered me’. Following closely behind Ta’isi was his nemesis, the now former

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administrator Sir George Richardson, who would be given a hearing in Geneva beyond his expectations by the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC). In contrast, Ta’isi got no hearing (though he met with several delegates to the commission privately). Despite this reception, Ta’isi believed the facts of the Sāmoan case and the weight of natural justice would prevail, and that the wise commissioners would find in the Mau’s favour. This was not to be. By mid-August, the PMC released the crushing news that Richardson was exonerated and Ta’isi condemned for inciting the Mau and leading an ‘impressionable’ people astray. After this defeat in Geneva, the New Zealand government stepped up its campaign of disgrace against Ta’isi. Another conservative NSW politician greatly assisted in this endeavour.

Sir Thomas Henley, another conservative Legislative Council member who lived in the Sydney suburb of Burwood, was also an Australian politician aspiring to be a statesman by offering views on Pacific affairs. Henley had already published a number of books in this vein including Fiji, The Land of Promise: Religious, Political, Economic and New Guinea and Australia’s Pacific Islands Mandate in which he aired his doubts about the mandate system. In July 1928, Henley visited Apia on a quest to get to the bottom of the troubles he had read so much about and present a view on them from his position as a ‘neutral’. He met with administration officials, Ta’isi’s estranged wife, Rosabel, her mother Fa’animonimo Moors as well as Tupua Tamasese Lea’ififi III, and others like Mau lawyer Thomas Slipper (see Figure 3). Henley also managed to climb Apia’s Mount Vaea to pay homage at Robert Louis Stevenson’s grave: it was a packed two-day fact-finding mission for Henley. Despite the hospitality shown him, not to mention the brevity of his investigation, Henley’s views were quickly published in Suva. Ta’isi and Tupua Tamasese Lea’ififi III were portrayed in unflattering ways as Henley strenuously opined in favour of the New Zealand administration.

Henley subsequently learnt his Sāmoan views made it all the way to the PMC in Geneva and were very useful for New Zealand’s case. When Sir George Richardson made his way back from Geneva to New Zealand, he stopped in Sydney and personally called on Henley to thank him for his great service. Henley also took the liberty, as he lived near their school in Burwood, to call on Ta’isi’s daughters unannounced and invite them to his home. This caused the girls embarrassment and the ire of their father when he learnt of it.

As the gratifying impact of his publication was registering, Henley asked his colleague Carruthers to share some anecdotes from his Pacific travels for another ‘little book’ he planned to write. He was particularly interested in the ‘correct version’ of an anecdote Carruthers told. It involved a Hawaiian chief who went to London and

54O.F. Nelson to M. Pomare, 19 June 1928, OFN 58. This story is told in greater depth in O’Brien, Tautai, chap. 9.
59Henley’s Sāmoan travels were published as A Pacific Cruise: Musings and Opinions on Island Problems (Sydney: J. Sands, 1930).
when asked about the introduction of civilisation in the islands responded that ‘they had a civilization in Hawaii equal to the civilization they [Britain] had then & at the time the people of England dug up roots in the forest for food’. Henley thought this amusing story ‘shows the placid stand still satisfied condition of the people’. Carruthers not only flatly refused this request, he assailed Henley for upsetting the Nelson family and then launched into an ill-advised attack on Richardson. Carruthers accused him of being the man in charge of Sāmoa during the influenza epidemic, which was completely inaccurate.

Henley penned a blistering response and forwarded Carruthers’ letter onto Richardson as revenge, sparking a heated public disagreement that centred on the reputations of these men – three knights of the British Empire – and Ta’isi. In the ensuing stoush that took place in the press and in private letters, Henley viciously attacked Ta’isi’s character.61 He told Carruthers Ta’isi had been ‘thrown out of the Tattersall’s Club and nearly thrown overboard for his anti-British remarks by a group of young men en route to NZ’.62 But Carruthers was unmoved by Henley’s letters brimming with invective. Instead he thought Henley should be committed to Callum

Figure 3. Sir Thomas Henley on his two-day fact-finding mission in the fale (house) of Tupua Tamasese Lea’ifiti III and Ala Tamasese. Rosabel Nelson is at the back. Source: Thomas Henley, A Pacific Cruise: Musings and Opinions on Island Problems (Sydney: J. Sands, 1930).

60T. Henley to J. Carruthers, 29 December 1929, CP, vol. 17.
Park, the notorious Sydney mental asylum, an opinion repeated to Henley that only fuelled the acrimonious fallout between the two politicians.63

The vitriolic exchanges between the three knights reveal why Carruthers took the stance he did on Sāmoa at a time when the overwhelming majority of conservative Australasian politicians sided with Richardson and New Zealand’s government. The essence of Carruthers’ support stemmed from his view that Sāmoans were asking for the ‘priceless possession of every Britisher, namely British Justice and British fair-play’.64 He believed Ta’isi’s exile was illegal and that the militant treatment of Sāmoans by Richardson and his successors was not the way to deal with Polynesian people. As well as the high regard he had for Ta’isi personally, Carruthers also believed in the exceptionalism of Sāmoans. Not only did he agree entirely with Robert Louis Stevenson’s appraisal that Sāmoans were the ‘gentlemen of the Pacific’; he thought Sāmoans were the ‘finest race of men and women that I have ever met in many travels in all continents of the world’.65

In addition to these ideals of British Empire, Carruthers claimed to be an authority on the governance of Polynesian peoples. This authority stemmed from his time as the administrative officer in charge of Norfolk Island for the better part of 1895 to 1907. The residents of Norfolk were predominantly descendants of Tahitian women and Bounty mutineers – that is mixed race people – who relocated from Pitcairn to Norfolk in 1856, bringing them under the jurisdiction of New South Wales. During his time in charge of Norfolk Island, Carruthers encountered political trouble. As he explained to Richardson, ‘one Macey Quintal … with some other hot-heads started similar trouble to what occurred in Samoa.’ Wanting to avert trouble, the British government appointed Sir Joseph and another as commissioners charged with dampening the revolt.66 ‘I settled all that with a little tact’, Carruthers claimed, ‘using the “suaviter in modo” [gently in manner] instead of “fortiter in re” [firmly in action] style.’ A deputation was sent to Sydney and ‘over three or four days’ the group met with Carruthers. ‘We had a glass of wine and smoked the pipe of peace in the form of a few good cigars’ and the problems were resolved, he claimed.67 Carruthers felt this experience of successfully governing Polynesian peoples, especially people of mixed race, was his unique qualification for offering New Zealand his views about how they too could rectify their Sāmoan problem. As well as proffering this experience, Carruthers’ view about resolving the Sāmoan troubles began to shift when no resolution was forthcoming from New Zealand or the PMC. By June 1929, in a widely publicised speech delivered to the Pan Pacific Congress in Honolulu, Carruthers endorsed taking Sāmoa’s status back to the 1889 Treaty of Berlin when the Three Powers – Britain, Germany and the US – had jurisdiction over Sāmoa. These were ideas Ta’isi and Carruthers had discussed ahead of this provocative speech.68

64An interview with the Hon. Sir Joseph Carruthers, c. 1929, in CP, vol. 18.
65Ibid.
In late 1929, two critical events shifted the terrain markedly. After the Black Saturday massacre in December 1929, Carruthers changed tack again and made even more provocative statements urging the US to take over the mandate.69 With Ta’isi, Carruthers discussed strategies for how the US might be pushed to take interest in Sāmoa, with the distant hope they would annex the western islands and reunify the Sāmoan group. Direct appeals to the US government failed, Ta’isi told Carruthers; the American people had to support the idea. Carruthers utilised his Hawaiian connections to aid this cause. He deployed his connection to Lorrin Thurston, owner of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, who also gave the Mau cause his support at this time. Thurston was an unlikely supporter of this cause, even more so than Carruthers, given his leading role in eroding the Hawaiian monarchy during the 1887 Bayonet Constitution among other actions.70

The other seismic event was the Great Depression. It hit the Sāmoan economy and Ta’isi’s business directly through the plummeting price of copra, the foundation of the mandate’s economy. As the newspaper Ta’isi part-owned, the *NZ Samoa Guardian*, described the situation: ‘what wool is to the New Zealand farmer, so is the product of the cocoanut to the Samoan.’71 Copra was also the stock and trade of O.F. Nelson and Company, of which Ta’isi was managing director and the majority shareholder. O.F. Nelson and Company bought and sold copra, operated copra sheds and shipping, and ran shops and trading outposts around the Sāmoan islands. It was a business that had been growing from its 1868 origins to become the largest commercial enterprise in Sāmoa, making Ta’isi the country’s richest man for a time.

Ta’isi’s flourishing business had been challenged when the Mau re-emerged in 1927. Under the guise of wanting to assist Sāmoan copra producers, whom Administrator Richardson believed were not getting a fair price from the cartel of four copra-buying firms operating in Sāmoa – O.F. Nelson and Co., Sydney-based Burns Philp (South Seas) Co., Ltd., Suva-based Morris Hedstroms Ltd. and P.C. Fabricius Ltd. – Richardson began buying copra at higher prices in early 1927.72 For Richardson, this punitive measure would solve a number of problems: it would (hopefully) reduce Ta’isi’s economic and political power and it would also drive a wedge between the three distinct but deeply intertwined Sāmoan communities that Richardson wanted to keep separate. O.F. Nelson and Co. not only weathered this challenge but, contrary to Richardson’s hopes, business improved.73 After Wall Street crashed in late October 1929 everything changed drastically on that front, affecting far-flung communities from Pacific growers to traders in Apia to Sydney and London.

73 O.F. Nelson to W.R. Carpenter, 27 March 1929, OFN 46.
O.F. Nelson and Co. finances began to suffer. As Ta’isi explained, copra was ‘the main ingredient in the manufacture of margarine’ and its price was ‘naturally affected by the market for the other edible fats’. The price of copra was pegged to the price of butter. When the latter fell – as it did sharply from 1930 – so did the price of copra. Other factors were also at play that drove down copra’s market value: a glut of copra, the rapid dominance of the Dutch firm Unilever in the international copra trade, the production of oil-seeds (like linseed and palm oil) and, strangely, a surge in Norwegian Antarctic whaling. Whale oil flooded the market at this time and, with new processing methods, competed with copra in its industrial uses.

On top of the impact of these global market forces, in 1931 O.F. Nelson and Co. was charged on 28 counts of aiding and abetting a seditious organisation (the Mau), found guilty and given a hefty fine. Though the fine was reduced on appeal, the episode added to the financial woes of the firm. This was the government’s intention.

After the guilty verdict was handed down in the High Court of Samoa in May 1931, Ta’isi was told that a prominent administration figure left the courtroom saying ‘we made Nelson now we are going to break him’. The administration’s campaign stopped short of withdrawing the company’s trading licence, which they had contemplated. The administration could perhaps see the effect stopping O.F. Nelson and Co. from trading would have on all the people dependent on the largest firm in the mandated territory for work, necessities and the continuation of the copra trade that was the bedrock of an economy under great duress.

The government’s campaign against Ta’isi took many forms. In 1932 Ta’isi wrote to the manager of Auckland’s Manukau Royal Arch Chapter of freemasons enclosing his subscription dues and the message that: ‘I greatly regret my inability to attend the Chapter for some time, this is due to certain circumstances which I prefer not to discuss here.’ Ta’isi nevertheless hoped ‘the time will shortly arrive when I can attend regularly without inconvenience to anybody’, a reference to the campaign being waged against him from within this bastion of British imperial manhood. The manager was sympathetic, telling Ta’isi: ‘we shall be delighted to see you whenever you are able to attend.’ He went on that: ‘Masonry should not take cognisance of politics at least that is my personal opinion and you may be assured that we have a warm feeling of esteem for you, who so kindly helped us in the early stages of the chapter’s history.

Despite these exclusions from Auckland society, Ta’isi and his six daughters – Viopapa, Noue, Malienafau, Piliopo, Sina and Taufau – enjoyed a lively social life notwithstanding the pressure of their circumstances. The Nelsons’ various Auckland homes were hubs for the fledgling Sāmoan community in the city, the loyal support network for the Mau as well as the many visitors who regularly passed through.

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75The Pacific Islands Monthly (PIM) tracked the price of copra in the 1930s. See ‘Palm Oil’s Challenge to the Coconut’, PIM, 16 October 1930, 1, 2, 11. In 1931, PIM ran a series ‘Copra in the Doldrums’ beginning in March where all these factors impacting the copra price were investigated.
76Translation of Samoan Supplement of the NZ Samoa Guardian, 4 August 1932, in ANZ IT1 284 EX 37/12 part 1 R17961901.
78O.F. Nelson to C. Crowther, 3 May 1932, OFN 46.
79C. Crowther to O.F. Nelson, 4 May 1932, OFN 46.
Auckland from Sāmoa. By 1932 the family were living in the Auckland suburb of Takapuna and it suited them well. They were by no means on the breadline, like so many others, but they too endured greatly reduced circumstances due to the dark clouds of the Great Depression hovering above them coupled with the social strain they endured.

In order to escape the Sturm und Drang of the Great Depression and the political, economic and social campaign being waged against him, Ta’isi headed for Sydney in March 1932 with his daughter Noue. By this time, Ta’isi was in the final year of his five-year period of exile from Sāmoa. Sydney offered some respite from many of the travails Ta’isi faced, though the city, like Auckland, was gripped by the Depression and Ta’isi’s Australian business matters were no less stressed than they were elsewhere. Two diversions on offer in Sydney that March were the Autumn racing carnival at Royal Randwick Racecourse and the Royal Easter Show, both of which Ta’isi and Noue enjoyed. Horseracing was one of Ta’isi’s great passions and complementing this was the convenient location of his niece, Auguste Lembke (the daughter of his sister Gustava Wetzell), who lived next to the racecourse on Botany Street in Randwick with her family.

Yet the biggest drawcard in Sydney that March was the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The bridge, which Ta’isi had witnessed being constructed during his many visits to Sydney in the 1920s, would be officially opened on 19 March. A round of social gatherings and festivities accompanied the opening where Sydney-siders tried to throw off the Depression’s gloom. When Ta’isi and Noue arrived in Sydney and established themselves at Ta’isi’s usual Sydney hotel, the Australia Hotel on Castlereagh Street, Ta’isi received a flurry of invitations (see Figure 4). He told readers of the NZ Samoan Guardian he had been invited to ‘everything’ including official functions hosted by the governor of New South Wales, Sir Philip Game, and his wife, Lady Gwendolyne Game.

It was Carruthers who organised tickets for Ta’isi and Noue to attend the Sydney Harbour Bridge opening and other events with Sydney’s great and good in March 1932. It cannot be overstated how important this legitimacy and access to the upper echelons of Australian society were to Ta’isi at this time. As he put it himself, he was shown ‘respect’ by the government of New South Wales despite his fears that ‘reports spread about by the New Zealand government … in its anger against the Representative of Samoa [i.e. himself]’ may have harmed his standing.

On 19 March Ta’isi watched the showcase of Australia being paraded before dignitaries, amongst whom he was seated. He wrote that ‘there was a procession of decorated motors depicting the history of Australia since the arrival of Europeans. This procession was two or three miles long, and exceedingly pretty.’ The ugliness of Australia’s colonial history had been whitewashed, but despite all the stage-managing of Australia’s identity, the fraught politics of the day intruded prominently. Ta’isi

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80A picture of the Nelsons’ domestic life in Auckland was etched during the 1930 court case between Ta’isi and his first Auckland landlady, Josephine Wilson-Smith, a story told in greater depth in O’Brien, Tautai, chap. 10.

81NZ Samoan Guardian, 9 June 1932, 1; Translation of Samoan Supplement of the NZ Samoan Guardian, 14 April 1932, in ANZ IT 284 EX 37/12 part 1 R17961901.


83Translation of Samoan Supplement of the NZ Samoan Guardian, 14 April 1932, ANZ IT1 EX 37/12 R17961901.
witnessed Francis De Groot of the fascist New Guard spring from the troops forming the honour guard for the Governor General and cut the ribbon, stopping the new Premier Jack Lang from taking that honour. Ta’isi reflected on the punishment De Groot got: a £5 fine and being taken to a building where ‘persons of doubtful sanity are detained’. ‘What would have happened to Samoans if they had done such a thing?’ he asked. ‘There is little doubt he would have been sentenced to many years in prison if apprehended by the troops.’

Figure 4. Ta’isi’s invitation to the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Source: NZ Samoa Guardian, 9 June 1932.

84Translation of Samoan Supplement of the NZ Samoa Guardian, 14 April 1932, ANZ IT1 EX 37/12 R17961901.
Ta’isi met many dignitaries, including Governor Game who inquired about Robert Louis Stevenson’s Apia grave ‘and of matters such as that’. Ta’isi felt the governor needed some updating on Sāmoan affairs so sent him ‘a copy of the Sāmoan petition to the Three Powers so that he could learn from it the truth of things’. Among all the people he met that March Ta’isi did not see Carruthers. He missed the celebrations because he was not feeling well, instead retreating to his country estate. After he returned from a trip to Hawai’i in September 1932, the long-serving politician took ill and died three months later.

Ernest Farrar wrote to Ta’isi in December 1932 to discuss the last days ‘of our dear old friend, Sir Joseph Carruthers’. Farrar told Ta’isi that during his last illness:

he talked about you and Sāmoan affairs and was wondering whether you would be going back to your Island home. I read to him the information on that point contained in the last ‘Sāmoan Guardian’ … and he expressed the hope that time had healed all the wounds and that a complete understanding as between yourself and the Government would open up a new era of happiness and prosperity for the natives and all concerned.

Ta’isi replied by telling Farrar that Carruthers’ passing ‘will indeed leave a gap which will be very difficult to fill in many directions’. Carruthers’ death meant Ta’isi’s ability to wield political clout from Australia was greatly diminished if not extinguished. Now this asset could not be deployed when, as far as Ta’isi was concerned, the worst was to come. Once he returned to Sāmoa from exile in mid-1933 he was put on trial and exiled again in March 1934 for 10 years. This second exile nearly ruined him financially and took a great toll on his health. The election of Michael Savage’s Labour Government in December 1935 would turn the tide for Ta’isi and he would finally be allowed to return home to Sāmoa in 1936, for good.

Like Sir Māui Pōmare and Harry Holland, Sir Joseph Carruthers was one of the champions of the Sāmoan cause who would die during the Mau campaign. It was Ta’isi O.F. Nelson who brought these three men from remarkably different backgrounds into the epicentre of the Mau cause. Bridges pervade this story about Australia and Sāmoan resistance between the world wars. The opening of a bridge of the steel kind – the Sydney Harbour Bridge – brings to light Carruthers and the story of esteem and disgrace that was at the core of Ta’isi’s decade-long experience as New Zealand’s ‘arch enemy’. Yet this is also a story of bridges of the human kind. Both Ta’isi and Carruthers were bridges connecting people from distant shores, vastly different walks of life and political persuasions. Together these men forged a connection between Australia and Sāmoa that writes a new chapter in a history that needs far more attention. Not only does this story illuminate Joseph Carruthers, but other Australian figures like Ernest Farrar, Thomas Henley, H.V. Evatt, Harry Holland,

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85 Ibid.
86 Sir Joseph made it back to Sydney on the day his brother, James Carruthers, died on 15 September 1932. ‘The Late Dr Carruthers’, Manning River Times and Advocate, 24 September 1932.
88 E. Farrar to O.F. Nelson, 16 December 1932, OFN 15.
89 O.F. Nelson to E. Farrar, 21 December 1932, OFN 15.
Michael Savage and Methodist clergy like F.G. Lewis and George Skinkfield. For these men, Samoa gave their various careers international dimensions, and for Carruthers and Henley, the chance to be statesmen. It also offers a glimpse at the lives of the pioneers of the Samoan community in Australia: Ta’isi’s niece Auguste Lembke, three of Ta’isi’s daughters – Noue, Malienafau and Piliopo – and Ta’isi himself, whose experiences of being Samoan in interwar Australia open up new questions about White Australia and its operations. Their lives offer glimpses of the bridges these people built, albeit invisible or forgotten ones, between Samoa and Australia.

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