

SAMOA'S LAST KING

A Footnote to History

By Leicester Webb

ONE of the cables that caught my eye recently and set me thinking, announced briefly the death of Malietoa Tanumafili, the last King of Samoa. To those of you who are readers of Robert Louis Stevenson, and particularly of his *Vailima Letters* and his *Footnote to History*, the name will mean something. Because you will remember that in the 'nineties of last century Stevenson got himself very deeply involved in Samoan politics, so deeply involved that the authorities seriously considered deporting him.

Why School History Is Dull

Now, it is rather a pity we don't pay more attention to Samoan history in New Zealand schools. School teachers have told me that it is very difficult to interest children in New Zealand history because it is quite exceptionally dull, particularly on the political side. We never assassinate our politicians when they displease us and we never settle our political quarrels by the sensible and conclusive method of a civil war. You can't blame school children for not being interested in a history in which nothing ever happens. But Samoan history is very different. Reading about the Malietoas and the Mataafas and the Tameseses is like reading about the wars of the Roses or the Cavaliers and the Roundheads. There is bloodshed and intrigue and treachery and heroism, and all the ingredients of the sort of history that people are really interested in. And seeing that Samoa is now part of New Zealand, it seems to me that Samoan history might be substituted for New Zealand history in the schools.

Key to Samoa's Story

The key to Samoan history is the fact that, ever since anything has been known about it, authority over the Samoan people has been divided between two great family groups—the Tupua and the Malietoa. When the Europeans came to Samoa they found the country in a state of continual civil war because the two families were never able to agree about the extent of their authority. They also found in existence an institution which they somewhat mistakenly called the Kingship. In the main island of Upolu, four chiefly titles were held by one person; that person had a nominal and ceremonial overlordship of the whole of Samoa. Actually, he had no real political authority. But it occurred to the earliest European inhabitants that the way to get power among the Samoans was to support one or other of the great families and to endeavour to get their protégé made king.

One might say that the struggle between the Malietoa and the Tupua families was converted into an international struggle. The British and the Americans supported the Malietoa family; the Germans supported the Tupua family.

Apia Fifty Years Ago

Apia, the capital of Samoa, was in those days a very nasty place. I am talking of the last quarter of the 19th century. It had a large population of adventurers, scoundrels, and beachcombers, from all parts of the world, subject to no proper sort of government. In addition there were the British, American, and German Consuls, all intriguing against one another and taking part in the quarrels of the natives. It was the golden age of imperialism. The Great Powers were grabbing territory right and left—in Africa, in the Pacific, in Central and South America. There wasn't really very much point in quarrelling over Samoa, because fairly obviously the country was not worth much. Apia is such a bad harbour that it could never be important as a naval base. The country is not rich economically; even the Germans, in their brief period of rule, didn't make much out of it. But imperialism, in those days, was more a matter of instinct than of reason. The Great Powers were like small boys at a party; although they had gorged themselves to bursting point they kept on squabbling over what was left on the table. Politics in Apia in those days was a sort of parody of international politics generally. The Consuls intrigued and plotted with as much energy as if the fate of Empires was at stake.

Now, the Malietoa you read about in Stevenson's *Vailima Letters*, which cover the four years from 1890 onwards, was Malietoa Laupepa, the father of the Malietoa who died the other day.

In 1889 the representatives of the Three Powers—Britain, Germany, and the United States—had met in conference in Berlin and agreed that Samoa should be regarded as an independent native kingdom, under the supervision of the Consuls of the Powers. The Powers also agreed that Malietoa Laupepa should be king.

Fighting Begins

But in 1894 fighting broke out between the Malietoas and the Mataafas. The Mataafas were beaten and Mataafa himself was deported to the Mariana Islands. There were about five years of uneasy peace, and then Malietoa Laupepa died. His son, Malietoa Tanumafili,

who died the other day, was proclaimed king by the three Consuls. But in the meantime Mataafa had come back from exile and was tremendously popular. There was a real upsurge of Samoan national feeling in his favour. Moreover, the Germans, who had been over-ridden by the British and the Americans in the appointment of Malietoa, gave Mataafa surreptitious encouragement and support.

Poor Malietoa was not king for very long. Mataafa's supporters invaded Apia itself, Malietoa was deserted by his allies and had to take refuge on a British ship. After that British and American warships bombarded the rebel villages for the sake of the prestige of their respective governments. The Mataafas went one better and looted European possessions.

King Goes Off to School

By this time the Powers had come to the conclusion that the farce of native kingship had outlived its usefulness, so they abandoned the pretence that Samoa was an independent native kingdom and instituted direct government by the Consuls. Malietoa, who was a young man and not very ambitious, went off to school in Fiji and forgot that he had once been a king.

And then the Boer war began. Great Britain was very much afraid Germany would come in on the side of the Boers, so she gave her Western Samoa. The United States got the island of Tutuila as a consolation prize.

Mataafa expected the Germans to make him king. But the Germans were too clever. They hit on the brilliant idea of making the Kaiser king of Samoa. I don't know whether, technically speaking, the Kaiser isn't still king of Samoa. Mataafa was made *alii sili*, which might be translated paramount chief.

Turn of the Wheel

The turn of the wheel for Malietoa came with the Great War, the New Zealand occupation, and the institution of the Mandate. New Zealand followed the example of the Germans by making no attempt to revive the kingship. What it did was to appoint two Fautuas, or high advisers, who were in theory consulted by the Administrator. And in order to avoid friction, those who held these offices were to represent the two great Samoan families. One of the men appointed was Malietoa Tanumafili, the other was Tamesese, of the rival Tupua family. . . . You know the rest of the story yourself.

(Abridged from a talk delivered by Mr. Webb from Station 4YA)