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Tautai

Hilary Howes, Sau'i'a Louise Mataia Milo, Gerald Chaudron, Craig Howes & Patricia O'Brien

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REVIEW FORUM

Tautai

Tautai: Sāmoa, World History, and the Life of Ta'isi O.F. Nelson. By Patricia O'Brien. Wellington, Huia, 2017. xxviii + 401 pp., maps, illus., notes, bibliog., index; ISBN 9781775503316 (hbk). NZ\$75.00.

INTRODUCTION

Biography, Barbara Caine suggests, has much to offer history. It can give us 'insight [...] into the lives and thought of significant individuals' or those of 'less-exalted and ordinary people'. It can also illuminate 'the ways in which particular institutions and events and larger-scale social, economic and political developments were felt, understood and experienced by those who lived through them'.¹ These benefits are true of Indigenous and non-Indigenous biographies alike, and *The Journal of Pacific History* (*JPH*) has reviewed numerous biographies of individuals influential in the history of the Pacific since its foundation in 1966; the very first issue featured reviews of biographies of Arthur Hamilton Gordon and Charles Reed Bishop.² During *JPH*'s first three decades of existence the biographies reviewed were predominantly those of non-Indigenous individuals, with a few notable exceptions.³ In more recent years the balance has improved significantly, one of several positive indications that Indigenous biography, autobiography and life writing as literary genres are increasingly valued.⁴ In the past ten years alone, reviews of 13 biographies or autobiographies of Pacific Islanders from various eras

¹ Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Houndmills & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

² J.D. Legge, review of *The Career of Arthur Hamilton Gordon, First Lord Stanmore, 1829–1912* by J.K. Chapman, *Journal of Pacific History* (hereinafter *JPH*) 1 (1966): 242–3; Niel Gunson, review of *Charles Reed Bishop, Man of Hawai'i* by Harold W. Kent, *JPH* 1 (1966): 249.


³ W.H. Pearson, review of *Omai: First Polynesian Ambassador to England* by Thomas Blake Clark, *JPH* 5 (1970): 240–1; Keith Sinclair, review of *Pacific Islands Portraits* ed. J.W. Davidson and Deryck Scarr, *JPH* 6 (1971): 222–3; Susan Gardner, review of *Queen Emma of the South Seas* by Geoffrey Dutton, *JPH* 12:2 (1977): 121–3; Susan Gardner, review of *Nāhi'ena'ena, Sacred Daughter of Hawai'i* by Marjorie Sinclair, *JPH* 13:2 (1978): 122–4; Alan Frost, review of *Omai: Noble Savage* by Michael Alexander; *Omai: Pacific Envoy* by E.H. McCormick, *JPH* 13:3 (1978): 188–9; Peter Corris, review of *More Pacific Islands Portraits* ed. Deryck Scarr, *JPH* 15:2 (1980): 120–1; Roderic Lacey, review of *Redemption Songs: A Life of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki* by Judith Binney, *JPH* 32:1 (1997): 125–7; Christine Weir, review of *Semisi Nau, The Story of My Life: The Autobiography of a Tongan Methodist Missionary who Worked at Ontong Java in the Solomon Islands* ed. Allan K. Davidson, *JPH* 33:1 (1998): 123–4.

⁴ Compare Peter Read, Frances Peters-Little, and Anna Haebich, eds., *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008); Malcolm Allbrook, 'Indigenous Lives, the "Cult of Forgetfulness" and the Australian Dictionary of Biography' (The Conversation, 2017). Available online at <https://theconversation.com/indigenous-lives-the-cult-of-forgetfulness-and-the-australian-dictionary-of-biography-86302>. Accessed 7 February 2019.

and diverse regions of the Pacific have appeared in *JPH*'s pages.⁵ This review forum is dedicated to a recently published addition to the biographical literature on Pacific Islanders, *Tautai: Sāmoa, World History, and the Life of Ta'isi O.F. Nelson*.⁶ Historian Patricia O'Brien has drawn on previously unknown archival sources and close consultation with family and wider community to document the life and times of Sāmoan nationalist leader Ta'isi O.F. Nelson, his wife Rosabel and six daughters. Reviewers Gerald Chaudron, Craig Howes and Sau'i'a Louise Mataia Milo offer three critical appraisals of *Tautai*; each has contributed in their own historical writings to areas relevant to O'Brien's work, and each brings a different perspective to the task. Their reviews are followed by a response from O'Brien herself. I thank all three reviewers and the author for their generous contributions to this forum, a multidimensional examination of a timely and important biography.

ORCID

Hilary Howes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4437-7884>

HILARY HOWES 
The Australian National University
hilary.howes@anu.edu.au
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⁵ Adrian Muckle, review of *Ce Souffle venu des Ancêtres ... L'Oeuvre politique de Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936–1989)* by Hamid Mokaddem, *JPH* 43:1 (2008): 131–3; Stephen Levine, review of *Tuimacilai: A Life of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara* by Deryck Scarr, *JPH* 45:1 (2010): 157–8; Miranda Johnson, review of *Mata Toa: The Life and Times of Ranginui Walker* by Paul Spoonley, *JPH* 45:1 (2010): 174–5; Adrian Muckle, review of *Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanak Witness to the World: An Intellectual Biography* by Eric Waddell, *JPH* 45:2 (2010): 286–7; Mark Derby, review of *Best of Both Worlds: The Story of Elsdon Best and Tutakanga-hau* by Jeffrey Paparoa Holman, *JPH* 46:1 (2011): 146–7; Glyn Williams, review of *Tupaia: The Remarkable Story of Captain Cook's Polynesian Navigator* by Joan Druett, *JPH* 46:3 (2011): 401–2; Angela Wanhalla, review of *I Whānau Au Kī Kaiapoi: The Story of Natanahira Waruwarutu as Recorded by Thomas Green* ed. Te Maire Tau, *JPH* 47:4 (2012): 530–1; Jack Corbett, review of *Ebia Olewale: A Life of Service* by Jonathan Ritchie, *JPH* 48:2 (2013): 228–9; Angela L. Robinson, review of *Don't Ever Whisper: Darlene Keju: Pacific Health Pioneer, Champion for Nuclear Survivors* by Giff Johnson, *JPH* 48:4 (2013): 497–8; Jack Corbett, review of *Making Micronesia: A Political Biography of Tosiuo Nakayama* by David Hanlon, *JPH* 49:4 (2014): 513–5; Max Quanchi, review of *Ma'afu, Prince of Tonga, Chief of Fiji: The Life and Times of Fiji's first Tui Lau* by John Spurway, *JPH* 51:1 (2016): 85–6; Grant Walton, review of *Playing the Game: Life and Politics in Papua New Guinea* by Julius Chan, *JPH* 52:1 (2017): 129–30; Jack Corbett, review of *Pālemia: A Memoir* by Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi with Peter Swain, *JPH* 52:2 (2017): 255–7.

⁶ While Huia is the publisher for New Zealand and Australian audiences, the University of Hawai'i Press is supplying the rest of the world: see Patricia O'Brien, *Tautai: Sāmoa, World History, and the Life of Ta'isi O.F. Nelson* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), xxviii + 399 pp., illus., maps, notes, bibliog., index. ISBN: 9780824866532 (hbk). US\$72.00.

A SAMOAN VOICE OF THE PAST⁷

Tautai is the first biography of Ta'isi Olaf Frederick Nelson, one of modern Samoa's founding fathers. The book has a wide focus and scope. In 14 chapters, O'Brien extensively documents Ta'isi's world, from his birth at the village of Safune in 1883 until his death at Tuaeufu in 1944, covering six decades. The book centres on Ta'isi's life and his involvement in the Mau movement, the major political event that dominates Samoan historiography and Ta'isi's lifetime. O'Brien and her sources, both living and archival, have revitalized Ta'isi beyond the 'agitator' image, as his critics portrayed him. In this chronicle, he is a serious Samoan businessman, a husband, a father, a patriot, encapsulated in the person that was Ta'isi: animated by locally manifested yet global colonial forces. Ta'isi's refusal to accept colonial frames that marginalized colonial subjects such as himself and his Samoan world induced a lifetime of political engagement, which made him the 'archenemy' of the New Zealand colonial administration.

The book sets out his life in a structured chronological order within 14 chapters. The sections on key historical figures and the glossary of Samoan terms will assist those unfamiliar with the language and Samoan history. The overarching theme in this book is the portrayal of Ta'isi's life as the '*Tautai*' or helmsman who is navigating his life through many difficult and trying times during his conflict with the New Zealand administration. Such lived experiences in a colonial context rife with racial attitudes were often intensified by other global phenomena such as the Great War, the 1918 influenza pandemic which killed most of his relatives, and the Great Depression.

The first two chapters portray Samoa's social and local manifestations of its de facto colonial affairs in which Ta'isi was born and raised. Chapters three to seven highlight the festering political and social conditions that made an agitator out of men such as Ta'isi who, despite his European legal status, took his Samoan birthright seriously. Chapters eight to 13 focus on the significant years of Ta'isi's life where he attempted to navigate against New Zealand's imperially motivated administration.

Chapters 12 to 14 demonstrate the resilience of Ta'isi's character in the manner in which he dealt with his critics and their futile retributive measures to break him, first through exile, gaol in Samoa and in Christchurch, and then by removing his 'principal power – money' (p. 281). Such setbacks could easily have relegated Ta'isi to the status of a vagabond in the colonial reality of the time, lost in his cause. However, the tides turned when the Labour government came to power in 1935, bringing a close to the agonizing relationship between Ta'isi and the New Zealand administration. This was also a new chapter in Samoa's history that saw Samoans included in local politics, and had Ta'isi at the helm again, steering a new future for his people. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of all in Ta'isi's story is the manner in which he responded to his adversaries. He was a true agent of change, and in this way, he created the conditions that allowed the decolonization process to take place in Samoa.

Three features of this biography are worth noting. One powerful strand that interweaves through *Tautai* is the illumination of other Samoan historical actors, notably women, who are often ignored by historians. Ta'isi, in his many roles, influenced the course of other people's lives, especially those close and dear to him. His wife Rosabel's aspirations, the anxiety she experienced as a mother and wife when Ta'isi was exiled, sentenced and imprisoned, and her decisions as an individual are important aspects of Samoan narrative. The daughters Viopapa, Noue, Malienafau, Billie, Sina and Taufau deserve more space. They were the essence of Ta'isi's cause. The author's attention to women perhaps inadvertently

⁷ Note on diacritical marks: for this forum the *JPH* has left it to individual reviewers to decide whether they wish to use the macron or not. For discussion on the historical and present day usage of diacritical marks in Samoan, see Eseta Magau Tualualei, Fepuleai Lasei John Mayer, and Galumalemana A. Hunkin, 'Diacritical Marks and the Samoan Language', *Contemporary Pacific* 27:1 (2015): 183–207.

illustrates the central role that women played in family and public spaces during this era. In terms of the Mau movement, Ala Tamasese's patriotic defiant acts during such a tumultuous colonial context throw new light on Samoan women's approaches and practices of resistance at the time. The illumination of these private, yet historical, moments suggests the intimate relationship the author had with her sources.

The author's reverent treatment of the subject seems to serve the drive of traditional biographies, a vice to sustain the veneration and commemoration of political elites. Yet, the ingenious craftsmanship in which O'Brien articulates Ta'isi at the centre stage of Samoa and world history indicates a genuine objective to illuminate intimate parts of Ta'isi's life. *Tautai* as a historical biography permits the reader to understand his historical context which is in tune with current trends in historical scholarship. It is suitable for those with a scholarly interest in Samoa but perhaps not for the average Samoan reader.

The most significant aspect that allows this work to transcend previous considerations of Samoan history is that the author is held tightly checked by Ta'isi's voice. From the outset, the author makes it clear she has been influenced by postcolonial scholarship of decentering theories 'to allow the voice of Ta'isi O.F. Nelson to be heard without scholarly interference' (p. 309). The historiographic discussion at the beginning of the book, in the notes and in the last chapter reflects the postcolonial persuasions of the narrative. The discovery of Ta'isi's voice was made possible only through the close examination of an extensive range of sources such as oral histories and archival papers – for example, Ta'isi's private papers, family albums and his adversaries' documents. Several collections are employed in this major undertaking that took eight years of thorough historical scholarship.

Tautai is a historical biography that contributes to Samoan and Pacific history in many ways. The book certainly achieves its primary purpose and more. The author captures Ta'isi's personal past and highlights essential aspects of his life that make him a worthy subject for historical enquiry. I congratulate the author and the family for both bringing to light and bringing home Ta'isi's story, and, ultimately, for inspiring Samoan and Pacific historiography. *Malo lava faafetai.*

Tautai a'e lau afioga Ta'isi. Ua a'e malo lau fa'atamasoāli'iga. Ta'isi has arrived!

SAU'A LOUISE MATAIA MILO
National University of Samoa
l.mataia@nus.edu.ws

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THE MAKING OF A HERO

Australian scholar Patricia O'Brien's book about Ta'isi O.F. Nelson is promoted as the first authoritative biography of this central figure in 20th-century Sāmoan history. O'Brien has noted in interviews that she was surprised there had been little research on Nelson's life and that the accepted view of him is still shaped very much by what New Zealand officials had articulated so negatively in the 1920s and 1930s. As a result, O'Brien asserts in the prologue, the 'received historical view of Ta'isi has been confused, incomplete, and questions about him have remained unanswered' (p. xxviii). In her effort to tell his story, O'Brien not only sought out new sources but 'interrogates notions of race, empire, gender, power, and towering national myths shaped by these ideologies' (p. xxviii). She clearly did not intend to limit herself to assembling facts through combing archival sources and interviews with descendants to fashion a journeyman's biography. O'Brien has a vision of Nelson as an independence fighter who should rank on the world stage with others who fought for independence from the European colonial powers in Africa and Asia, such as Gandhi and Nkrumah, and she announces that vision in the subtitle of her book.

The bare bones of Nelson's life are well-known, from his birth into a Swedish-Sāmoan family in 1883 to becoming the richest man in Sāmoa, and then his resistance to New Zealand colonial rule in the 1920s that led to him being exiled twice to New Zealand before finally being allowed to return to his homeland in 1936, his health and finances severely weakened, to die perhaps prematurely in 1944. During his life, New Zealand officials did their best to demonize Nelson in their correspondence, memoranda, press statements and reports to the League of Nations. Some of their repeated claims are included in the questions about Nelson that O'Brien asks of herself and her readers: 'Was he an exploiter of his people? Was he a power-mad capitalist driven by a lust for commercial dominance? Was he a naïve idealist striving for an impossible goal? Why *was* he an agitator?' (p. xxviii). By weaving the stories of Nelson and his family into the larger story of Sāmoa's history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, O'Brien attempts to flesh out those bones and explain the personality, motives and forces that made Nelson the man he was, the relationships he forged and the decisions he took. While there is an assumption that the reader is familiar with the intricacies of New Zealand's role as a mandatory power, O'Brien gives sufficient background for the less knowledgeable reader to be able to follow her narrative.

From the beginning of her biography, O'Brien emphasizes that Sāmoa was not an isolated group of islands but part of a wider world that continually impacted and interfered with Sāmoan affairs, and that Nelson was shaped by those external forces from birth. In the first two chapters that cover the period until New Zealand was granted the mandate for Sāmoa by the League of Nations in 1920, O'Brien paints a Sāmoan scene dominated by the colonial machinations of the European powers jockeying for power in the Pacific. Nelson's early life is revealed as threads through this overwhelming geopolitical contest, resulting in an almost inevitable political awakening in 1919–20. In the following chapters, that cover principally the climactic years 1926 to 1930 when the Sāmoan Mau resistance movement critically weakened New Zealand's control of the islands, O'Brien focuses on the evolving and deteriorating relationship between Nelson and the New Zealand Sāmoan administration. Successive administrators increasingly viewed him as *the* impediment to their rule and a threat to New Zealand's colonial reputation. This view was shared with, and by, New Zealand government officials and culminated in the efforts of Sāmoan Administrator General George Richardson to brand Nelson as a dangerous agitator who was principally to blame for all the problems in the territory and eventually remove him from Sāmoa altogether.

As a cultural historian, O'Brien endeavours to explain actions and events by relating them to broader contexts, drawing on her research into colonialism in Australia, New Guinea and Polynesia. She makes comparisons between what was happening in Sāmoa with the history of Indigenous peoples in Tahiti, Hawai'i and New Zealand and shows how Ta'isi Nelson's friendship with Māori politician Māui Pōmare had a significant impact on his thinking. She notes correctly how the military backgrounds of many of the officials who served in Sāmoa moulded and limited their thinking and how the myth of racial harmony in New Zealand perpetuated by the white elite impacted the country's rule so negatively in the territory. However, O'Brien seems mystified why Nelson did not see any commonality between the Sāmoan situation and that of Indigenous Australians. In her efforts to undo the myths and untruths woven around Nelson by undoubtedly self-serving, narrow-minded and often incompetent New Zealand officials, O'Brien does not admit sufficiently that Nelson was also a product of his upbringing and times. It is not surprising that he did not identify with Indigenous Australians when he considered himself equal to the white Australians he mixed with on his visits to Sydney. His own wealth and status in Sāmoa had initially made him unwilling to seek universal suffrage there and, as a member of the Sāmoan elite, it was natural that he should look to the Māori elite, his fellow Polynesians, as models.

O'Brien's sincere efforts to redress a historical wrong and her clear admiration for her subject make Nelson the hero of this book, both literally and figuratively, and the language used is often dramatic. Her constant use of questions to stimulate the narrative almost suggests she is addressing Nelson's detractors as much as the modern student of Sāmoan and Pacific

history. In the epilogue, O'Brien defends him against all the historical charges made by New Zealand. She notes correctly that he was a conservative and a modernizer but perhaps over-extends her argument when she suggests that his correspondence and meetings with supporters in Europe made the Mau a 'global nationalist movement' (p. 303). The fact that Nelson was in contact with people in Europe, Australia and America did not actually translate into political support that had any impact on the situation in Sāmoa. She also has somewhat of a blind spot in regard to American Sāmoa, the other Sāmoa. In her comparison between the administrations of the mandate of Western Sāmoa and American Sāmoa, O'Brien rightly notes that New Zealand's bungling in regard to the 1918–19 influenza epidemic devastated Sāmoa while American Sāmoa was largely unaffected. However, she does not mention that American control over their colony was as strict as, and culturally more pernicious than, that in New Zealand's 'colony'.

Such criticisms apart, O'Brien has produced a biography that places Nelson at the centre of Sāmoan history instead of the almost walk-on part that previous studies have often assigned him. Her research is impressive and the access she gained to his papers and his family enabled her to tell his story from his own perspective, something that is long overdue. He is revealed as a complex character, a generous, thoughtful and optimistic man whose faith in his fellow man and the British sense of fair play endured despite severe tests. Perhaps a more cynical man may not have persisted as he did and for that reason his, and his countrymen's, 'naivety' was the reason New Zealand failed in Sāmoa. O'Brien has made a valuable contribution to Sāmoan history and in so doing has contributed greatly to integrating Nelson and Sāmoa into the broader currents of Pacific and world history as she intended.

GERALD CHAUDRON
University of Memphis
gchudron@memphis.edu
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DECOLONIZING PACIFIC HISTORY AND WRITING INDIGENOUS BIOGRAPHY

In this engaging and detailed biography of Sāmoan activist, entrepreneur, and patriot Ta'isi O.F. Nelson, Patricia O'Brien pays special attention to his December 1933 trial for sedition. Nelson defended himself in the proceedings, and over the course of his skilful cross-examination of his principal accuser, Investigator Arthur Braisby, 'the trial transformed from an open-and-shut case to one in which New Zealand's entire administration of Sāmoa, indeed, British Empire itself, was put on trial' (p. 263). Something similar takes place in O'Brien's *Tautai*, an unapologetically redemptive biography that offers valuable information about its subject at the same time as it reorients the entire representation of Sāmoa as a colonial possession.

In carrying out this task, O'Brien is in good company. To mention only work by current and former colleagues in Hawai'i, Alan Howard's *Hef Ran Ta (The Morning Star): A Biography of Wilson Inia, Rotuma's First Senator* (1994), Robert C. Kiste's *He Served: A Biography of Macu Salato* (1998), David L. Hanlon's *Making Micronesia: A Political Biography of Tosivo Nakayama* (2015), Marie Alohalani Brown's *Facing the Spears of Change: The Life and Legacy of John Papa 'Īrī* (2016), and Brij V. Lal and Vicki Luker's edited collection *Telling Pacific Lives: Prisms of Process* (2008), are part of a widespread movement to retell the history of the Pacific by focusing on the challenges and triumphs of prominent Indigenous figures, rather than upon the well-documented machinations of imperial agents and institutions.

Like her predecessors, O'Brien takes it for granted that colonial governance and its agents were inherently, pervasively, privately, and publicly racist. In addition to being

‘Sāmoa’s richest man’, and a complex and fascinating individual, then, Nelson was also the “archenemy” of New Zealand and its greater whole, the British Empire’, because he drew upon, and all but exhausted, his substantial resources ‘to get his people’s plight heard’ throughout the world (book jacket). Telling his story therefore requires writing a history of Indigenous struggles against the brutal facts of colonization in the Pacific.

The great strength of this biography is its success in presenting Nelson as an active and effective agent for Sāmoan self-determination and resistance. His family background, his educational and financial advantages, his skill as a *tautai* (navigator) steering his way between communities and nations, his battles with colonial authorities, his domestic struggles and blessings, and his intelligent, insistent, articulate, and ongoing critique of German, New Zealand and British colonial policy are all carefully documented. This biography’s striking examples, drawn from private and public archives of letters, government documents, newspapers and other publications, as well as court proceedings, make it hard to imagine a more thorough and responsible handling of the available materials.

Because so much is quoted from Nelson’s own correspondence, a vivid portrait emerges of his talents as a writer, speaker, and thinker. His tastes were cosmopolitan, without ever weakening his conviction that Sāmoa provided the foundation for his identity. And because Nelson was so public a figure, O’Brien can draw extensively on newspaper accounts, often with photographs, to suggest just how important he was to Sāmoans.

Given its undeniable accomplishments, at another time, or in another place, any reservations about *Tautai* could be dismissed as quibbles. But certain qualities of the book do raise important issues about Pacific biography, and Indigenous biography more generally. Most notably, despite the overwhelming amount of material O’Brien gathers from Nelson’s own archives, and from the public records available in New Zealand, Sāmoa, and elsewhere, the portraits of Sāmoan people not continually engaged with colonial institutions or authorities, or outside of Nelson’s immediate circle, seem sketchy and ill-defined. The reasons for this are endemic to writing biographies about Indigenous subjects. First, the sheer volume of written documentation produced by political and literary figures, and the ease of access, tends to skew any biographical narrative toward those issues and individuals prominently featured in these materials. In the case of Indigenous subjects, however, this tendency can draw attention away from documents or sources not in the language of the colonial authorities – or of the biographer. In Nelson’s biography, for instance, O’Brien mentions relatively briefly the *Samoan Guardian*, a newspaper published in English and Sāmoan that Nelson co-founded in 1927 ‘to combat the hostile *Samoa Times*’. As ‘the newspaper of record for the protest movement’, this paper ‘was always opposed to colonial enterprise and championed Indigenous views and causes’ and ‘served as the main means of communication for the Mau’ (p. 131). But in the biography, all the citations seem to come from the English side of the ledger, even though in early 1928, the colonial administrator, General George Spafford Richardson, issued an Order in Council aimed at ‘preventing anyone from publishing in the Sāmoan language without his permission’, and specifically ‘the *O Le Matua Tausi Samoa* – the Sāmoan-language supplement of the paper’ (p. 163). Why did the colonial authorities want to stop Sāmoan publications? Were there differences between the English and Sāmoan content of the *Guardian*? Or were the presumed readers the real problem?

Such questions lead to more general questions not only about the extent and contents of Sāmoan language archives regarding Nelson, but also about the degree to which an individual’s proficiency in English, or high visibility in English-language environments, determines their prominence within historical and biographical narratives. As someone completely bilingual in English and Sāmoan, and an accomplished and prolific writer, Nelson is constantly translating his own identity in response to his intended audiences. But at least in the biography, the Sāmoans living outside of the financial centres, and I suspect those who did not live much of their lives or activism in English, don’t display the same fullness of character that Nelson, his family, his closest political associates, and even his many colonial adversaries and friends enjoy.

This cloudiness also affects perhaps the most important issue the biography raises – the degree to which Nelson served as a leader and representative of the entire Sāmoan population. As O’Brien acknowledges, because of his affluence, and his status as an *afakasi* – his father was European and his mother was Sāmoan – the colonial powers sought to alienate him from his community by accusing him of wrapping his greed and rapaciousness in patriotism to take advantage of the ‘real’ Sāmoans. Others saw Nelson as more a product of European than Sāmoan values, while still others never saw any meaningful distinction. Sāmoans all, they were by definition incapable of self-determination and governance. But even if these tensions are recognized, virtually all interactions between Nelson and other Sāmoans would have been conducted in the Sāmoan language. Whether they were not written down for both legal and political reasons, or were written down, and even published, these engagements do not figure prominently in the narrative, leaving many questions about Nelson’s relationship to other Sāmoans as a political leader and organizer unanswered.

O’Brien has indisputably done a remarkable amount of research, and the result is a biography that Albert Wendt praises for introducing readers to a ‘fascinating, profoundly intelligent, courageous, and indefatigable leader of Sāmoa’s drive for independence’, and Alison Bashford describes as a ‘world history of Sāmoa, and a Pacific history of the early twentieth century world’ that ‘links empire, war, capitalism, anti-colonialism over six tumultuous decades’ (book jacket). *Tautai* is an important and welcome contribution to the decolonizing of Pacific history. It should not be anything other than what it is.

But when thinking about representing Pacific lives, Lal and Luker’s insistence on noting the difference between life writing and life telling should be heeded. This distinction recognizes the significance of orality and literacy, *not* as states of competence or stages of development, but as modes of performance, with different epistemologies, and notions of time and narrative.⁸ The resources potentially available from life telling are often harder to acquire, sometimes because of a language barrier between the biographer and potential sources, but just as often because the relevant material does not reside on paper, but in the cultural memory of individuals, frequently removed by time and space from the actors and events.

When Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice ask ‘what it means to *do* Indigenous biography’ in a special issue of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* devoted to this topic, they conclude that such biographies ‘are too often studied for how they engage colonial subjects rather than for the ways they center their own contexts and concerns both within and beyond settler colonialism’.⁹ Instead, Somerville and Justice call for ‘an insistence on Indigenous biographies as more than past-tense histories of study, but rather, as meaningful and ongoing living relationships in the world’.¹⁰

O’Brien’s biography provides us with an excellent past-tense history, and its gestures toward assessing the contemporary relevance of Nelson’s struggles and successes should encourage all of us, and especially current and future Indigenous biographers in the Pacific, to create those ‘meaningful and ongoing living relationships’.

CRAIG HOWES
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
craighow@hawaii.edu
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⁸ Brij V. Lal and Vicki Luker, eds., *Telling Pacific Lives: Prisms of Process* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), vii–viii.

⁹ Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice, ‘Introduction: Indigenous Conversations about Biography’, *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 39:3 (2016): 241.

¹⁰ Somerville and Justice, ‘Introduction’, 246.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

It was very gratifying to read these essays on *Tautai* by Sau'i'a Louise Mataia Milo, Craig Howes and Gerald Chaudron. I thank them for their considered insights and scholarly generosity. I also thank the *JPH* editors for recognizing *Tautai* with this book forum.

Sau'i'a, Howes and Chaudron all raise challenging points in their critiques that collectively engage multiple dimensions of *Tautai*. They provoke questions not only for me as the author of *Tautai* but for many, if not all, scholars of Pacific history, especially those who tell their histories as biography, and seek to engage Pasifika as well as academic communities and a wide-ranging demographic beyond, as *Tautai* has done.

At the time of writing (early 2019), I see *Tautai* in three interwoven parts. The first part is the mining of sources and the compiling of a complex portrait of this extraordinary man and his story. The second part is the 'relationship research' woven through every page of *Tautai*. This is the unusual and unwaveringly generous involvement of the family and wider community in guiding me, a *pālagi* (non-Samoan) historian, through the *fa'asamoa* (Sāmoan way) aspects of the project and actively participating in the exchange of knowledges upon which *Tautai* is built.

The third part of *Tautai* is not contained between the book's covers. This is the story of *Tautai*'s remarkable reception since its launches in Sāmoa and Auckland in August, and in Sydney in October 2017. This aspect of *Tautai*, as well as the research journey preceding publication and Ta'isi family reflections on working with me, has now been collated on the website tautaithebook.com.

These three parts of *Tautai* are apropos of all the reviewers' comments, but particularly that of Howes. His ultimate verdict of *Tautai*, as an illustration of Indigenous biographical writing, hinges on the book's ability to generate 'meaningful and ongoing living relationships in the world'. *Tautai*, as evidenced by the consistent community engagement since I began delivering the first lectures on my research in 2012, through to its continuing reception in the present, I hope will be deemed an exemplar of this kind of Indigenous biography.

When I have told Ta'isi's story, it has always struck a deep community chord, so much so that I have regularly been overwhelmed by how much and deeply it resonates. This has taken multiple forms. There were the events at the 2013 Pōmare Day at Ōwae Marae, Waitara, when I presented my work on the friendship between Ta'isi and Sir Māui Pōmare, a story that had fallen from memory. Listening to me tell this story were members of the Ta'isi family joining with the Pōmare family for the first time in over eight decades to remember these two friends. (This story was published in *JPH* 41:1 2014 and remains one of *JPH*'s most read articles.)

Many other moments brought home the impact of the pre-published book on contemporary lives; but they pale in comparison to what transpired once the book appeared in late 2017. The greatest expression of this would be the wreath-laying ceremony at Ta'isi's Apia home, Tuae'fu, in August 2017 the day before *Tautai*'s official launch. An army of *aiga* (family) had worked for months preparing the site for this occasion, including undertaking major earthworks. *Aiga* came from across the world and mingled with dignitaries and community to pay their respects to Ta'isi. From my vantage point seated next to the prime minister of Sāmoa, as the graves disappeared under mountains of fragrant and vibrant floral tributes, I still cannot adequately describe the realization that this was catalysed by my work. And that was only the first of often quite astounding demonstrations of the embrace of *Tautai*.

As well as the evident interest Ta'isi generated throughout the writing of *Tautai*, the lives of his six daughters – Viopapa, Noue, Malienafau, Piliopo, Sina and Taufau – as well as his wife, Rosabel, and his mother and sisters were also central to *Tautai*, so much so that I see the book as a form of collective biography. Sau'i'a's commentary hit upon this central agenda, though surprisingly other reviewers to date have not. As well as Ta'isi's kin, *Tautai* illuminated the lives and contributions of other women in Sāmoan history like Ala Tamasese. Sau'i'a would

have liked to see these women given more space in *Tautai*. I wholeheartedly agree: all these women (and many more actors besides) deserve additional historical treatment. Like any author, I had limited parameters for *Tautai*. When the manuscript was completed it ran well over-length, though (thankfully) Hawai'i University Press permitted it to proceed nevertheless. Even at its published length, *Tautai* is by no means an exhaustive study. I see *Tautai* as a map for future researchers, especially Sāmoan researchers. I took particular care to ensure *Tautai* provided a clear research path (many historiographical works, though vital, lack adequate citations to generate new research paths about Ta'isi).

I also make a standing commitment to assist future Pasifika researchers especially with accessing many of the sources I relied upon that are out of reach without the kinds of generous funding that made *Tautai* possible. In researching *Tautai* I uncovered a body of new sources that shed light on many aspects of Sāmoan and wider Pacific histories, and indeed Sāmoan-centred world histories. The original Mau petitions signed in 1928, listing signatories by district, village and name – that I digitized from the League of Nations archives in Geneva – are one fine example of documents that allow new windows to open on this past; they have now been put into circulation, but I do not believe any historian had set eyes on them before. Another example is the transcript of the secret hearings of the 1927 Joint Samoan Petition Inquiry Committee, so deeply buried in the National Library of New Zealand that previous historians had not found it. Like Ta'isi's unutilized personal papers, this document was also a goldmine for revealing Ta'isi's voice, his view of the historical course of Sāmoa during his lifetime as well as New Zealand colonial methods circa 1927. My hope is that *Tautai* will inspire numerous future works both with a global scope and local ones, connecting villages to imperial heartlands. It was apparent during the Apia launch events, when a number of people stopped me on the street to tell me about how Ta'isi entered the lives of their families, that there are many stories waiting to be told revolving around Ta'isi, O.F. Nelson and Co. and its multifaceted business based predominantly on the copra industry and retail, marked out by its many nodes dotted throughout Upolu and Savai'i. Social histories of O.F. Nelson and Co., from its 1868 founding to its contemporary remnants, would capture an array of histories.

On the topic of sources and future studies, Howes mentioned Sāmoan-language sources, especially the *NZ Samoan Guardian's* Sāmoan-language supplement, *O Le Matua Tausi Samoa*. As noted, I used English translations that are interesting documents in themselves. Howes suggested the added value of comparing English and Sāmoan-language versions (to which I would add all the Sāmoan-language sources beyond this newspaper). This is the perfect enterprise for future Sāmoan scholars, but was beyond the scope of *Tautai*. Howes goes further by hoping that sources free from Ta'isi's authorial or glossing hand come to light. The materialization of such sources would alleviate the 'cloudiness' that 'affects perhaps the most important issue the biography raises', being 'the degree to which Nelson served as a leader and representative of the entire Sāmoan population'. I too hope that such documents exist, come into circulation and provide additional perspectives on Ta'isi. Even so, *Tautai* does not claim Ta'isi enjoyed the support of the 'entire' population. His opponents were effective and well-placed, but also greatly outnumbered, as an abundance of evidence of varying origin corroborates.

To this wish list of sources that could have dissolved some of the ambivalences about Ta'isi I would add documents revealing his attitudes to Indigenous Australians. Chaudron writes, 'O'Brien seems mystified why Nelson did not see any commonality between the Sāmoan situation and that of Indigenous Australians', adding that 'it is not surprising that he did not identify with Indigenous Australians when he considered himself equal to the white Australians he mixed with on his visits to Sydney'. Is it the historians' role to presume Ta'isi unequivocally held this attitude? Ta'isi had a blinkered view on this and other issues, including women's political rights and the dismal lot of African Americans, Hawaiians and Native Americans under the yoke of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. But to confidently assert his full embrace of the racial attitudes of his white Australian friends is an

assertion too far. Ta'isi had limits on his progressiveness, as *Tautai* notes, and he did embellish comparative colonial situations, like American Sāmoa, when it was politically expedient to do so. Ta'isi's optimistic view of American Sāmoa is not also this author's view of the situation, as Chaudron seems to suggest. The rosy view put forward by Ta'isi and the *NZ Samoa Guardian* was a device used to hammer and embarrass New Zealand. As *Tautai* shows, the tactic worked well.

The stories told in *Tautai* will no doubt become continually larger and more complicated as more details, perspectives and sources come to light. Ta'isi O.F. Nelson's storied life and those of his *aiga* offer research pathways that promise to be deeply engaging to both academic historians and wider reading publics. I look forward to seeing how *Tautai* inspires future historians, writers and artists, and feel confident in predicting that their engagements with *Tautai* will add further richness to this quintessentially Sāmoan, yet global, story.

PATRICIA O'BRIEN
The Australian National University
patricia.obrien@anu.edu.au
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