

Reviews

Samoa mo Samoa: The Emergence of the Independent State of Western Samoa. By J. W. Davidson. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1967. 467 pp. Australian price: \$9.75.

UNTIL the nineteen-fifties Pacific history was a neglected backwater of colonial history concerned for the most part with the interests and policies of the colonial powers. Now, due largely to the 'new ways' practised by Professor Davidson and his colleagues in the Australian National University, it has become an established academic discipline centred on the history of the islanders themselves.

Samoa mo Samoa is a shining example of how new ways can be made to serve traditional standards to deepen historical understanding. It is solidly based on perceptive study of rich, scattered, and hitherto untapped, documentary sources synthesised with oral traditions and ethnographic material. It bears the imprint of an incisive mind, a vivid, succinct pen and an instinctive sympathy for a non-European people, striving to preserve their customs in a modern, Western-dominated world. More than this it merges historical reconstruction with field work and autobiography. In 1947 Professor Davidson was sent to Western Samoa by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, to report on the administration and background to the petition for self-government and to consult with the special investigating United Nations Mission. During 1949-51 he helped to prepare the way for independence as trusteeship officer in the Samoan government. So closely was he able to identify himself with Samoan society and aspirations that in 1959 he was invited back by the Samoan leaders as their constitutional adviser.

In this book he explains how a traditional society, lacking any effective political authority above the village level, became an independent nation state. His clear, concise analysis of the traditional polity is based on ethnographic material collected by early European observers and German scholars, reinterpreted in the light of his understanding of twentieth-century Samoa — which he admits is a perilous undertaking. Then comes an admirably condensed account of the impact of the West 1830-1900, which owes much to the unpublished work of the late R. P. Gilson, and which turns the conventional nineteenth-century histories inside out. Far from accepting various attempts by foreigners to dictate solutions to new problems of maintaining law and order, the Samoans, Professor Davidson argues, tried to reorganise their own political structure in accordance with the particular logic of their own culture and to oppose control by a foreign power. In this struggle and in the parallel struggle of the Samoan pastors to reduce the power of the missionaries lay the seeds of twentieth century nationalism.

When the Germans took over the task of modernising and stabilising the Samoan government, they aroused opposition, not only from orator groups in the old political centres, but also from the part-Samoan commercial community. Firmness combined with scholarly paternalism quelled re-

bellion and, when New Zealand troops occupied the territory in 1914, a 'ramshackle' military administration was, on the whole, accepted with equanimity. If almost one-fifth of the population had not died in the disastrous 1918 influenza epidemic, the same might have been said of the New Zealand mandate. As it was, the administration could no longer contain old and new forces of tradition, ambition and discontent. Professor Davidson's account of this germinative period of Samoan disaffection is all too brief and sketchy but, when he comes to Richardson and the Mau, he is back on solid ground.

His very thorough examination of the origins and course of the Mau (based on confidential files not generally open to research workers) reveals how a movement, originally intended for the orderly formulation of complaints, acquired the characteristics of one for the fermentation of avid disaffection; how 'its initial concern with reform within the framework of political dependency and with the restoration of the traditional order' gradually grew into a wish for self-government under British protection. There is an epic quality in his story of Nelson's personal struggle with Richardson, 'the paternalist, the unquestioning believer in the orderly procedures of a military hierarchy'; in the Mau's persistence against Allen, who liked to sit at Vailima studying Samoa from books and official files and became known as 'Silent Steve'; and in the tragedy of 'Black Saturday' and the death of Tupua Tamesese Leolofi. Official lack of understanding of Samoan society and arrogant disregard of Samoan opinion and sensibilities are frankly but judiciously exposed. Why seven years of crisis failed to produce the two conditions necessary to end the deadlock — a drastic change in policy and new senior officials with sympathy and understanding — is for the first time adequately explained. A decade of marking time and lack of constructive leadership in the Samoan administration followed the goodwill mission of 1936 and facilitated the emergence of a group of well-to-do traders and planters, the spearhead of a new movement for self-government in 1944.

To have compressed over a hundred years of Samoan history into 166 graphic, absorbing pages is craftsmanship of the highest order. To create history out of the 'major personal experience' which followed is a very different kind of exercise, particularly if one often was 'a passionate partisan'. Professor Davidson might well have begun by quoting the immortal words of R. L. Stevenson in his *Footnote to History*: 'The story I have to tell is still going on as I write; the characters are alive and active; it is a piece of contemporary history in the most exact sense You may conceive the difficulty of a history extending to the present weeks at least, where almost all of the actors upon both sides are of my personal acquaintance. The only way is to judge slowly, and write boldly and leave the issue to fate.'

First and foremost the second part of *Samoa mo Samoa* is valuable documentary material, much of it autobiographical, which will outlive the purely historical chapters. It contains at least part of the answer to an important question that all future Samoan historians will ask themselves. To what extent did Professor Davidson influence the formulation of a new policy of political development and the Samoan advance from trusteeship to independence?

My own tentative answer would be not quite so much as Peter Fraser's words — 'You have opened the door to the future for me in Samoa' —

might indicate. In fact a new policy was beginning to take shape on the departmental files in Wellington before Professor Davidson went to Samoa. Furthermore the forces of Samoan nationalism virtually limited New Zealand's choices in 1947 to the establishment of a new legislative assembly with power of the purse and a Samoan majority, or a recurrence of non-cooperation and constitutional deadlock. But in the final analysis the breakthrough was made by Peter Fraser. A valuable clue to his thinking is remembered by Professor Davidson: 'I can only count on two and a half years in office', said Fraser, 'and I doubt whether my probable successor has the imagination to know what must be done.' Of similar value to historians are Professor Davidson's reminiscences of his evening walks with Eduardo Cruz-Cos, the Chilean member of the United Nations Mission, round Apia harbour. Out of these grew the idea of a council of state which provided a place for the Fautua at the highest level in 'the new set-up'. In 1947 Davidson obviously frequented the 'corridors of power'.

After 1949 his position was ambivalent. Initiative in policy-making shifted from Wellington to Vailima, and, in place of F. W. Voelcker, who had been unhappily conscious of his administrative inexperience and ignorance of Samoa, was G. R. Powles, an energetic and experienced administrator and perceptive student of Samoan affairs. Though he and Davidson had a mutual regard for each other and a common range of interests, there were differences between them in temperament and in their relationships with the local leaders and people. Furthermore, they disagreed about the manner and method of approaching self-government.

Professor Davidson's chapters on the rôle of government in the economy, and on the district and village government, and his criticism of the 1953 development plan, must indeed be read as powerful arguments against policies adopted by the administering authority in the early nineteen-fifties. 'My own view [he writes on p. 244] was that the relatively relaxed political atmosphere that had been created by the recent constitutional changes provided an ideal opportunity for tackling the country's more difficult and controversial problems. In particular it made it possible for the government to direct the attention of the political leaders upon them without arousing suspicions of government antipathy to customary ways or desire to delay the attainment of self-government.' Accordingly (on p. 322) he criticises the High Commissioner for his belief that a settlement of the country's political future was a necessary preliminary to effective action in other fields. But has he really understood the day-to-day tensions arising from the divorce of political power from responsibility and the invidious position of a High Commissioner charged with the responsibility of carrying out the objectives of the trusteeship agreement in this situation? I think not. After 1949 it was the financially and economically conservative Samoan majority in the legislative assembly that really determined the pattern of development — political acceleration coupled with economic caution. All Powles could do was to use his powers of persuasion (see his letter to the *Pacific Island Monthly*, November, 1967). More capital aid and technical assistance from New Zealand would undoubtedly have helped him, but virtually all he got was the surplus profits of the Reparation Estates.

The failure to reform the customary system of district and village government in line with the recommendations of the commission of inquiry is attributed by Professor Davidson, who was its chairman, to the unrealistic approach of the High Commissioner and other officials. Powles, on the

other hand, believed that the commission's scheme would put the customary system, which was functioning reasonably well, into a legal strait-jacket. He was also convinced that the more Western-educated Samoan leaders at the centre would not have tolerated the strengthening of customary authority outside. In a sense their serious disagreement mirrored the conflict underlying the whole movement to self-government between the forces of progress and conservatism, between the 'fast runners' and 'slow brothers', and between Apia and the outer districts.

Professor Davidson's analysis of political development in the nineteen-fifties reflects his absence from Samoa for much of this period and the insufficiency of research based on working papers accumulated in an official capacity. He does not, for example, examine in any detail the 'battle' for an executive council or for planned political development which was waged between the High Commissioner and the New Zealand government; nor the part played by the first working committee and constitutional convention in determining how and when this plan should be adopted. Nor does he reveal the initiative taken by the High Commissioner, the Department of External Affairs, and the constitutional adviser to the New Zealand government, in the acceleration of cabinet government. Again he ignores a crucial decision taken by Walter Nash, when he became Prime Minister, to go for 'unqualified independence' not a Tongan relationship with New Zealand. On the other hand, Professor Davidson's close, unofficial contacts with Samoans and local Europeans throughout these years have enabled him to understand and sympathise with ways and attitudes which often exasperated and frustrated New Zealand officials. Furthermore they have enabled him to enliven his history with a number of fine biographical sketches of local notables.

In explaining 'the virtual eclipse' of important decisions of 1947 to reorganise the public services, and to promote rapid Samoanisation by an imaginative programme of staff training, Professor Davidson emphasises that a great deal depended on the personal calibre of the public service commissioner, but that he 'sat astride the path of progress, unimaginative, self-righteous, enmeshed in the coils of punctilio and routine'. Consequently 'Samoa was forced to go forward to independence inadequately provided with a corps of experienced administrators'. But in this and other cases where he criticises public servants, it should be remembered that they were in a sense victims of a system. Clearly it was the New Zealand government and the New Zealand public service commission more than individuals who were to blame for the failure to keep administrative and political developments in step. The 1949 legislation made the Minister of Island Territories, not the High Commissioner, responsible for directing the Samoan public service in matters of policy — and another ten years of pressure from Vailima, Mulinu'u, New York and Canberra were needed to produce a 'crash' programme for training Samoan public servants in New Zealand.

During the final stages of decolonisation, 1959-62, Professor Davidson was once more at the heart of things, this time as constitutional adviser to a Samoan working committee, 'experienced in politics, reasonably diverse in professional and other interests, varied in age and outlook'. His knowledge and understanding of Samoan history and customs and his close association with local leaders and people happily complemented the legal expertise of the New Zealand government's adviser, Professor Aikman, and helped Aikman win the confidence of the working committee. Together they

were all able to solve a number of outstanding problems, such as citizenship, and to draft a constitution based on the Westminster model, but carefully adapted to the needs and circumstances of a conservative society holding fast to its customs and traditions and aspiring to better standards of living and education.

If there are any qualifications to be made concerning this intimate and fascinating account of the final stages of trusteeship, they are, firstly that it does not quite recognise the organic relationship between the first and second working committee and constitutional convention and, secondly, that it rather neglects the rôles of the department of external affairs and of the United Nations. It therefore should be supplemented with Professor Aikman's article 'Samoa Comes of Age' in the *Round Table*, September 1961.

For good measure Professor Davidson has added an epilogue demonstrating that independence has stimulated economic development and that the Samoan constitution has proved remarkably durable. The danger he fears is that the new state facing the problems of balancing the claims of progress and tradition will give a preponderant weight to the latter.

Although *Samoa mo Samoa* is primarily Samoan history for Samoans and New Zealanders who have helped in its making, it will be appreciated by all those who are interested in decolonisation and who appreciate good literature.

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War and Politics in New Zealand, 1855-1870. By B. J. Dalton. Sydney University Press, 1967. 311 pp. Australian price: \$7.00.

NEW ZEALAND historians are prone to exaggerate the significance of their works by inflating their titles. The short essay, often regionally flavoured, becomes a Short History of New Zealand; the specialised monograph, usually conceived as a thesis, blossoms into life under a broad thematic title. B. J. Dalton's book belongs to the latter category. It started as an Oxford D.Phil., 'The Control of Native Affairs in New Zealand: a constitutional experiment and its consequences, 1855-1870' (1956). Now, on publication, it has become *War and Politics in New Zealand*. Yet, despite the change in packaging, the product remains much the same. As Dalton admits (pp. 2-3), this is essentially a study of the transfer of responsibility for Maori affairs from the British Governor to the Colonial Ministry. The Anglo-Maori wars and politics of the period are discussed only in so far as they were related to this central issue.

A detailed study of this topic is certainly welcome, if unfashionable. For Dalton's book is a belated product of a school of history that is almost as dead as the empire which was its chief concern. British imperial history, and particularly the evolution of colonial responsible government, was taught for a good many years in Oxford, Cambridge and London — and in the universities of the dominions. New Zealanders, expatriates and returned men, were assiduous contributors to the school. Most of them had survived their ordeal by thesis, but few of them could obtain sufficient respite from teaching to refurbish their theses for publication. The publications of the last forty years on New Zealand constitutional development and imperial