



## Tautai: Sāmoa, World History, and the Life of Ta'isi O.F. Nelson

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in contrast to the thriving population growth occurring in the mixed-race communities on the other islands in Bass Strait, which would be the basis for the long-term survival and development of an Indigenous population in Tasmania. What do we make of the relentless population decline at Wybalenna, so that at its end, there were only ten children in a total population of forty-three? And what happened to these ten children? Stevens does not ask these questions, though we do glean that the number of births was very low, that some of the women opposed marriage, some preferred celibacy, and some seem to have used herbs to induce miscarriage. Stevens briefly suggests the last of these may help explain the very low birth rates at Wybalenna, but puzzlingly does not pursue the matter.

If Stevens shows little interest in the very low birth rate, or in the child survival rate, many other historians and commentators have shown a great deal. They have wanted to understand why the Indigenous Tasmanian population on Flinders Island and the VDL mainland fell so drastically, and how and why on the other Bass Strait islands it managed to survive and eventually grow. In recent years, this quest for understanding has been enfolded in the larger debate over whether we can see Australian colonial history in terms of the history of genocide, as I explored some years ago in 'Genocide in Tasmania: The History of an Idea'. Stevens stands apart from these debates, for example ignoring Tom Lawson's *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania*, with its detailed discussion and highly critical account of Wybalenna. In avoiding the genocide question, Stevens has in my view lessened the impact and import of her valuable work.

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***Tautai: Sāmoa, World History, and the Life of Ta'isi O.F. Nelson.***

By Patricia O'Brien. Wellington: Huia Publishers and University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. Pp. 399. NZ\$75.00 cloth.

Despite being one of the most important figures in the history of Sāmoa's independence

movement, the life of Ta'isi Olaf Frederick Nelson has been consigned largely to short entries in biographical dictionaries and brief discussions in broader histories of the Pacific, Sāmoa or New Zealand, or discussions of the post-World War I Mandate system. This is no longer the case, with Patricia O'Brien's biography offering a fascinating, detailed and deeply researched portrait of one of Sāmoa's national heroes. It is sure to become the standard work on this remarkable man.

The son of a Sāmoan mother and a Swedish father, Ta'isi O.F. Nelson was a prominent member of Sāmoa's vibrant and economically important *afakasi* ('half-caste') community, itself a product of Sāmoa's place at the crossroads of nineteenth-century imperial globalisation. In Sāmoa, the term 'half-caste' carried less venom than it did in other colonial spaces, but was still immensely significant, given that patrilineal citizenship laws extended economic and political opportunities to *afakasi* Sāmoans like Ta'isi; opportunities denied to other Sāmoans whose fathers were not expatriate Europeans.

As O'Brien painstakingly demonstrates, it was these barriers to political and economic equality under New Zealand's Mandate rule that politicised Ta'isi O.F. Nelson. Despite early cordial relations, he gradually became not merely an irritant to Sāmoa's administrators, but a serious challenge to their authority. Accordingly, although he remained steadfastly committed to peaceful agitation, he was expelled from Sāmoa. Supported in part by his considerable wealth and his newspaper *The Sāmoan Guardian*, the nationalist Mau movement grew during his exile, culminating in the 'Black Saturday' killings in 1929 that saw New Zealanders shoot dead Mau demonstrators, including their leader Tupua Tamasese Leā'lofi III.

O'Brien vividly depicts all of this, as well as the full range of tactics used by New Zealand's administrators against Ta'isi. These ranged from accusing him of exploiting Sāmoans for his own financial and political gains, through to exiling him, denouncing him as a German agent and attempting to ruin his business. None of these measures persuaded him to give up his demands for Sāmoan independence.

His activism also led New Zealand's officials to consistently disparage him for leveraging his legal status as a European. 'He is not a Sāmoan', New Zealand's officials protested

(126). For O'Brien (and indeed for Sāmoans), however, he most certainly was. O'Brien's very act of calling him Ta'isi (rather than Nelson) throughout the book foregrounds this key Sāmoan strand of his identity. Nonetheless, as O'Brien says, 'he spoke on behalf of both the Sāmoan and European communities as he saw them as an integrated and interdependent community' (47). This complexity might arguably have been signalled a shade more strongly. In stressing his Sāmoanness, O'Brien occasionally risks minimising other strands of his public persona and private style of life. Culturally fluent and undoubtedly accepted by Sāmoans as one of their leaders, Ta'isi was also Nelson, a (legally) European businessman; wealthy and well connected at the highest levels of British imperial society in the antipodes. His house dwarfed those of New Zealand's administrators, he operated one of the most profitable copra trading houses in the Pacific, and he travelled with a degree of luxury unattainable for the vast majority of the inhabitants of not only Sāmoa, but also Australia and New Zealand.

None of this complexity takes away from the immensity of his undertaking or his commitment to Sāmoan independence. It is all the more remarkable that a figure who had so much to lose (and indeed came close to losing it all) risked everything to tirelessly champion the rights of his disenfranchised compatriots. As chapter after chapter of this work shows, had he decided to take full personal advantage of his European status, enormous wealth and political connections, and simply agreed to work within the regulatory framework imposed by the New Zealanders, there was no reason why Ta'isi O.F. Nelson could not have climbed from success to success. This did not happen, however, because as O'Brien persuasively argues, he 'did not seek political power' but rather 'wanted self-government for Sāmoa' (302).

Less convincing, however, is O'Brien's argument that he was targeted because 'he did not accept the notion of white racial prestige' (304). As Ta'isi himself shows, Sāmoa under the New Zealanders (as under the Germans before them) was an imperial site where stratified economic, political and civic rights differentiated between communities that were only inexactly 'racial' communities. The system Ta'isi O.F. Nelson fought against was calibrated to

ensure the political and economic dominance of New Zealand and the large plantation owners of Sāmoa at the cost of the Sāmoans. His greatness came in his insistence that, although these arrangements benefited him personally, such hierarchically organised intercommunal relations were not sustainable, equitable or desirable. As O'Brien demonstrates, this fight against empire and for Sāmoan self-determination came at a considerable personal cost.

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***Colonialism and Its Aftermath: A History of Aboriginal South Australia.***

Edited by Peggy Brock and Tom Gara. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2017. Pp. 453. A\$45.00 paper.

This is a large and important book for several reasons. First, it provides an excellent overview of the history of South Australian colonialism, which has been less researched than other jurisdictions in Australia. Second, it overviews the colony and state's Aboriginal policy, which is imperative given the colony/state primacy in Aboriginal administration until the 1970s. This survey begins with Paul Monaghan's account of Aboriginal structures and population at 1836, followed by outlines of policy in two chapters (before and after 1911), by Robert Foster and Amanda Nettelbeck and Brock and Gara respectively.

Third, despite the field of Aboriginal history being now forty years old, dating from the first issue of the journal *Aboriginal History*, the field still needs more regional studies. This book aids this by adopting a regional approach: covering the Adelaide region, southern South Australia and the Outback. However, this regionalism is still a work in progress, as there are no sections on the Upper Murray or the Flinders Ranges regions of South Australia. Fourth, and perhaps most significant, this book places sixteen Aboriginal life stories alongside the fifteen chapters by academic historians and anthropologists. In this way, stories emerge from both sides of the frontier.