



**Auckland Unitarian Church**  
Love beyond belief

## Samoa's Nonviolent Struggle for Independence from New Zealand Colonial Rule

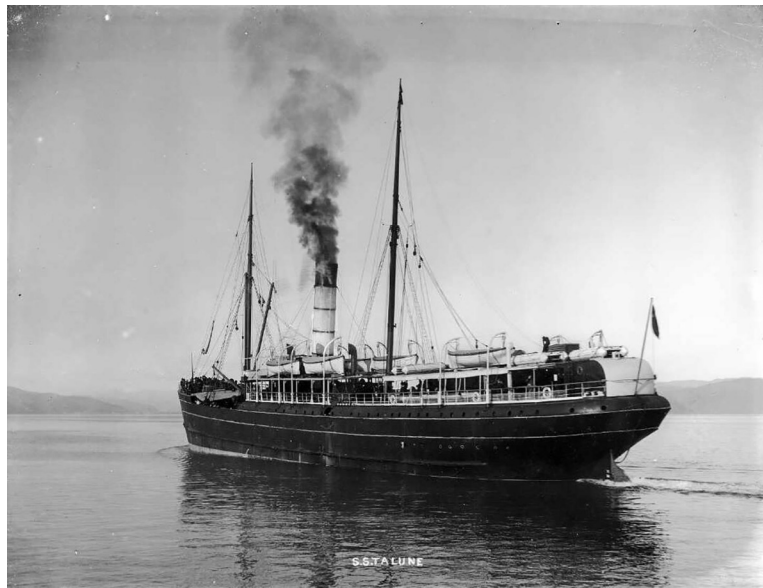
Paul Henriques © 2 July 2023

As many of you know, with Auckland Unitarian Church support, I initiated a pilot programme to help dyslexic children in Samoa in a joint programme with their Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture. While there I came across information on Samoa's nonviolent struggle for independence from New Zealand. Back in New Zealand, I began to read up on the subject and in asking friends and family about it, found few knew much about it and some nothing at all. I find it a very sad but interesting story, that certainly deserves knowing about, and thought I would share a bit of it with you this morning.

Before the outbreak of the First World War, Germany controlled Western Samoa, now called Samoa, under the [Samoa Tripartite Convention of 1899](#) when Britain, Germany and the United States agreed that Germany would acquire the western islands, including the main islands of Savai'i and Upolu, and the United States the eastern islands. Samoans were not consulted about the agreement.

At the beginning of the First World War, Britain requested New Zealand seize control of Western Samoa. Germany had a radio transmitter above Apia, Samoa's current capital and largest city, and Britain believed it could be used to assist Germany's war efforts. New Zealand sent an expeditionary force which landed and seized control without any opposition. New Zealand continued to occupy the islands throughout the war and immediately after. Formal control came in 1920 when the League of Nations allocated the islands making up Western Samoa to New Zealand.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 1918, four days before Germany signed the Armistice ending World War I, the New Zealand passenger and cargo steamship *Talune* arrived at Apia from New Zealand.



Aldersley, David James, 1862-1928. Steamship Talune - Photograph taken by David James Aldersley. Dickie, John, 1869-1942 :Collection of postcards, prints and negatives. Ref: 1/1-002437-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [/records/22701174](#)

At the time, Spanish flu was spreading rapidly in New Zealand and had caused many deaths. In Apia, *Talune* was not quarantined and although apparently some on board had Spanish flu, passengers were allowed to disembark. Influenza spread quickly, at first in Upolu, and then throughout Western Samoa.

NZHistory, a website from the NZ Ministry of Culture and Heritage, has the following to say about the resulting disaster. Full references for my talk, by the way, will be in the text of my talk to be posted on our Auckland Unitarian Church website. So this is what the NZHistory website reports:

***“The disease spread rapidly through the islands. Samoa's disorganised local health facilities and traumatised inhabitants were unable to cope with the magnitude of the disaster and the death toll rose with terrifying speed. Grieving families had no time to carry out traditional ceremonies for their loved ones. Bodies were wrapped in mats and collected by trucks for burial in mass graves. The total number of deaths attributable to influenza was later estimated as 8500, 22% of the population. According to a 1947 United Nations report, it was ‘one of the most disastrous epidemics recorded anywhere in the world during the present century, so far as the proportion of deaths to the population is concerned’.***

***Survivors blamed the New Zealand Administrator, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Logan, for failing to quarantine *Talune* and for rejecting an offer of medical assistance from American Samoa. A Royal Commission called to enquire into the allegations found evidence of administrative neglect and poor judgement.***

***Logan seemed unable to comprehend the depth of feeling against him and his administration. He left Samoa in early 1919 and did not return. His successor, Colonel R.W. Tate (1920-23), was faced with immense grief and ongoing resentment.***

***The influenza pandemic had a significant impact on New Zealand's administration of Samoa. Many older matai (chiefs) died, making way for new leaders more familiar with European ways. For survivors, the incident was seared into memory. It became the foundation upon which other grievances against the New Zealand authorities would be built.”***

Many sources other than the NZHistory website paint a similarly grim picture of events. Western Samoans felt particularly aggrieved because in American Samoa, not far away and having many family and personal ties, the governor there initiated a strict quarantine policy and the territory suffered no influenza deaths whatsoever.

Following the Spanish flu epidemic, New Zealand, similar to most colonial powers, governed Western Samoa in a paternalistic and authoritarian manner. Local customs were interfered with, sometimes even prohibited. In 1922, Matai, the traditional chiefs in the villages, came under a local law giving New Zealand officials the authority to remove their titles as well as banish them. These infringements on indigenous identity were resented as much as the colonial mismanagement. Irritation was also rising among local Europeans and those of mixed race who objected especially to inadequate political representation.

Continuing frustrations led to the formation of the Mau Movement by Olaf Frederick Nelson who had a Swedish father and a Samoan mother and was well respected in both the Samoan and European communities. Many consider the Mau Movement that Nelson started was to a degree a renewal of the *Mau a Pule* formed in 1908 when Western Samoa was under German control. Mau means ‘opinion’, and pule was the name given to a group of influential orator groups on Savai’i. This movement was led by an orator chief from Savai’i and centred on the *matai* or chiefs being aggrieved by the German governor’s moves to alter the Samoan way of life and to centralize power in German hands. Unfortunately for Samoans, in 1909, the German administrators suppressed the *Mau a Pule* and exiled its ten leaders and their families to the island of Saipan, just north of Guam.

The story of Olaf Nelson’s renewal of the Mau Movement, including the powerful role and lasting legacy of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, has been well summarised by Archives New Zealand and reads as follows:

*“An influential Sāmoan nationalist and businessman, Nelson visited Wellington in 1926 to voice his grievances with the New Zealand government’s efforts to control Sāmoa’s copra market and the poor treatment of Sāmoans under colonial rule. When his complaints received no response, Nelson founded the second iteration of the Mau at his offices in Apia, with the slogan ‘Sāmoa Mo Sāmoa’ (Sāmoa for Sāmoans).*

*This time, resistance made the Mau stronger. District councils and committees established by the administration were ignored, children were pulled from government schools. Labourers stopped going to work in the coconut and banana plantations. Instead of paying taxes, Sāmoans gave money to the Mau.*

*This intensified official disapproval and in January 1928 Nelson was deported from Sāmoa to New Zealand for five years, where he continued to push the Mau’s cause through mass meetings and the establishment of the New Zealand Samoa Guardian newspaper. After returning to Sāmoa in 1933, Nelson was exiled again the next year, for 10 years – though this exile was later revoked.*

*Meanwhile in Sāmoa, the Mau were intensifying their campaign under the leadership of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III. It remained peaceful – European businesses were boycotted, Mau members turned themselves into the police en masse to overwhelm the prison system. The New Zealand administration responded with force, bringing in Royal Navy warships manned with marines to enforce laws banning Mau activities. After two violent confrontations between the police and the Mau in 1928, Tamasese was arrested for non-payment of taxes and imprisoned for six months.*

*The violence reached its peak on the morning of 28 December 1929 or Black Saturday, when Mau supporters, led by Tamasese, marched on Apia to welcome two Mau members who were returning from exile. As the peaceful crowd neared the courthouse, New Zealand police attempted arrests which the Mau resisted. The police were forced to retreat and fighting broke out, resulting in the death of a constable. Panicked New Zealand police fired rifles into the crowd, wounding 30 Sāmoans and killing 11, including Tamasese Lealofi III, who was trying to restrain the crowd when he was shot.”*



Tattersall, Alfred James, 1866-1951. Mau parade along Beach Road in Apia, Samoa, on Black Saturday. Ref: 1/2-019638-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [/records/23143678](#)

Other author's references on the shooting of Tamasese paint a vivid and tragic picture of Tamasese standing with his back to the New Zealand police, with outstretched arms and calling "peace, peace" in an attempt hold back the protesters, and then getting shot in the back. Tamasese was taken to hospital but died the next day. Before he died, knowing that his death could start a war between Samoans and the New Zealand colonial forces, Tamasese requested of his followers that peace be maintained but that passive resistance and civil disobedience be continued. His final words were: "My blood has been spilt for Samoa. I am proud to give it. Do not dream of avenging it, as it was spilt in peace. If I die, peace must be maintained at any price."



Tattersall, Alfred James, 1866-1951. The lying in state of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, Samoa. McKnight, P:Photographs of Robert Louis Stevenson and his valet, his gravestone, of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III with Mau leaders and his lying in state. Ref: PAColl-0691-1. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [/records/22865150](#)

The online Social Change Library, in an article by Iain Murray, describes events following Tamasese's death as follows:

***"Following the massacre, male Mau members fled to the mountains, the traditional retreat of those defeated in war. The resistance continued by other means, with the emergence of a women's Mau to continue the councils, parades and symbolic protests that the men now could not. For the women's movement, even the game of cricket represented an act of defiance inviting official harassment.***

***A truce was declared in 1930, and the male Mau members returned to their homes, on the condition that they retain their right to engage in noncooperation. Meanwhile, Nelson and other exiled leaders continued to lobby the New Zealand Government and communicate their progress to the Mau. In 1931, news of the growing resistance to the British rule of India reached many Samoan villages.***

***The Mau movement had not gone unnoticed by the population of New Zealand, and the treatment of Samoans at the hands of the administration had become a contentious issue in some New Zealand electorates during the 1929 election. 1936 marked a turning point for Samoa, with the election of a Labour Government in New Zealand and the subsequent relaxation of repression by the Samoan administration. Under the new Government, there was slow movement towards greater involvement of Samoans in the administration of their own country."***



Tattersall, Alfred James, 1866-1951. The leaders of the women's Mau; Mrs Tuimaliifano, Mrs Tamasese, Mrs Nelson, Mrs Faumuina. Gleeson, Francis Joseph 1908-1993 :Album of photographs of the Mau uprising, Western Samoa, 1930. Ref: PA1-o-795-05. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [/records/22827944](#)

It wasn't until 1962 that Samoa obtained its independence, and it wasn't until 2002 that Samoa received an apology from the government of New Zealand. An apology long overdue!

## References

*Influenza in Samoa*. NZHistory. Ministry for Culture and Heritage. <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1918-influenza-pandemic/samoa>

*The Rise of the Mau and the Fall of Colonial Rule in Sāmoa*. Archives New Zealand. <https://www.archives.govt.nz/discover-our-stories/the-rise-of-the-mau-and-the-fall-of-colonial-rule-in-samoa>

Murray, Iain. *The Mau Movement for Samoan Independence*. The Commons Social Change Library. <https://commonslibrary.org/by/iain-murray/>

## [Meditation / Conversation starter](#)

What social issues are important enough to you that you would be willing to become involved in non-violent action to bring about positive change?

Have you taken non-violent protest actions in the past?

What actions would you be willing to take in the future?