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# Loxias

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## A Little Book with a Wide Perspective: Stevenson's *A Footnote to History*

Paola Della Valle

Paola Della Valle is a researcher at the University of Turin, Italy. She specializes in New Zealand and Pacific literature, gender studies and postcolonial theory. Her articles appeared in *English Studies*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies*, *Le Simplegadi*, *Il Castello di Elsinore* and *Quaderni del '900*. She has published the monographs *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (Oratia Media, Auckland 2010) and *Stevenson nel Pacifico: una lettura postcoloniale* (Aracne, Roma 2013). She has contributed to the volumes *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures* (Routledge, London & New York 2011) and *L'immagine dell'Italia nelle Letterature angloamericane e coloniali* (Trauben, Torino 2014). Her article "Stevenson in the Pacific: a Problematic View of Cultures and Imperialisms" appeared in the online journal *Le Simplegadi*, XII (12) 2014.

Stevenson est généralement reconnu comme le maître indiscutable du roman d'aventure et du thème du double in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Mais, il peut également être classé parmi les premiers écrivains qui bouleversèrent le mythe de l'impérialisme occidental dans ses derniers écrits concernant le Pacifique. Non seulement il démantela les clichés du colonialisme littéraire, mais à la différence de la plupart de ses contemporains, il reconnut aussi le point de vue de l'« autre » indigène et la légitimité de la résistance indigène face au pouvoir impérialiste. En recourant à l'instrument de la critique postcoloniale, mon article sera basé sur les études de Stevenson sur l'histoire contemporaine des Samoa, *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892), dans lequel il dénonce la lutte pour la suprématie des trois pouvoirs de l'Occident dans l'archipel (Allemagne, Grande Bretagne et États-Unis) et se situe à côté des rebelles Samoans, menés par le chef local Mataafa, opposés au roi fantoche choisi par les Allemands, Tamasese. Sa méthode scientifique de recherche fondée sur un examen croisé de plusieurs sources, y compris celles des Samoans, certifie du sérieux de son but que l'on retrouve également dans d'autres textes de la même période, par exemple ses lettres recueillies dans *In the South Seas*. Stevenson porte son regard sur les « autres » narrations et prend en considération les raisons culturelles qui sont à la base des choix et des comportements de la population indigène. *A Footnote to History*, ouvrage « militant » qui causa un grand embarras au British Foreign Office et coûta presque la déportation de l'écrivain, montre l'ouverture d'esprit de Stevenson et son habilité à prévoir des thèmes de la plus grande importance aujourd'hui.

Stevenson is generally remembered as the undisputed master of the adventure romance and for his original re-

elaboration of the theme of the double in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. However, he can also be numbered among the first European writers who subverted the myth of Western imperialism in his late Pacific writings. Not only did he dismantle colonial literary clichés but, unlike most of his contemporaries, he also acknowledged the viewpoint of the indigenous “other” and the legitimacy of indigenous resistance to imperial power. Using the instruments of postcolonial criticism, my article will focus on Stevenson’s study of Samoan contemporary history, *A Footnote to History : Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892), in which he denounces the fight for supremacy of the three Western powers in the archipelago (Germany, Britain and the USA) and sides with the Samoan rebels led by local chief Mataafa and opposing the puppet king chosen by the Germans, Tamasese. His scientific method of research by cross-examining different sources, including the Samoan ones, testifies to the seriousness of his scope and is also found in other texts written in this period, for example his letters collected in the volume *In the South Seas*. Stevenson is willing to listen to “other” narratives and takes account of the cultural reasons behind the choices and behaviours of indigenous people. As well as being a militant text, which caused great embarrassment in the British Foreign Office and almost cost him deportation, this study shows Stevenson’s open-mindedness and ability to envisage issues of great relevance to the present global world.

Stevenson(Robert Louis), Samoa, colonialisme, Said (Edward), études postcoloniales

Stevenson, Samoa, colonialism, postcolonial studies, Said

Postcolonial studies have made the concept of “other” and its construction by Western colonisers a focus of attention. Colonialism has always enacted symbolic practices, that is, a system of representations based on rhetorical, aesthetic and ideological strategies. The real is “reduced” and made intelligible through simplified images or ideas (namely, stereotypes) that are repeated to fix the construction of alterity. This mechanism has nothing to do with a real will to know the indigenous “other”. Rather, it is a projection of the colonisers’ desires and needs, and is meant to reinforce their identity<sup>1</sup>. The elaboration of the idea of a “noble savage”, arisen after the “discovery” of the New World from explorers’ travelogues such as Amerigo Vespucci’s *Mundus Novus* (1503), is an example of ideological construction of the West: an elaboration of the “other” in order that it may meet the colonisers’ expectations and be under their control..

This biased attitude to the “other” cannot be found in Robert Louis Stevenson as a traveller in the South Seas. In the winter between 1887 and 1888 Stevenson was living at Saranac in the Adirondack mountains (in upstate New York) with his American wife Fanny<sup>2</sup>. He was the well-known author of *Treasure Island* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which had brought him fame in Europe and America. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Miguel Mellino, *La critica postcoloniale*, Roma, Meltemi, 2005, pp. 70-73.

<sup>2</sup> J.R. Hammond, *A Robert Louis Stevenson Companion : A guide to the novels, essays and short stories*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p. 11.

contacted by the newspaper magnate Samuel McClure, who offered him 10,000 dollars for a series of letters from the Caribbean or the South Seas which he would then syndicate for publication in the British and American press<sup>3</sup>. Stevenson chose the South Seas for the fascination those regions had always exerted on him since his childhood, but also because of their mild climate, which could help his lung condition. He sailed from San Francisco with his family in June 1888. This was the beginning of a nomadic life in the Pacific, which included three cruises on different ships and several long stays on numerous islands, among which the Marquesas, the Paumotu (or Tuamotu), Tahiti, Hawaii and the Gilberts. The Stevensons also stayed in Samoa from December 1889 to April 1890 and finally settled down there in February 1891, until the writer's death in December 1894. The commissioned letters appeared throughout 1891 in the London *Black and White* and in the *New York Sun*, but their publication was suddenly interrupted for they were deemed too impersonal and even tedious. The public wanted *Treasure Island* again – and that was not it.

While travelling, Stevenson kept a journal with the passion of a professional researcher. It was filled with information, comments, reports from his local sources and Polynesian stories, and became the basis for his correspondence. As he was writing on the spot, his notes were continuously amended by new observations, parallels and details, which sometimes affected the orderliness of his letters as well. But Stevenson began considering them as provisional chapters of a longer text he was hoping to write : the most comprehensive book on the South Seas ever written. The seriousness of Stevenson's purpose accounts for his continuous revisions and search for analogies or contrasts between different populations, most notably between his Scottish background and the Polynesian one. However, he never succeeded in completing his project. What remains today is *In the South Seas*, published posthumously in 1896 : basically, it is a chronological collection of most of his South Sea letters edited by his mentor and friend Sidney Colvin. The plan to write a local history of Samoa developed from the material Stevenson had collected towards a projected Samoan section in *In the South Seas*<sup>4</sup>. *A Footnote to History : Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892) therefore details the political background, atmosphere and events in the archipelago from 1883 until the early 1890s.

Stevenson's engagement with anthropological research in *In the South Seas* and with historical research in *A Footnote* marks a passage from romance to committed writing, an inclination he had already shown in the social criticism of *The Amateur Emigrant* and *Across the Plains*. The former is a record of Stevenson's 1879 passage from Glasgow to the United States aboard an emigrant ship. The text, realistically depicting a mass of derelicts in search of hope overseas, was ransomed from the publisher by Stevenson's father (following Sidney Colvin's advice), who paid 100 pounds to have the manuscript back. He thought that a book of harsh social criticism could damage his son's literary reputation. The essay came out posthumously in 1895. A similar delayed destiny occurred to *Across the Plains*, the record of Stevenson's further trip from New York to San Francisco on an emigrant train, which was published only 13 years later in 1892. As commented by Clotilde De

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Irwin Hillier, *The South Seas Fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New York, Peter Lang, Hillier, 1989, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Smith, *Literature Culture and the Pacific*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 193.

Stasio, such texts would destroy the social myth of emigration and the literary myth of adventure romance<sup>5</sup>.

Referring to *In the South Seas* and *A Footnote to History*, Roslyn Jolly underlines that « these works represent Stevenson's new sense of writing as action in the world<sup>6</sup>. » In particular, *A Footnote* is different from any book previously written by Stevenson and seems to result from Stevenson's unfulfilled aspiration as a historian, after having failed to obtain the position of Professor of History and Constitutional Law at the University of Edinburgh in 1881<sup>7</sup>. Smith also notices that, while in the essay *A Gossip on Romance* (1882) Stevenson had highlighted the « capacity of romance fiction to enable the child reader to enter the space of adventure, by offering a vicarious experience of the physical<sup>8</sup> », the participation in Samoan local politics and warfare revitalized Stevenson's writing, which in his letters he depicted as « declining into fever and growing impotent<sup>9</sup> ». So, Smith concludes, in *A Footnote to History* the process described by Stevenson in *A Gossip on Romance* « becomes inverted, with active engagement serving as the means of recuperating a literary experience<sup>10</sup>. »

*A Footnote to History* is a peculiar book. Even now, readers cannot but wonder about the meaning of this chronicle set in a small faraway country : it is overcrowded with details, incidents, references to unknown places, complex names of local chiefs and foreign personalities completely strange to anybody who did not live there. In Stevenson's account, a plethora of characters from diplomatic circles, the navy, the business and mercantile worlds, compete in order to achieve supremacy in the archipelago, shaping the destiny of its people and three local chiefs : Laupepa (who owned three titles, corresponding to the three provinces supporting him) and the other pretenders to the throne, Tamasese and Mataafa (who owned one title each)<sup>11</sup>. Three foreign powers had shown an interest in the islands because of their strategic position in the Pacific and their potential for economic development : first the Americans in 1839, then the British and the Germans in the 1870s. As Smith underlines, the foreign settlers' aim was to establish stable Polynesian governments, which would provide a safe environment for the facilitation of trade and the introduction of plantation economies. Smith continues by quoting the words of R.W. Thompson, foreign secretary to the London Missionary Society : « "When the white man came on the scene, the strife between rival claimants of the throne became more serious." Settler nations sought "to gain influence and advantage by supporting the claims of one or other of the rival claimants for the chief place and kingly name"<sup>12</sup> ».

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<sup>5</sup> Clotilde De Stasio, *Introduzione a Stevenson*, Bari, Laterza, 1991, pp. 110-111.

<sup>6</sup> Roslyn Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific. Travel, Empire, and the Author's Profession*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 229.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> R.L. Stevenson, *A Footnote to History. Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa*, [1892], Hamburg, Tredition Classics, 2006, p. 8. Further page references, indicated in brackets in the text, are to this edition.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 197.



Laupepa became king in 1881 with the support of all the foreign powers. As Colley underlines, by the time Stevenson arrived « the Germans were in the ascendancy, for they owned the largest plantations : they grew coffee, cacao, pineapples, and coconuts – they were the leaders in the Copra trade<sup>13</sup> ». According to Stevenson, the German authorities, however, were not satisfied with Laupepa’s rule, because in their view he was not able to enforce the laws concerning private property (in particular, the respect of *their* properties), justice (that is, punishing the authors of theft in the German plantations, the so-called « German firm », 19) and tax collection. So, in 1885 the head of the German firm, Weber, made the king sign a new convention to depose the existing government and install a council of two Germans and two Samoans (king and vice-king) « invested with the right to make laws and impose taxes “as desirable for the common interest of the Samoan government and the German residents”<sup>14</sup>. The provisions of this council the king and vice king had to sign blindfold. And by a last hardship, the Germans, who received all the benefit, reserved the right to recede from the agreement on six months’ notice ; the Samoans, who suffered all the loss, were bound by it in perpetuity » (27). In reaction to this convention, the king chose to play a double game. On 5<sup>th</sup> November 1885 Laupepa and forty-eight high chiefs met in secret and offered the supremacy on Samoa over to Great Britain ; but the text of the address to the British came into the hands of the Germans, who now considered Laupepa as « a man impossible to trust and unworthy to be dealt with » (29). This led to Laupepa’s deposition at the first pretence of offence, which happened on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1887, when four Samoans were accused of having started a riot in a public bar where some Germans were celebrating the Emperor’s birthday. Laupepa’s latest fault was described as « the trampling upon by Malietoa [one of the titles of Laupepa] of the German Emperor » (36). By the middle of August 1887 five German warships had appeared in the bay of Apia, the capital, (37) and on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1887 a new king was given the royal salute with twenty-one guns (38). The king chosen by the Germans was the mild Tamasese, more inclined to be the mouthpiece of their commercial interests. After living some months in the bush as a fugitive in search of possible alliances, Laupepa decided to sacrifice himself and surrender, in order to preserve his supporting countrymen from German retaliation. He was sent into exile.

Before giving himself up to the Germans, Laupepa met Mataafa. One of the bystanders to the event tried to console the king by claiming : « We have no cause for shame. We do not yield to Tamasese, but to the invincible strangers » (42). Then « the departing king bequeathed the care of his country to Mataafa » (42). Previously in the book, Stevenson described both Laupepa and Tamasese as weak personalities in the hands of “superior” forces :

Laupepa and Tamasese were both heavy, well-meaning, inconclusive men. Laupepa, educated for the ministry, still bears some marks of it in character and appearance ; Tamasese was in private of an amorous and sentimental turn, but no one would have guessed it from his solemn and dull countenance. Impossible to conceive two less dashing champions for a threatened race. (28)

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<sup>13</sup> Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1988, p. 136. Copra is the dried coconut kernel, from which oil is obtained.

<sup>14</sup> Stevenson is quoting directly from the document.

From the very start Stevenson identified the other pretender to the throne, Mataafa, as the leader that could best represent the interests of the Samoan people in their complex interaction with foreign powers : « a chief with a strong following, and in character and capacity high above the native average », who had been « probably mortified by the circumstance » (29). The figure of Mataafa seemed to foreshadow a possibility of resistance.

The German coup and the coronation of a puppet king raised the formal protest of the other two foreign powers. A period of skirmishes began between the officials of the three powers in the islands. The last straw came when the neutral zone of Apia, with a tripartite municipality, was *de facto* abrogated by the Germans. Tamasese was installed in the historical village of Mulinuu, once the site of the king but now in the hands of the German firm. If neutrality was abolished in the capital, the king would be able to impose taxes on the island's the richest area. Moreover, as the king lived in a German estate, the Germans would be able to hoist their flag above the royal one. The bulk of Stevenson's account is concerned with 1887-1889, when Germany's attempt to gain control of the island provoked intense international rivalry and social unrest. The resistance to a king the Samoans did not recognise as such was organised around the other pretender, supported by most of the indigenous population. In the meantime non-aligned villages were attacked and burnt, German warships shelled villages from the sea, weapons were provided to the rebels by the Anglo-American forces and martial law was proclaimed by the Germans. The civil war reached its apex in September 1888 with the battle of Fangalii, in which the Germans were defeated by Matafaa's partisans. This episode has become a legend in the history of Samoa insofar as it demonstrated the vulnerability of a Western power : « the invincible had fallen ; the men of the vaunted war-ships had been met in the field by the braves of Mataafa » (109). The event was to have consequences in the future, as the Germans forever opposed Mataafa's ascent to the throne. But Stevenson presents the victory as epochal principally because it showed Samoans the possibility of indigenous resistance :

No native would then have ever dreamed of defying these colossal ships, worked by mysterious powers, and laden with outlandish instruments of death. None would have dreamed of resisting those strange but quite unrealised Great Powers, understood (with difficulty) to be larger than Tonga and Samoa put together, and known to be prolific of prints, knives, hard biscuit, picture books, and other luxuries, as well as of overbearing men and inconsistent orders. Laupepa had fallen in ill-blood with one of them ; his only idea of defence had been to throw himself in the arms of another ; his name, his rank, and his great following had not been able to preserve him ; and he had vanished from the eyes of men – as the Samoan thinks of it, beyond the sky. (78-9)

The growing tension in the archipelago was evidenced by the number of warships in Apia bay. In March 1889 seven huge ships lay at anchor : three were German (the *Ebler*, the *Olga* and the *Adler*), three were American (the *Trenton*, the *Vandalia* and the *Nipsic*) and one was British (the *Calliope*). In the end, the agreement that men were not able to achieve was sealed by nature. On March 16<sup>th</sup> a hurricane approached the coasts of Samoa and the super-technological Western forces seemed not to notice that the barometer was falling menacingly. The Apia harbour was small, surrounded by coral reefs and overcrowded with gigantic vessels that could

hardly manoeuvre when the sea was flat. It was a storm in a teacup, but its result was fatal. Of the seven ships only one succeeded in sailing out of the port, the British *Calliope*. The *Eber* was the first to sink. Only four of its crewmen survived. The *Adler* was stuck on the coral reef, and many of its crew members could be saved. The *Nipsic* was beached and the *Olga* collided with the *Trenton* before being beached itself. During the storm many Samoans participated in the rescue operations, careless of bringing help to friends or foes. This episode is narrated with great irony by Stevenson, as if it stood as a symbol of the vanity of all human ambitions, which can be wiped away by nature with a single wingbeat. But it can be also read, as Jolly underlines, as « a parable of the folly of imperial ambition » insofar as « [t]he terrible loss of life was a direct result of international rivalry paired with personal animosity, and the nations' jostling for place in the harbour offers a fitting emblem of their jostling for power in Samoa<sup>15</sup>. »

When the Stevensons first landed in Samoa, the islands were ruled by the provisions of the Berlin Act, signed 14th June 1889, which was the agreement reached between the foreign powers and the Samoan government after the disastrous hurricane. As noticed by Colley,

The arrangement was to make the government less dependent on agreement among local representatives of the three foreign Powers by strengthening the judiciary, reorganising public finances, re-establishing the municipality of Apia, ensuring the maintenance of peace among the Samoans, and offering the Samoan government responsible and reliable European advisers<sup>16</sup>.

Laupepa was reinstalled on the throne in 1889, but the moral winner over the uncontested foreign interference in Samoan politics was Mataafa. He was never officially king because of the German veto but, in fact, he ruled the country together with Laupepa from then on, and was considered the true sovereign by Samoans.

There are many innovative aspects in Stevenson's *A Footnote to History*. First of all, in dealing with an indigenous culture he challenges the juxtaposition between ethnography and history. As Smith underlines, in the nineteenth century ethnography became the dominant discourse for describing Pacific cultures, which « constitutes a refusal to recognise the historical status of these cultures. The practice of ethnographic fieldwork privileges the synchronous, formulating social generalisations from evidence gathered in specific cross-cultural encounters which necessarily marginalise the impact of historical change<sup>17</sup>. » Stevenson, on the other hand, offers « the blueprint of the historical<sup>18</sup> ». The author himself stresses this aspect in a letter to Colvin, in which he pointed out that the subject matter of the book was pure history and it broke down distinctions between ancient and modern, myth and event : « Here under the microscope we can see history at work<sup>19</sup>. » So, Stevenson's much-detailed chronicle alludes to a vaster picture and serves as a commentary to the workings of economic imperialism and political colonialism. It also prefigures the possibility of change and resistance in Pacific islands.

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<sup>15</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Sidney Colvin, [19 April] 1891, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1995, p. 100. Quoted from Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific*, p. 193.

In order to build his “story” as a segment of “history in process”, Stevenson uses a scientific method that takes into account the voice of the “other”. He carries out his historical research by cross-examining different sources – written and oral – so that he can also record the voices of those who were not allowed to express their views formally or write their own histories, unlike the westerners who could easily avail themselves of reports, military despatches, letters and various written documents<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, as well as consulting a wide range of official writings, including records and publications of the American, British and German governments, he interviewed the indigenous perpetrators of the upheavals, most of whom were still alive when Stevenson landed in Samoa : first of all, Mataafa the rebels’ leader, and Laupepa the legitimate king who had been deposed and exiled by the Germans and finally reinstalled by the Berlin Treaty. In that respect, Stevenson is a « boundary-crosser<sup>21</sup> », as defined by Jolly : one that can see beyond or behind official reports and is able to voice “other” sources. Furthermore, Stevenson takes into accounts the cultural reasons for the Samoans’ conduct, largely misinterpreted by the Germans. In scientific historiographic research, « the best and surest testimony concerning the condition of a people, in any age, is that which is given unconsciously<sup>22</sup> ». Stevenson, too, valorises indirect or spontaneous testimony. King Laupepa’s deposition, for example, was allegedly due to his inefficient policies in persecuting theft, a crime which was undermining the German plantations in the archipelago. Providing direct and indirect evidence (such as interviews and the analysis of the notions of “king” and “theft” in the local language), Stevenson argues that the role of the sovereign equates him to a divinity in theory, but in fact allows him very limited decisional power. On that matter, the Samoan language is particularly revealing. The same word signifies « the watching of a virgin » and the « warding of a chief » ; and another word means both « to cherish a chief » and « to fondle a favourite child » (7-8). Furthermore, Stevenson demonstrates that in Samoa the notion of private property is quite elusive. Within the extended family or clan everything must be shared. The practice of sharing goods was (and still is) quite common in Samoan culture even between different clans, and what would be defined as “beggary” in Western terms was the norm there : « The sacramental gesture of refusal [...] was supposed to signify “my house is destitute” » (13). Whenever you are in need, it is your right to ask for, and ultimately take, what you need. There is no legal obligation to give back or pay back. The obligation is only moral, but is very frequently ignored. Stevenson pinpoints that the Samoan vocabulary did not include a word corresponding to the concept of “debt” and had to borrow it from Tahitian. What was considered “theft” and persecuted by law in European culture was legitimised by custom in another (12-14). So, the king’s lack of intervention was not due to negligence but to etiquette and customary habit.

Stevenson’s openness to another perspective is clear and extremely rare for the time. Jolly defines his approach a « proto-structuralist historical methodology » : a research based not only on grand events, but on the relationship between the

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<sup>20</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, pp. 78-9.

<sup>21</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Lilly, “The New Spirit in History”, *Nineteen Century* 38 (1895), p. 624. Quoted from Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 84.

structures of everyday life (for example, the notion of theft) and the macro or unique events that result from it (i.e. the king's deposition and all the other consequences) :

Stevenson set himself the task of attempting to understand the mentalities, institutions and cultural formations produced under certain restricted material conditions, and then not only to narrate, but also to analyse, the disintegration and possible transformation of those psychological and social structures when brought into confrontation with the mentalities and institutions of another, materially more powerful, culture<sup>23</sup>.

Stevenson would have liked to apply this methodology to a projected Scottish history : a plan he never realized, which would have been centred on the clash between ancient barbarism (the Highlanders) and modern civilisation. Both the Samoan and Scottish cases, which he often compares in his writings, imply « a fault line in history, a transition between epochs, and to understand this transition it was necessary to appreciate the relation between the unique event (such as the Jacobite uprising or the Berlin Treaty) and what the structuralist historian Fernand Braudel calls the 'structures of everyday life' in the '*longue durée*'<sup>24</sup> ». His attention to Samoan customs and language is therefore not only descriptive and ethnographic, but is meant to understand the point of view of the "other", how it differs from the dominant view of the coloniser and how the clash between them can produce larger effects.

Another indirect testimony is given through the description of the landscape and the information it provides to the attentive observer. The invasive presence of the whites had transformed the islands completely. The German plantations had changed the landscape's natural colours, creating artificial geometrical patches of brilliant green, ordered like soldiers in a military parade, contrasting with the dark areas covered with native bush. The bay of Apia, stretching from the western promontory of Mulinuu to the eastern cape of Matautu, symbolised the « political sickness » (15) of Samoa. Walking from one extreme to the other, a visitor would travel through a sequence of occupied areas that synthesized the recent history of Samoa. The historic village of Mulinuu, which used to be the seat of the king's residence, was now German property, as indicated by a sign. Then one came across a series of offices, barracks and warehouses of the German firm. After that lay Matafele, a small town replete with German pubs and stores, hosting the German consulate, the Catholic mission and the cathedral. The river flowing under the Mulivai bridge marked the border with the Anglo-Saxon area. There you would find the stores of Mr Moors (American) and Messrs MacArthur (English), the English mission, the English newspaper office, the Anglican church and the old American consulate. Western residences and offices continued at Matautu, including the British and American consulates. Everything was indicated by a plethora of signs and boards, as if to set boundaries, give directions and define affiliations or identities. There were « more signboards than men to own them » (16). The harbour, too, was crowded with all types of ships and watercraft, men-of-war and merchant vessels, so much so that Stevenson exclaims : « there are more whites afloat in Apia bay than whites

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<sup>23</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 75.

ashore in the whole Archipelago » (16-17). When the visitor met some indigenous people or the king himself, s/he wondered where they resided :

Here and there, in the back yards of European establishments, he [the visitor] may have had a glimpse of a native household elbowed in a corner ; but since he left Malinuu none on the beach where islanders prefer to live, scarce one on the line of street. The handful of whites have everything ; the natives walk in a foreign town. (17)

After the Germans had occupied Mulinuu, even the Samoan king had to leave his traditional residence. Stevenson points to the place where he lived when he was driven from the German into the Anglo-Saxon zone : a simple indigenous house on a low hill behind a pub, guarded by soldiers and flown over by Samoan flag. At the time of Stevenson's writing the king had gone back to his original residence. The writer could not but be discomfited by the spectacle of a sovereign being « shuttled to and fro in his chief city at the nod of aliens. » (17)

In the final part of the book, Stevenson compares the dwellings of Laupepa – the king compromised with the Western powers and reinstalled after exile – and that of Mataafa – the moral winner of the war, supported by his people but unable to rule because of the German veto. Mulinuu, where Laupepa now resided, is described as a decaying village : « It is now like a neglected bush-town, and speaks of apathy in all concerned. » (151) Two Western mansions dominated the harbour side, the residences of the highest authorities appointed by the Berlin Act : Cedarkrantz the Chief Justice and the Prussian Baron Senfft von Pilsach, President of the restored municipal council of Apia<sup>25</sup>. The king's dwelling, on the other hand, was « such a house as a commoner might use in a bush village ; none could dream that it gave shelter even to a family chief ; yet it is the palace of Malietoa-Natoaitete-Tamasoalii-Laupepa, king of Samoa » (151). The image that the reader visualises is that of a place devoid of identity, not organically developed but artificially constructed, subordinated to external exigencies and where the legitimate sovereign of a country is “given hospitality”. The extent of the king's lack of authority is also expressed in financial terms by a statement recording the monthly salaries of the three main personalities in the archipelago : 500\$ for the Chief Justice Cedarkrantz, 450\$ for Baron Senfft von Pilsach, and 95\$ for His Royal Highness, the King of Samoa (152).

On the contrary, Malie, where Mataafa had chosen to reside, was « the scene of prosperity and peace » (154). The village still embodied all the typical features of a Samoan place : a great number of oval or round native dwellings (many under construction), pig walls on the shore and no fortification. In the middle stood a taller building, the house of assembly. The centre of attention was Malietoa-Tuiatua-

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<sup>25</sup> As Colley states « The major innovation of the Berlin Act was the establishment of a Supreme Court with, however, only a single judge, the Chief Justice of Samoa, a foreigner to be appointed either by the three consuls, but in the case of disagreement, by the monarch of Sweden or Norway. [...] The Berlin Act also restored the municipal government of Apia that the Germans had earlier dissolved and with it a municipal council that appointed a magistrate and other local officials, that passed regulations concerning the sale and lease of land, supervised elections, and collected levies previously forbidden by foreign treaties. This municipal council was headed by a President (a voting chairman selected by the three Powers and, like the Chief Justice, a foreign official) who was also to serve as the chief executive of the municipality, the treasurer, and, at the King's pleasure, a general adviser to the Samoan Government. » See Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, pp. 144-145.

Tuiaana-Mataafa, « king – or not king – or king claimant – of Samoa. [...] About himself and all his surroundings there breathes a striking sense of order, tranquillity, and native plenty » (155). In Stevenson's words the person of Mataafa conveyed authoritativeness, pride and power. The village of Malie seems to be a place outside the boundaries of the imperial forces, which was able to impose a limit to their spreading supremacy. Nevertheless, Mataafa is not a symbol of pre-colonial essentialism. He is an emblem of that hybridity typical of colonial and postcolonial conditions. He was unmarried, and a natural daughter attended to him. A fervent Catholic, he had made a vow of chastity « "to live as our Lord lived on this earth" » (155). During the civil war he had been a brave warrior and clever chief, but also obedient to the rules imposed by technologized powers. He was careful not to trespass on the neutral zone or on any foreigner's property (65, 79), but used the ammunitions and provisions supplied by the Americans and the British (90 and 101-2). After the Treaty he assumed a regal state in Malie, received deputations, headed his letters "Government of Samoa" and « tacitly treat[ed] the king as a co-ordinate » (142). He refused to obey all orders as to his movements or behaviours. But he also paid his taxes to the government at Mulinuu and sent offenders to be tried under the Chief Justice (143). Stevenson's admiration for Mataafa is evident. He is recognised as the king chosen by the majority of his people and acknowledged as a viable voice of resistance to overwhelming and contradictory international interests. While defending the native chief, Stevenson also defends the Samoan right to a more independent rule.

In commenting the Berlin Act at the end of the essay, Stevenson once more faces the problem of points of view. He tries to see the fruits of "illuminated" Western diplomacy from an indigenous perspective and expresses reservations on its results on Samoan people.

I am not asking what was intended by the gentlemen who sat and debated very benignly and, on the whole, wisely in Berlin ; I am asking what will be understood by a Samoan studying their *literary work, the Berlin Act* ; I am asking what is the result of taking a word out of one state of society, and applying it to another, of which the writers know less than nothing, and no European knows much. (143, my emphasis)

Interestingly, Stevenson defines an international political agreement as "a literary work", as if the question of the point of view necessarily transformed history into a story and an official document into a fictional text.

From his letters Stevenson appears doubtful about whether *A Footnote to History* could find or not an interested public in Europe, but he felt he had to publish it at all cost, even at his own expense. He mostly cared for a response from the people around him in that part of the world, a small community similar to that described in *The Wrecker* (1892), made of business men, men of action, rough people and beachcombers. As Jolly underlines, « [t]hese readers mattered to Stevenson, because their opinion counted in the world in which he lived ; their response to the book would show whether he had done his work well, and what its practical effect might be<sup>26</sup>. » So Stevenson's book was supposed to be a denunciation of the questionable ways and means of Western imperialism and an act of militancy. His involvement in Samoan politics also caused great embarrassment in the Foreign Office and

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<sup>26</sup> Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, p. 98.

prompted the British High Commissioner for the Western Pacific to issue an official document – *A Regulation for the Maintenance of Peace and Good Order in Samoa* (1892) – aimed at stopping further interferences from the writer, which would have otherwise cost him deportation<sup>27</sup>.

*A Footnote to History* did not have the immediate practical results Stevenson had hoped for, as can be read in official records. Six years after Stevenson's death, Germany and the United States started a shared rule of the territory (Germany over the west islands, the US over the east ones). In 1914 Western Samoa was occupied by New Zealand, which was allied to Britain against Germany, like all the British Empire colonies and dominions during the First World War. It achieved independence in 1962, as constitutional monarchy under a native chief. Eastern or American Samoa is still an "[unincorporated territory](#) of the United States". It is difficult to ascertain the extent of the book's influence on the course of later Samoan history. For the time being, it is certainly one of the first Western texts giving voice to the reasons and views of the indigenous "other", applying a serious scientific method of historical research and using a local situation as a parable of the larger discourse of Western imperialism.

In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said is critical of Conrad, accusing him of "eurocentrism", that is, of being unable to conceive of other narratives but the European one. If on the one hand Conrad is anti-imperialist because he denounces the corruption and inefficiency of the colonial enterprise, which is self-deluding and self-justifying, on the other he ends up affirming the imperial system by his rejection of any viable alternative. In refusing the possibility of indigenous resistance, says Said, Conrad acts as an imperialist<sup>28</sup>.

Stevenson's *A Footnote to History* not only anticipates the "anti-imperialist" themes expounded by Conrad but also acknowledges the presence of the "other" and of a different narrative, as well as the possibility of resistance to the dominant discourse.

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<sup>27</sup> Jolly, « Introduction », in R.L. Stevenson, *South Sea Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. xliii. See also Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, p. 151.

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