

Chapter 10

Researching, (W)riting, Releasing, and Responses to a Biography of Queen Salote of Tonga

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Researching Queen Salote was *not* my first foray into biography. I was employed as a book editor for five years in Sydney and then nine years in London. In 1969 Macmillan London decided to move the editorial department from Little Essex Street—just about equidistant between the Thames, the Law Courts, Fleet Street, and the Middle Temple (and only 20 minutes walk from the National Gallery and other delights)—to Basingstoke. Not the Basingstoke of Gilbert and Sullivan (a ‘word that teems with hidden meaning’), but a factory town. After the brass handshake from Macmillan, my friend Nick Furbank asked me if I would be his research assistant, as he was writing the biography of the novelist E.M. Forster.

The research was fruitful. After I had spent some time in the British Museum Library (now the British Library), the London Library, and the Colindale Newspaper Library, Forster obligingly died in June 1970. I was then asked to go to King’s College in Cambridge and catalogue all Forster’s papers, which were to be found in his set of four rooms at King’s.

After that initial catalogue for the Forster estate, King’s College, the main beneficiary of Forster’s will, asked me to do a more detailed catalogue and arrange for the binding of many of the papers. Thus I became the first Archivist of the Modern Manuscripts at King’s. I returned to Australia after 15 years abroad just in time to take advantage of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam’s abolition of university fees. I was tempted to do something to make up for my lacklustre undergraduate degree, and the idea of doing a postgraduate degree on the late Queen Salote of Tonga came to me in a flash while I was having my hair cut. Well, not quite. My father had written the chapter on Queen Salote for Noel Rutherford’s book *Friendly Islands: a history of Tonga*, and asked me if I would do some checking of the dates. So it was a kind of pre-destined flash.

That was the only part of the whole experience that happened with any speed. After a year, my candidature for an MA being converted to a PhD, I felt liberated—able to undertake something I hoped would be significant and

fulfilling. I had by then realised that my research was something of a 'roots' exercise, as I had been born in Tonga to missionary parents.

When I submitted my topic to the History Department at the University of Melbourne, I broke many of the rules I now endeavour to impress on students (if any ask my advice): to know your archives before you begin, or at least their locations; whether they have been catalogued or not; whether permission is required; and last but not least what languages the papers are written in. I had an unfounded conviction that my first language (Tongan) would just come back to me once I encountered it again. It didn't.

It came as somewhat of a shock (a) to find very little in any library or archive in Australia about Queen Salote, who had been a mythical figure of my childhood; (b) neither Tongans nor Australians who had lived in Tonga for many years seemed to know very much about anything connected with Tonga.

I had already discovered in a game that some people have astoundingly poor memories of anything that happened more than a week earlier. Others, particularly former missionaries, had acquired a loyalty to the kingdom of Tonga that prevented analysis or criticism. So the myth of the Friendly Islands lives on.

Once in 1974 and twice in 1976, I visited the Western Pacific High Commission Archives in Suva to read their papers. The British High Commissioner (also Governor of Fiji) had oversight over Tonga, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, the New Hebrides, Pitcairn Island, and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. The Archives were located in the Suva Botanical Gardens, and as I sat waiting for files to be delivered, I could watch the prison inmates labouring in the Botanical Gardens and listen to the intermittent drumming of tropical rain on the roof—a sound reminiscent of my childhood.

The procedure at the Archives was to look in large registers that listed the inward and outward correspondence of the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC). There were also the British Consul Tonga (BCT) files, relating specifically to Tonga. And registers for the correspondence between the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific and the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London.

Each item of correspondence in the main WPHC registers, which could be to or from any one of the WPHC territories, had a brief (about four words) description of the contents. Using these registers I requested those files that looked as though they might be relevant and interesting. I ignored files about exports and imports (these were summarised in the *Tonga Government Gazette*, another useful source) and ordered any to do with religion, as I knew these would really be about politics. A few files had nothing, or referred to attachments that had been removed. I assumed that the missing attachments had been forwarded to the Colonial Office in London.

In the late 1970s, the Western Pacific Archives papers went to Milton Keynes in the United Kingdom. Since 2002, they have been in the care of the Library of the University of Auckland. In January 2005, in Auckland, I requested some files from the 1950s and found they had been removed in the UK because they were considered too 'sensitive' for us colonials to read.

Alas, nothing like the Western Pacific Archives existed in Tonga, and still does not. When the late King became Minister for Education in 1943 or when he became Premier in 1949, he decided to make a big bonfire of most of the papers lying around in the 'Stone Building'—which then housed several government departments—in order to make space for his own records.

The papers of the Free Wesleyan Church are now being well looked after (although requiring more detailed cataloguing). In the 1970s the large registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths, and the minutes of District and Quarterly meetings were stored in cupboards and odds and ends in the old stables. Some of the letters and other loose papers I read and copied in the Mission House in 1974 and 1976 I never saw again, although a sighting of some letter books was reported to me in 2005.

The Catholic Bishop Finau was most helpful, but the ancient French priest who looked after the Catholic Archives assured me that the only relevant papers in the Catholic Archives were some surviving diaries of 1912-1934 of Bishop Blanc, which were in French. I borrowed a French-English dictionary from the nuns and spent a number of weeks at the Catholic office (Toutaimana) translating Bishop Blanc's diaries and sharing morning tea with the nuns and young priests.

The real goldmine in Tonga was the collection of papers then stored in the Palace Office. When I first arrived to make inquiries, the Acting Private Secretary to the King was the noble and musician Fielakepa, who had been a student of my father's many years before. Each morning I borrowed his keys and went into a back room, climbing over bicycles, boxes full of bottles of champagne, and rolls of wire to reach the top shelf of the book-case on which there were boxes labelled by decades. Someone had started this sorting venture some time before, but after an inch or so of the designated decade, other papers had just been dumped in on top. I took one box at a time and retired to the Privy Council room to read them.

As there was nothing much to do in the evenings, I studied Churchward's *Grammar*, and learned lists of Tongan words off by heart. The latter was not a particularly useful exercise, as there are many homonyms in Tongan, and the meaning is determined by the pronoun and context. The outcome of these evenings and keeping Churchward's *Tongan-English Dictionary* always at hand was that I was able to do quite a lot of translation on my own—especially when the *Tonga Government Gazette* also included a summary in English, a practice abolished by the late King.

For my purposes, the most valuable of the documents then in the Palace Office and now in the Tongan Traditions Committee Archives were the diaries kept by Queen Salote's Private Secretary (Sione Filipe Tongilava), which gave me some idea of the daily comings and goings at the Palace. Presentations of food were listed in great detail, also lists of *koloa* (mats, barkcloth, etc.) presented to Queen Salote, but alas no details of dances beyond a bare number, such as 37 *lakalaka*. He noted when the Queen presided over a kava circle or *mavae kava*—a kava root was presented, but was not immediately used. Tongilava was also Clerk to the Privy Council Minutes and kept the Privy Council Minutes, but I did not have the time to read all of these, nor the Hansard of the Parliament of Tonga. The last would have been beyond me, as Tongan speeches are allusive, using metaphors abundantly.

An unknown person had already translated the diary Queen Salote had kept of her visit to England in 1953. When Tongan friends offered to help with the translation of letters, I found *they* could not understand the documents, partly because of the allusive language and partly because the would-be translators did not have the context. Tongan history as taught in schools was bland, respectful of the royal family, and tended to ignore the 20th century. I had to explain why the documents were interesting to me before they could attempt translation. Another difficulty is that the Tongan language is not gender specific. In a letter to Rev. J.B. Watkin did Queen Salote reproach him for trampling on 'me'—i.e. the Queen—or on 'it' (her plan)? No one will ever know.

My father had read papers in 1972 that were no longer there, and on later visits I could not find papers I had read earlier. But it was worth asking on the next visit whether the papers had reappeared. I cannot remember the number of times I asked about photographs, and was told there were none. After my book was published I was shown a photograph album bursting with pictures of Queen Salote and her family. The denial of the album's existence was not malicious, it was just easier to say no than to actually go and look!

After my three visits to the Western Pacific Archives in Suva and two visits to Tonga (one for three months and one for a year) I put the papers I had copied in those countries and in Australian libraries and private papers into date order. The 5 x 3 cards on which I had made notes I put into alphabetical order, indicating the date and source of each of the notes. It was only then that I got any sense of sequence, and hence of cause and effect. I would phone a friend and say, 'Guess what! If A and C happened then B must have been the link!'

By this time, having written and thrown away a number of chapters, I realised that the focus of my thesis was the partnership between Queen Salote and her consort, the great chief Tungi Mailefihi and their dual leadership, which was derived from the traditional relationship between 'eldest sister' and 'eldest

brother' as leaders of their clan; and in the case of the highest titles, as sacred and secular ruler.

Traditionally the 'eldest sister' was the keeper of genealogies and provider of *koloa* (wealth) in the form of barkcloth, mats, and other durable goods, and the 'eldest brother' was the keeper of the land and distributor of the food that grew on it. Salote and Tungi were fourth cousins. Thus, in political terms, they took on the traditional roles of 'eldest sister' and 'eldest brother' and made their goal the unification of the whole kingdom. Salote had married Tungi (the choice of her father, Tupou II, and much loved by her) when she was 17 years of age and he was 29. Seven months after the wedding she was proclaimed Queen, and was pregnant with the first of three sons.

Salote alone was installed in the pre-eminent title of Tu'i Kanokupolu. Salote alone was addressed in the sacred language, although both she and Tungi were descended from the ancient line of sacred rulers. Tungi was addressed in the language appropriate for chiefs. Salote appointed him as her Prime Minister; but his real influence was exercised through his role as a very high-ranking chief, especially in matters relating to land. 'He was a farmer', people told me. He initiated the annual agricultural show and won many prizes there. He made lists of local fish. He planted as many species of yam as he could find and kept cattle. He encouraged people to grow for export, not only copra, but good quality bananas and other fruits: a frustrating enterprise since the inspectors employed to ensure the fruits were of good quality were often relatives of the farmers. There was always a line of people outside his office waiting to ask for money: to pay for taxes, a wedding or funeral or special birthday.

Oral history in the 1970s was quite a problem. 'If we knew we would tell you, Besi', was the cry of my Tongan friends, friends bequeathed to me by my parents and my sister and brother-in-law, who had also been missionaries in Tonga. Reflecting on this later, I realised they thought I was seeking really 'important' information, rather than the humdrum insights that mean so much to a biographer. These insights came to me in casual conversation, *not* by my sitting with a tape recorder or notebook—both of which caused Tongans to clam up. The cup of tea was, in my case, mightier than the pencil.

Part of the reason for the almost universal silence was that, even in the 1970s and 1980s (Salote died in 1965), Salote's *mana* was so great that she might reach out from the grave and punish someone for being *fie'eiki* (presuming to know matters reserved for chiefs).

What surprised me even more was that Queen Salote's sons did not have much to say. Both had been students of my father, and so there was no difficulty in getting audiences. The youngest son held back, I think, also because of the great *mana* of his mother.

This was not the case with the late King. It took some years for me to realise that although he had kindly provided me with a letter giving me permission to do research, he was simply *not* interested in what I was doing, or in anything about the past. He was sure he was more intelligent, better educated, higher-ranking, more interesting, and altogether had more of everything than the late Queen, and he could not understand why people were interested in her when *he* was there to be admired. Was he jealous of the love and respect people had for her?

I was fortunate that when I suffered 'culture shock' in 1976, Epeli Hau'ofa, who had just returned to Tonga from Canberra and was being very bolshie (wearing a black beard and a kaftan made of mattress ticking), was writing his best short stories, and would read them to his wife, Barbara, and me and other friends in the evenings. Another guide along the way was a Danish man known as Tavi, who had lived in Tonga since 1953 and had privileged access to the Palace. His cynical view of Tonga, which had been the paradise of my childhood, was a great corrective.

Best of all was being introduced by Tonga's best-known *fakaleiti* to his grandmother, a woman of high rank, who loved talking about the old days. Twice a week I visited her and (without my taking notes) we had wide-ranging conversations. As soon as I returned to my place, I would type out everything I could remember her saying. I could check some omissions on my next visit. Alas, as a postgraduate student, I did not have the money to have her wonderful collection of photographs copied.

After the PhD thesis was submitted and approved, I was really burnt out, and wanted to do something else for a while. That was possibly a mistake, but at the time I was happy to become a freelance book editor and indexer and write occasional papers on Tonga for conferences and publication.

At last, in 1994 and 1995, I was awarded two fellowships in New Zealand, which enabled me to do further research and writing. My thesis had covered only the years 1918-41. Although I had incidentally researched much of the remainder of her life and times, I had many gaps to fill, which was possible through papers, books, and theses in the University of Auckland Library, and the archives in Auckland and Christchurch of the New Zealand Methodist Church. Queen Salote was, and her grandson now is, the only Methodist monarch in the world.

In an early draft of the book, the first two chapters had described the hierarchical structure of Tongan society in much detail. Then I thought: 'The *papalangis* won't be interested in all this detail, and the Tongans know it already'. Then I remembered the question people in Australia always asked me: 'Where is Tonga?' So I started the book by answering that question. Salote was born in a palace beside the sea, within a town about a mile square. Beyond the town

were the villages and allotments and the chiefs and people who lived there. Then there were all the other islands of Tonga, then Samoa and Fiji, and the rest of the Pacific, until I reached the ends of the earth.

I believe in following a chronological line as far as is reasonable, so once the scene was set, past history summarised, and a brief account of the social ranking systems given, I was able to structure the book so that chronologically the narrative moved on while each chapter dealt with a different theme. Fixing the structure of the book was the most satisfying experience.

At the end of 1995, I returned home to Melbourne with a complete book: long and somewhat doughy. In the next 18 months I rewrote the whole book, keeping the structure, but with a lighter tone, bearing in mind my audience: the Tongans themselves and anyone who knew enough about Tonga to be interested. I deliberately avoided academic jargon (a decision made also, but independently, by two of my colleagues: Helen Morton Lee and Cathy Small) in favour of simple language.

Many times people told me how they had been in the crowd in London when this wonderful Queen Salote rode by in a carriage with the hood down in spite of the rain so she could share the excitement of the people who had waited all night and all day to see the procession. A man in Rotorua, New Zealand, gave me a cutting about Queen Salote at the coronation that he had kept for 40 years. As the Queen had attracted attention before Queen Elizabeth II's coronation by her obvious enjoyment of everything she witnessed and her friendliness to all she met, it was not surprising that the coronation edition of the *Daily Express* included a diagram of Westminster Abbey, showing the seat allocated to Queen Salote (only a few of the invited guests were so distinguished). Salote had been 18 years old when she had been crowned in the royal chapel in Tonga, so it is not surprising that she empathised with the young Queen of England then making her coronation vows.

My major 'conclusions' were (1) that Salote was a very intelligent person, very shrewd, and very good with people; (2) that Salote had not always been beloved and secure in her position as Queen; (3) that her allies (both Tongan and *papalangi*), especially her consort, were totally committed in their loyalty to her.

I was concerned about some things that were common knowledge, but I could not decide how to handle. I consulted a high-ranking chiefly woman who encouraged me by saying, 'It is time to tell the truth'.

One example of a truth that needed to be told related to the Queen's half-sister, Princess Fusipala, daughter of Tupou II's second marriage (Salote's mother having died when Salote was only two years old). Princess Fusipala's mother's family set up a rival court in Tonga, and did everything they could to enhance the status of Fusipala and diminish that of Salote. Eventually the half-sister died, in

Sydney, in 1933. I was told by Tongans (a) that Fusipala had died from a broken heart because the Queen would not allow her to marry the commoner she loved; (b) that Fusipala had committed suicide because she had been engaged to four high chiefs and angered all four and their families by breaking the engagements; (c) that Tungi (who was in Sydney at the time) had poisoned Fusipala. The truth was that she had died of tubercular peritonitis. Did my account stop the romantic stories being told? Probably not.

Although Fusipala was related to Tungi in a way that required his loyalty (her mother's mother's mother was sister of his father's father), Salote's consort was totally loyal to the Queen. When Tungi and his most trusted ministers were impeached by his enemies in 1939-40, the Queen was solid in her loyalty to him, while (to *papalangi* eyes) appearing to be calm and impartial. The attempted impeachment failed. In the following year, 1941, the Queen was devastated by the death of Tungi when she was only 41 and he was 53.

When the late King Tupou IV (then Crown Prince) returned from Sydney University with both a BA and an LLB (the first Tongan to take a university degree) in December 1942, he assumed he would take over from the Queen. As Prime Minister, he relieved Salote of many onerous duties, particularly the bureaucracy and tedious government matters, so that she could get on with the *real* governing, with influencing the people. Her *mana* increased each year, and she was much loved and admired for what were her genuine qualities.

The time eventually comes when one must stop writing a book (even when one has not finished) and start looking for a publisher. New Zealand had given me the space to write the book, and it was Auckland University Press (AUP) that accepted it for publication. Fortunately, AUP did not ask me to cut the text, as another publisher might have done, since the book is around 110,000 words. And they accepted almost all of the 130 photographs I offered, and chose someone who designed a most wonderful cover. ('Is yours the book with the blue cover?' I am sometimes asked.)

One very good thing that AUP did was to offer a 40 per cent discount for any direct order of at least 10 books. Many Tongans in Melbourne and Auckland—and perhaps other places—were able to order boxes of books, and sell them to their fellow church members or friends at considerably less than retail price.

I visited Tonga after the first printing in 1999. The first 500 copies ordered by the Friendly Islands Bookshop had sold out and another 700 copies had arrived. One Tongan lady bought six copies, one for each of her granddaughters. There was a signing session. I paid the late King a courtesy call.

Tongans and non-Tongans alike have thanked me for writing the book, as it covers a period in Tongan history that no one else has written about. Reviews

were many. I had omitted the story about Noel Coward at the coronation for my own reasons, and the index to my book has the entry 'Coward, Noel, not mentioned' with no page references. Nevertheless some reviewers insisted upon telling the story. Chagrin.

One criticism (repeated to me 'anonymously') was that I had written about the illnesses and causes of death of members of the royal family and of other high-ranking people. No one in the royal family commented on or reproached me for this. However, in a subsequent book, *Songs and Poems of Queen Salote*, our translator insisted that all reference to such matters were taken out of the notes that headed each section of poetry. As editor, I complied with her request, but put the information into my essay that introduced the book.

An Australian lady, Rosary, had lived for many years in Tonga, and in the year 2000 she was living in Fairfield, Victoria, the suburb next to mine. She read *Queen Salote* and phoned the History Department of the University of Melbourne to ask how she could get in touch with me, as she would like to meet me. She was told I was *dead*. Rosary showed the book to her next-door neighbour, Pat, and told her how sorry she was that I was dead. 'She is not dead', said Pat. 'I see her every Sunday. She is a member of our Uniting Church congregation here in Fairfield.'

The most recent response was unexpected. A contract has been signed for *Queen Salote of Tonga: the story of an era 1900-1965* to become part of the History E-Book Project, so it is in cyberspace courtesy of the American Council of Learned Societies.

Financially, of course, the PhD and the writing of *Queen Salote* were a total disaster, costing me immeasurably more than I shall ever recover from minuscule royalties. I am glad I did not realise that relative poverty would be the outcome, or I might not have proceeded. I learned not only about the paradise of my childhood (which is no paradise, but I cannot help being loving and wanting the best for Tonga), but my mind was stretched, and I made many friends, both Tongan and *papalangi*, in the course of researching, writing, releasing, and listening to responses about *Queen Salote of Tonga: the story of an era 1900-1965* (first published in 1999) and, subsequently, to the *Songs and Poems of Queen Salote* (first published in 2004).