

# What price fa'a Samoa

Michael Field

Among the leaders and dignitaries gathered in the small Taranaki township of Pahou in June 1930 for the tangi of the great politician Sir Maui Pomare was a man who, if he had of had his way, wouldn't have been there at all.

Certainly he was a strong admirer of the late leader, and it was with deep and genuine emotion that he placed a Samoan ietoga or fine mat by the side of his old friend, but he was an unwilling exile in New Zealand.

The man was one Taisi Olaf Frederick Nelson, Samoa's leading merchant. The son of a Swedish ship captain and a Samoan woman, he had outraged Samoa's rulers — military men from Wellington — by turning on the white side of his past and identifying strongly with Samoans in their struggle for dignity and independence. New Zealand exiled him from Samoa, and so it was that he came to be at Pahou.

Paradoxically it was the same Government that Sir Maui had served as a cabinet minister responsible for the Cook Islands which had banished Nelson. Sir Maui made little secret of his support of the Samoans in opposition to his own prime minister, and so his friendship with Nelson had formed.

Recent anti-Samoan feeling in New Zealand produced by the Privy Council's ruling on Samoan citizenship, and the subsequent introduction of the Citizenship (Western Samoa) Bill into the New Zealand Parliament are but the latest chapter of a long and sorry story of relations between the two countries.

Samoans never tire of telling people how their beautiful and benign land is

the cradle of Polynesia, the place where it all began. Few experts dispute this and its accepted that for some 3000 years the Samoan islands have been inhabited by the first Polynesians.

Totally isolated in time and distance, Samoans came to terms with a fertile land and evolved a sophisticated culture and system of local government today known as the fa'a Samoa. It was (and is still) based on the aiga, the extended family which was headed by the consensus elected matai. The matai represented the family at the village council while matai with important titles represented the village at sub-district and district level. Although Samoans recognised that a place called Samoa existed, the formal national government that Westerners would recognise did not exist. Chiefs and orators formed a loose confederation but when the Europeans arrived in force in the middle of last century all they could see was anarchy. Whites tried to impose a government on the Samoans.

The story of events in Samoa between 1850 and 1900 is a tale of complicated intrigue and manipulation as the Western powers, Germany, the United States and Great Britain, used various extended families to fight de facto civil wars in order to press their imperialistic interests.

New Zealand was at this time but a colony of England but there were men who had big ideas and they saw New Zealand as the centre for a new southern empire. Samoa, they felt, should be annexed by New Zealand.

In 1884 Premier Julius Vogel asked London for permission to annex Samoa, claiming that New Zealand had experience in dealing with Polynesian Natives and this could be used in dealing with Samoans. The implication that the whites had a successful relationship with the Maori was undoubtedly news to the latter, and London was not impressed either. Somebody there looked up an old *Gazeteer* and learnt that Samoans were "theivish, treacherous, and ferocious" so wrote back to Vogel telling him to "rest contented with the task of dealing with the Maoris".

In the end Germany annexed what is today Western Samoa in March 1900.

The United States took American Samoa and Britain had her interests elsewhere recognised.

German rule of Samoa was low key, its two administrators, Wilhelm Solf and Eric Schultz were clearly impressed with Samoan culture and traditions and did not want to see it undermined. But they were not adverse to exiling troublemakers, the most notable of whom was one Lauaki Namulau'ulu Mamoe who, along with his family was exiled to Saipan in the northern Marianas.

The assassination of an arch-duke in Europe revived the late Julius Vogel's great dream, when, within hours of the declaration of World War One, New Zealand was asked to seize the German radio station behind Apia.

With soliders drawn from the 5th Wellington Regiment and the 3rd Aucklanders New Zealand took Samoa within 25 days of the declaration of war. The Germans had nothing to fight with and had surrendered without a shot being fired by either side.

The man who led the invading forces was a Southland sheep farmer, Colonel Robert Logan who stayed on after the forces left to fight real wars in Europe. He left Samoans largely to their own devices but was oppressive towards the around 2000 Chinese labourers and coolies who lived in Samoa. He tried to ban interracial cohabitation between Chinese and Samoans.

The real disaster of Samoa came four days before the end of the war when the vessel *Talune* from New Zealand dropped anchor in Apia harbour. Its passengers were infected with the deadly Spanish influenza virus but New Zealand's quarantine procedures were so slack that despite critically ill passengers, people were allowed ashore. In the following two weeks over 8000 Samoans, or 25 per cent of the population died an awful death. Logan refused medical help from nearby American Samoa, which escaped the disease, because he did not like Americans.

Logan accused the Samoans of helping the spread of the disease and told Wellington that "like children, they will get over it..." They never did and in that tragedy were the seeds of a strong in-

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