

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON IN SĀMOA BY JOSEPH FARRELL

Judy-Anne Alexander-Pouono, National University of Sāmoa

Robert Louis Stevenson will always be remembered as the world renowned author who chose the South Pacific, and Sāmoa in particular, as his final home and resting place ‘under the stars.’

Several authors have chosen to write on the life of Robert Louis Stevenson, but this book review focuses mainly on Joseph Farrell’s comprehensive account on the life of *Robert Louis Stevenson in Sāmoa*, and the influences that shaped his short life, which began with his birth in Scotland and ended with his demise and burial on his chosen place, a mountain top, on the other side of the world, in Sāmoa. The site of his resting place was probably selected as a reminder of the hills of his birthplace in Scotland.

In 1890, after sailing the seas of the South Pacific for two years, the well-known Scottish writer, Robert Louis Stevenson (RLS), arrived in Sāmoa and took up residence on the island of Upolu. The Sāmoans bestowed the name *Tusitala*, on RLS, which means Teller of Tales. In addition to his famous title, he also became a ‘defender of Sāmoan affairs’—an outspoken advocate for the country’s right to be free from external influence from outside countries, such as Britain, Germany and the United States of America (Farrell 2017). This did not win him many admirers, but it did demonstrate his independent views on political matters, even in a country not his own.

Stevenson’s reasons for leaving his homeland of Scotland were personal, mainly because of his various health issues, but also as Farrell suggests, “... a surrender to the appeal ... in the contemporary European imagination of those elusive and imprecise factors ... exoticism, charm, mystique, glamour, all treasured qualities believed to be located in the Pacific Islands” (Farrell 2017: 33). Chesterton’s comment for travelling was that he was “... partly an adventurer ... and partly ... an invalid...” (in Farrell 2017: 34). Some of RLS’ early publications were travel books. Among them are “*An Island Voyage, Travels with a Donkey, and The Amateur Emigrant*, ... while those on “journeys on land and sea are intrinsic to the plot of such novels as *Treasure Island, Kidnapped, The Master of Ballantrae, and St. Ives*.” (Farrell 2017: 34–35). However, in spite of his ailments, Stevenson has left a lasting legacy on the world, with his writings on a variety of topics, penned while on land as well as on the sea. One admirable trait is that he was not afraid to express his views as he saw them, even if he offended others.

In his book on Stevenson, Farrell gives his audience a detailed insight into the aspects which may have influenced RLS’ life. For example, Farrell comments that RLS had “acquired Calvinist instincts from his father and from his nanny, Cummy, although these instincts were more deeply rooted than he then believed.” (Farrell 2017: 35). (The church was later referred to as the Presbyterian Church.) Another example of ‘persuasion’ was RLS’ marriage to Fanny Mathilda Van de Grift Osbourne. At first, Thomas and Margaret Stevenson objected to the relationship, “they made no secret of their dismay at his affair with a married woman” (Farrell 2017: 48). However, in May 1880, when the couple decided to get married in San Francisco, RLS’ parents, “... changed their minds and wrote to him promising him an allowance of L250 pounds a year. ... his staunchly Presbyterian parents took to Fanny and relations between Stevenson’s mother and wife remained generally harmonious for the rest of their lives.” (Farrell 2017: 49–50). Margaret Stevenson remained devoted to her son and after the onset of widowhood, “... the staid, dutiful, Presbyterian, Victorian bourgeois wife, ... showed her true mettle and demonstrated a wholly unpredicted independence of attitude” (Farrell 2017: 56–57). RLS’ mother also joined her son in the Pacific. While much has been said about Fanny’s relationship with her husband, Robert Louis Stevenson, evidence shows that while she tried to ‘control his life’, she was

devoted to him during his periods of illness (Farrell 2017). One instance was during a trip to Sydney where RLS was ill with ‘recurrent lung haemorrhages,’ and when Fanny realized that her husband had been better when travelling on the seas, she immediately began to look for a vessel to sail them away from the city (Farrell 2017: 64).

Robert Louis Stevenson and his family arrived in Sāmoa December 7, 1889 and after deciding to reside in Sāmoa, Harry J. Moors, an American resident and trader, assisted RLS with the purchase of land and construction of a permanent residence. After adjusting to life on the island, RLS began writing about his concerns in *Footnote*, for the period 1883–1892,—approximately eight years, (Farrell 2017: 128). In his adopted country, he was able to observe the dynamics of politics at play. While he was critical of Imperialism and felt that islands like Sāmoa should not be influenced by any foreign power, (viz. Britain, Germany or the United States of America), (Farrell 2017: 142), he did comment on the dynamics of local life, affairs of state and opinions of the local population. “To access their beliefs, one approach was to seek out parallels between their history and Scotland’s, but that could only take him so far” (Farrell 2017: 148). It is clear that RLS compared and contrasted his Scottish clans to the Sāmoan *matai* (chiefly) system, as the former was the one with which he was familiar, and so he would have been able to make suitable comparisons. His comments on the two structures included social systems, etiquette, dress, and public protocols among others. He even played politics at times, as seen when he expressed his choice of chief as Mata’afa Iosefo instead of Malietoa Laupepa, (Farrell 2017: 170–171) which may have been a ‘brave and bold move’ to take for an ‘outsider.’

There is no doubt that all of Robert Louis Stevenson’s writings will always have a place in the sphere of world literature, in the South Pacific, and especially in Sāmoa. “His productivity over the Sāmoa years was indeed astonishing in quantity and variety, even if the quality varied. ... estimated to have written some 700,000 words in the four year period of his residence on the island’ (Farrell 2017: 291). For example, between November 1890 and October 1891, RLS completed both “*The Beach of Falesa*” and *The Wrecker* (Farrell 2017).

In conclusion, Joseph Farrell’s *Robert Louis STEVENSON in Sāmoa* is well-researched and offers its readers a balanced view of the Scottish author’s life—ideals, realities, hopes and disappointments. In addition, its audience is also able to understand the events which helped shape the world at that period in time. While Scotland and Sāmoa were on opposite sides of the globe, Stevenson was able to identify the events and analyse the possible outcomes, which would have affected almost every country on every continent on the planet. It is a book worth reading.