Salt water ran strongly in the veins of Ernest Allen. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were admirals in the family and, in the nineteenth century, there was a post-captain. About 1850 the latter’s son, Frederick Kenneth Allen, was invalided out of the Royal Navy and migrated to New Zealand. There, at Wellington, in 1851 he married Frances Stratford Elizabeth Houghton, the 19-year-old daughter of another ex-navy man, Robert Houghton. Said to be an illegitimate son of one of the Cochrane family, to which Admiral Thomas Cochrane, 10th Earl of Dundonald (1775–1860), and the model for Frederick Marryat’s heroic Hornblower-like Captain Savage, had belonged, Houghton arrived in Wellington with his family in the New Zealand Company vessel *Aurora* in January 1840. There he established a successful lightering business and acted as harbour master. The family name is preserved in Houghton Bay. Frederick and Frances, in contrast, took up sheep farming on Forsyth Island in the Marlborough Sounds at the top of the South Island. It was there that their only son, Ernest Frederick Hughes Allen, the youngest of their four children, was born in 1867.1

Information about Ernest Allan’s childhood and education is scarce, but it seems that about 1870, after his father, who died in 1871, was struck with paralysis, the family shifted to Wellington. There, about 1880 he was articled as a clerk in the law firm of Cutten and Edwards, but—as with ‘Banjo’ Paterson’s Clancy—that sort of work was not to his taste. ‘I doubt he’d suit the office, Clancy of the Overflow’. A more active life at sea beckoned. Thus it was that in 1882, according to a report in 1920 in the *Samoa Times*, Ernest Allen launched himself on what would be a four decade career as a South Sea trader, planter, mariner and ship owner.2

In embarking on this course, there is nothing to suggest that Allen was running away from anything, or yielding to a romantic, literature-fired indulgence. Nor was he escaping into a balmy nirvana, like many of the shore-based ‘resident traders’ who managed small trading stations, either independently or on behalf

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2 *Samoa Times*, 20 Mar. 1920; *Fiji Times*, 22 Sept. 1924. The *Samoa Times* states, ‘Captain Allen, was a resident in Suva from 1882 to 1885’, but it is more likely that 1882 was the year he left Wellington in the *Albatross*. 
of larger ship-based operators, and who gradually ‘went native’, and whom he eventually helped displace from their place in the commercial spectrum. Such men have been well described by Doug Munro:

Despite their diversity of social backgrounds, the overwhelming impression is that [they] were a group of men, dissatisfied and often unsuccessful in other walks of life, who found a refuge on the margins of the Island trade. They were social casualties by and large. Most went into trading in the first place as a last resort after drifting in and out of various occupations—and sometimes in and out of trouble as well—in various parts of the world.\(^3\)

Nor was Allen as restless a soul as his near contemporary Louis Becke. From 1869 to 1892 Becke wandered from Sydney to San Francisco and back and spent at least ten years in a desultory trading career in various islands of the Pacific before becoming a writer at the age of 37. He then found fame but not fortune with unvarnished tales of his adventures.\(^4\) In contrast, despite his evident relish for the less constrained style of life that the islands had to offer him, Allen showed himself to be consistently entrepreneurial and broadly conventional in the way he managed his affairs. And there were numerous others such as he. Many of them had been drawn to the Pacific by the big German firm of Godeffroy und Sohn (forerunner of the Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft or DHPG) which opened in Samoa in 1857, and by the ‘rush’ of would-be cotton planters to Fiji in the early 1870s. By 1905 there were 400 \textit{palagi} (Europeans) in Samoa, 250 in Tonga and 2,675 in Fiji—and overall almost 2,500 half-castes, of whom 700 were in Samoa. Collectively, within each island group, these people constituted a distinct and self-sustaining, but by no means exclusive, demographic and social category, with half-castes tending to be identified as ‘European’ rather than ‘native’. What the leaders among them were doing and had accomplished is described and lauded, though not egregiously so, in the biographical entries in two \textit{Cyclopedia} volumes published in 1907 to chronicle ‘the history, traditions and commercial development of the islands’.\(^5\)

In joining the ranks of these \textit{arrivistes} of the pelagic littorals, Allen sought to make a comfortable living, if not his fortune. And he succeeded moderately well. He thus played—within the region in which he operated—a significant

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part in an important and pervasive double-sided process. It was one in which, on the one hand, the European settler presence in its various manifestations was supported and serviced while, on the other, the local peoples acquired new appetites and expectations as they were drawn ever more closely into the European-controlled economic system. Allen himself, though, was never absorbed into indigenous life. In 1924 the Fiji Times would recall him as ‘a fine type of Britisher’. But he did become well integrated on the advancing palagi-defined margins of island society through long and familiar acquaintance with places and people, not least by marriage, and by his fluency in the language of Samoa. From such a position the established and enterprising trader such as he, like the veteran missionary and the energetic colonial official, might exert an appreciable influence on the multiple rhythms of islands affairs.

Allen left Wellington as an apprentice on the trading schooner Albatrosss, under Captain McLever, and stayed with her for several trips until coming ashore in Fiji, probably in 1884. There he worked as a boatbuilder in the yards of J. Darrach in Suva before moving to Samoa in 1885, where he found employment with the Auckland-based trading firm of William McArthur and Co. At that time McArthurs, which had come to Samoa about 1876 and was the largest British company in the group, was locked in a bitter and protracted legal contest with an ex-missionary turned planter, Frank Cornwall, over the ownership of 300,000 acres of land. McArthurs claimed the land, with some limited early success, on account of money owed them by Cornwell. It seems that Allen was first employed managing the cotton plantation at Magia, 24 kilometres west of Apia, which a court had awarded to McArthurs in 1882. The dispute, however, dragged on until 1890, when the Privy Council in London ruled in favour of Cornwall. McArthurs left Samoa in 1892.

Apparently more than just an impartial observer of the drama, Allen is reported to have come around to supporting Cornwall in his claim and in return to have received from him, although in his wife’s name, 1,200 acres of land at Iva on eastern Savai’i. In any event, Allen had settled there by 1892. There he built himself a small schooner, the Manu Tagi (‘Bird that Cries’), and also started a trading business of his own, which he at

6 22 Sept. 1924.
first conducted from a vessel named the *Kawau.* Unfortunately, for the sake of a good story, there is no evidence that during these years Allen ever met, let alone ‘knew intimately’, Robert Louis Stevenson; or other celebrated literary figures such as Becke and Jack London. These were specious claims to fame, but ones with which he later apparently impressed Donald Kennedy, an administrative officer in the Ellice Islands, who passed them on to other sympathetic listeners.

Politically, the 1890s were an uncertain decade for the European community in Samoa, with rival chiefly lineages, backed by rival foreign powers, contending for the kingship of the group. It was a problem that had become acute in the 1870s and which continued to beget sporadic outbursts of warfare until 1899 when, in a spurt of imperial expansion, America annexed the small island of Tutuila with its port of Pago Pago and Germany took the larger, agriculturally valuable islands to the west. The last phase of the conflict had been precipitated by the death of the incumbent, Laupepa of Sa Malietoa, in August 1898. The contenders for succession were Laupepa’s 18-year-old son Tanumafili, who was backed by the British and Americans, and the venerable Mata’afa Iosefa of Sā Tupua, who was backed by the Germans. Following the installation of Tanumafili as king on 31 December, heavy fighting, most of it centred around Apia, occurred between January and April 1899.

On several occasions during that period civilians sought refuge aboard naval vessels. Allen, however, joined in the conflict. He was present at the opening of hostilities on 1 January and, from 12 March to 23 May, he was carried on the books of HMS *Porpoise,* under Captain (later Admiral) A.C.D. Sturdee, at the rate of £1 per day to serve as interpreter, pilot and intelligence adviser aboard any of the four British craft deployed in Samoa. In that capacity, in mid-April, he went in the *Royalist* to Salelologa in Savai’i to bring in 215 men who were defecting from the Mata’afa cause. A few days later he was hurt in a fall from his horse during a skirmish at Vailima. Yet it had all been to little purpose. In June all parties agreed to abolish the institution of kingship in Samoa. After all, it had never been a more than notional office, despite the turmoil caused by those seeking it. They had engaged in what was essentially a contest for titular supremacy rather than for supreme power. Allen, though, clearly showed where his sympathies lay by naming his fifth son, born on 14 May 1899, Ernest

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9 Allen, ‘Memoir’; tape of interview with Eric Allen, Brisbane, 7 Sept. 1987, courtesy of Doug Munro. In 1926 the 1,200 acres were still in the family. Power of attorney of Frederick Kenneth Allen, 13 April 1926, copy courtesy of Eric Allen.


Tanumafili, but later generally known as ‘Joe’, apparently in honour of another chief. Contrary to Joe’s own belief, he was not born aboard the Royalist, for it had left Apia for Suva en route for Sydney on 2 May.\textsuperscript{12}

With the coming of German rule the economic development of what would in 1962 emerge as the Independent State of Western Samoa accelerated markedly. New planting companies were formed, Chinese workers were imported (from 1903) to expand the available labour force, extensive public works were undertaken—and shipping requirements increased. From about 1900 Allen had in some measure been operating in conjunction with William Blacklock, a merchant who had come to Samoa in 1883. Whatever their arrangement, it became closer in 1903, when Blacklock sold his business and he and Allen jointly purchased a ship, the *Maori*.\textsuperscript{13} Subsequently, in 1908, they set up the Samoa Shipping and Trading Company and, in September 1910, registered its head office in Sydney with Blacklock as manager.\textsuperscript{14} In line with the post-annexation economic growth, the Kawau, in addition to its other inter-island work, had been kept busy making a weekly run from Apia to Pago Pago to connect with the San Francisco mail steamers of the Oceanic Line.\textsuperscript{15} The importance of this service to the residents of Apia—and evidence of some deep anxiety about even being there?—is revealed in a dramatic newspaper report of 1901:

There seemed to be mystery around the sudden departure of the S.S. Kawau for Tutuila on last Friday. Some of the foremost businessmen were disconcerted, thus forestalling the shipment of goods by that boat. However Captain Allen knew best. On mail-day the Kawau had not arrived. Great suspense hung over entire Apia. All looked seaward during the day. At last, at half past six, the gun of the Kawau was heard. Intense excitement prevailed. By nine o’clock the post office was thronged with eager citizens. So packed were the verandah and the streets that men nudged the ladies; the girls were not afraid of the boys—and many forgot their customary decorum in the excitement. Only by ten o’clock the window was opened, and the mail distributed. Then it was made known that the Kawau’s delay was principally due to the fact Mr Allen

\textsuperscript{12} New Zealand National Archives, Royal Navy Australia Station 40, Stuart to Pearson, 14, 18, 26 April 1899; Thomas Trood, *Island Reminiscences*, Sydney, 1912, pp. 108–111, 129; interview Joe Allen.
\textsuperscript{13} Allen, ‘Memoir’. *Samoanisch Zeitung*, 19 July 1902, stated ‘From this date no passengers will be carried [by S.S. Kawau to Tutuila] unless they have tickets from the office of W. Blacklock’. On 17 June 1905, quoting from the *New Zealand Herald* of 18 May, it referred to ‘The steamer Maori, belonging to Messrs W. Blacklock and E.F Allen’. *Cyclopedia of Samoa*, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{15} Refer *Samoanische Zeitung* for shipping movements. Trood suggests that Blacklock may have had more to do with the Kawau than selling tickets: ‘Allen initiated with Mr. Blacklock that steam service between Apia and Pago Pago’, *Reminiscences*, p. 129; C. Hartley Grattan, *The United States and the Southwest Pacific*, Melbourne, 1961, pp. 110–111.
had the boiler repaired, had the pipe newly painted—all in Pago Pago—and, as it rained heavily there he had to wait patiently until the pink paint had dried. This satisfactory explanation was sufficient to reconcile the Apians with their day’s suspense, and to acknowledge that Captain Allen knew perfectly well what he was about.\footnote{Samoanische Zeitung, 26 Oct. 1901.}

Such was the increasing demand for shipping that the \textit{Kawau} was replaced in February 1903 by the larger \textit{Maori}, which also made regular runs to Niue and to Tokelau. Niue was a source of labourers for, among others, the Upolu Cacao Company which began planting at Tanumapua in 1901.\footnote{Ibid., 28 May 1904. Cyclopaedia of Samoa, pp. 91–93.}

Of 174 tons gross tonnage, with room for 163 tons of cargo, built in Glasgow in 1868 and carrying a crew of 25, the \textit{Maori} had been the first vessel acquired by the newly incorporated Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand in 1875.\footnote{Samoanische Zeitung, 30 Dec. 1903, 17 June 1905; J.E. Hobbs and D.F. Gardner, \textit{The Union Steam Ship Company Steam Ships}, Wellington, 1982, p. 13.} The shipping news from the \textit{Samoanische Zeitung} regarding it conveys an impression of constant activity. For instance, on Thursday 26 May 1904 the \textit{Maori} arrived at Niue, where it landed passengers and recruited plantation labourers; five days later it left for Pago Pago, arriving there on Thursday 2 June, and leaving that night for Apia; the next day it left Apia for Safata on the south coast of Upolu to land labourers and cargo and to load copra, and returned to Apia on 5 June; next day, Monday, it left with passengers and the ‘colonial mails’ for Pago Pago, via Leone; arriving on Tuesday, it received mails and cargo from the SS \textit{Sonoma} during the night; and, at noon the following day, after taking on passengers, it departed for Apia, which it reached 11 hours later. Similarly, in June 1905, the \textit{Maori} took ‘100 tons of copra from Savai’i to Pago Pago for shipment to San Francisco’. And in September it was employed to take the members of the Sports Club, founded in 1903, and of which Allen was vice-chairman, on an excursion to Savai’i. There followed a succession of excursions during the first part of 1906, following volcanic eruptions that began on Savai’i in August 1905. The \textit{Maori} regularly carried sightseers to view the volcanic lava flowing into the sea at Sale’aula on the north coast of the island.\footnote{Samoanische Zeitung, 28 May, 11 June 1904, 17 June, 2 Sept. 1905, 7 Jan., 2 Feb. 1906. Cyclopaedia of Samoa, pp. 8–9, 67. J.E. Newell, ‘The Most Active Volcano in the World’, \textit{The Lone Hand}, vol. 7 (Aug. 1910), pp. 274–278.}

In June of that year Allen extended his operations to Tokelau, thereby establishing a profitable but harshly applied paramountcy within that group, which would last until 1923. As the historians of Tokelau observe:

Allen [enjoyed] a monopoly not only in trade but also in communication between Tokelau and the world outside, specifically between the local
polities and their colonial administrators. He alone tendered for Tokelau tax copra; he bought all other copra and supplied all imports. He transported all travellers in and out, ignoring port of entry regulations if it suited him . . . . He had a captive labour force to recruit either for Olohega or the Phoenix Islands. People sentenced to serve time in the Funafuti gaol, often at the instigation of Allen, were conveyed to gaol on the Dawn and, after serving their sentences, returned on the Dawn.

The first voyage, to Tokelau had also been something of a social occasion. As the Samoanische Zeitung noted, ‘Messrs Partsch, Meredith, Forsell, Hall and Hallbauer’ went with Allen ‘to enjoy a well-earned week’s respite from the cares and worry of business’. About the same time the Lever Brothers vessel Upolu was busy carrying seed coconuts from Samoa for planting in the Solomon Islands. Allen was similarly optimistic about the prospects for his own business. In 1908 the Maori was replaced by the 522-ton Dawn, which (to the irritation of established operators) he would occasionally take to Tonga and New Caledonia. And in 1910 he also acquired the wooden-hulled Rob Roy of 80 tons. The company later operated, in addition, the Laura, Jeanette and Samoa.

Then, in 1911, there was another portentous move. In September Allen sailed the Dawn to the Ellice Islands (since 1976, Tuvalu). He made several more such voyages over the next three years. After obtaining access to land in May 1913, he built a substantial establishment there on the atoll of Funafuti, and formally made it his operational base in June 1914. A wharf for ocean-going ships was not practicable, but there was a jetty for launches and barges and large coal, cargo and copra sheds, as well as a well-equipped shipyard and a slipway that could take vessels of up to 100 tons. Electricity was installed and the machine shop was complete with power-driven lathes, drills and machine saws. There was also a blacksmith shop. Fresh water was assured by a system of ducts from the buildings into a huge concrete cistern, and the main residence of about 280 square metres was of concrete, with high ceilings, French windows and wide verandahs. The precise reasons for Allen’s move from Apia (where he left an agency) are not recorded. One suggestion, made in 1920, well after the event, is that he had ‘become tired of German rule’, but is seems more likely that in the face of increasing competition in the Samoas Funafuti was deemed to offer better business opportunities. It is also possible that politics on the other side of the border was impeding the flow of commerce, as the Samoanische Zeitung hints in 1913:

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It is not certain when the Government at Tutuila will grant pratique [entry] for ships arriving from Apia. For this reason the mail may not go by the Samoa Shipping and Trading Company’s steamer on 2nd July, as advertised. If it is possible the Imperial Post Office will forward the mail via Pago Pago but it is advisable to post via Fiji, Vancouver.\textsuperscript{23}

Besides, whatever other reasons there may have been, coming from the British-ruled Ellice offered easier access to Tokelau, which had been attached to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate in 1910, and for which Apia would become an official port of entry only in 1923.\textsuperscript{24}

Meanwhile, Ernest Allen also had a personal and domestic life. On 4 June 1888, in the British consulate in Apia, he married Maria Miller Meredith. She was the daughter of Thomas Meredith, an English-born merchant who had come to Samoa with his brother James in the 1870s, and his wife Maria, a woman of notable parentage. Maria’s father, Jonas Coe, was one of the earliest European settlers in Samoa, and her mother, Le’utu, belonged to the chiefly family of Sa Malie’itoa. Ernest and Mary had six sons, but, to ensure that they were brought up \textit{palagi} style, Ernest entrusted them during their formative years to the care of his sister Frances, known in the family as ‘Auntie’. In 1896 she joined the family in Samoa, but, in 1899, the four eldest boys were sent to Auckland to live with her in the waterfront suburb of Devonport. They were followed by the next two in 1901 and 1905, respectively. About the latter date Ernest and Mary were divorced. Then both remarried: Mary to a German named Bayerlein, and Ernest to Mary Eliza Coe, a product of Jonas Coe’s fifth—and final—marriage to Litia, the daughter of a Tongan missionary. This second union yielded one daughter and two sons.\textsuperscript{25} They, too, were brought up by Frances, but—together with their youngest half-brother, William—mostly in Sydney, where their father bought a house in Lane Cove. They remained there from 1914 to 1921, before returning to Samoa. There Frances continued to devote herself to the family until shortly before her death in 1936.\textsuperscript{26} Another child, not brought up in the family, was Lucy Pereira, Ernest’s daughter by a Tokelau woman.\textsuperscript{27}

As the older boys of the first family completed their schooling they also acquired skills that could be useful in their father’s business. Fred served his time as an apprentice aboard the \textit{Louisa Craig} which ran between Sydney and


\textsuperscript{26} Obituary, Frances Annie Amelia Allen, unidentified newspaper cutting.

Auckland; Reg worked in a warehouse; Tom in an engineering firm; Bert (Robert) in a shipping office; and, Joe had studied commercial subjects at Auckland Technical College. Thus, when on 28 February 1914 Joe joined the *Dawn* in Apia as an assistant supercargo, or floating shopkeeper, he was one of five brothers working for the Samoa Shipping and Trading Company. That first voyage took him north to Olohega (Swain’s Island), which was owned by a planter named Eli Jennings, then up through the Tokelau group—Fakaofo, Nukunono, Atafu—before turning north-west for Funafuti, where Reg had married a local girl, Katerina. Soon afterwards the barquentine *Laura* arrived from Sydney carrying coal and general cargo, with Fred as first mate and Tom as able seaman. After loading copra, the *Laura* returned to Sydney. Then, as Joe later recalled in a memoir offering an unusually detailed and immediate description of trading operations, he began work in earnest.

We traded mainly in the Tuvalu and Tokelau groups, with occasional trips to Samoa and islands north of the Cook group and Fiji. Our ship would arrive at an island at daybreak and I would go ashore with a supply of empty copra sacks. These I would distribute around the village in accordance with the amount of copra in each house … . The platform scale would be set up on the beach and the natives would bring their copra down in the sacks provided. On weighing I would give a ticket to the seller showing weight and cash value. The natives would then take their tickets on board where Bert would then cash them, and then sell them back goods. Meanwhile, I would supervise the carrying of the sacks of copra to waiting surf boats for transport over the reef to the ship … . Once over the coral reef, the depth went down suddenly to about 500 feet. Therefore, the ship had to steam in close and parallel with the reef, haul up the sacks of copra from the surf boats, and then steam or drift out again. I would go on board with the last boat load of copra and help Bert in the trade room. We usually got back in sales about 95% of the amount paid out for the copra. When trading was complete we would head away for the next island, usually an overnight trip. It would be 7pm by the time we had straightened up the trade room, replenished shelves, balanced the cash, and collected any passage monies from inter-island passengers. A popular custom was for groups of young men to go on holiday to another island in the group. This was also an exercise in practical eugenics, as it reduced inbreeding on each island.28

While strongly established in the Ellice group, the Allens did not have everything their own way there. The large firm of Burns, Philp sometimes competed for trade. So, too, did Sarah Jolliffe of the London Missionary Society, who ran a

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28 Allen, ‘Memoir’.
school at Papaelise on Funafuti. Her enterprise led Ernest Allen to complain to her Samoa-based superior, in a revealing letter on one of the classic tensions of Pacific islands life in the decades before World War II.

I am sorry to say that Miss Jolliffe is rather seriously cutting into our business throughout the group. Miss Jolliffe imports goods for sale to the girls of the school. She no doubt believes that they are for the use of the girls only, but after careful enquiries I find that the girls buy for numerous other people, who bring the goods to us and tell us how much cheaper they can get them through Miss Jolliffe than through the ordinary course of trade.

We keep a full and well assorted stock of goods which we sell at fair prices. Consequently I consider that it is very unfair that anyone engaged in mission work should import goods for trade at all.

One instance I might point out. We sell a number of chemises at 2/–. These we used to get made at Sydney, the factory price for sewing being 2/6 per dozen. I thought it would be good practice for the girls if they made them, also allowing them to earn a few shillings, so through Miss Jolliffe got as many made as they could do. I now learn that Miss Jolliffe has a lot made up from her own material for sale.

I would call your attention to the fact that we are under rather severe trading regulations in the Protectorate, all buildings etc having to be erected according to ordinance, which conditions we have faithfully carried out; also the licences: £100 for a ship, £12 per store and also a capitation tax of £5 per head per annum on all other than natives of the Protectorate in our employ that remain in the group for a longer term than two months.\(^\text{29}\)

Besides its shipping and trading activities, the company also owned and operated island coconut plantations. These were Niulakita (Sophia) in the Ellice Islands, bought from H.J. Moors of Samoa in 1914; Nassau in the northern Cooks, also previously owned by Moors; and leaseholds, purchased from Levers, of five of the seven islands of the Phoenix group. Servicing these islands was a welcome diversion from the trading routine.\(^\text{30}\)

World War I, though, would soon disrupt familiar routines in less congenial ways. Fred and Tom came ashore from the Laura in Sydney shortly after the outbreak of hostilities and enlisted forthwith in the Australian Imperial Force. They were both wounded at Gallipoli. Later Tom transferred to the Australian

\(^{29}\) Allen to Hills, 13 May 1915. Courtesy of Eric Allen.

Flying Corps, and was killed in a training accident. In due course three other brothers, Bert, Joe and Bill likewise enlisted. That left only Reg of the immediate family to work with their father, who continued to captain the *Dawn*, and to endure the abuse and moodiness deriving from his habitual heavy drinking.\(^{31}\)

By 1919 the surviving brothers were back with the firm, and business prospects looked good. In the immediate postwar years the price of copra was high, as was the demand for building materials and trade goods. Allen was also receiving a retainer from a family in Ireland for bringing to Funafuti and taking care of its Trinity College-educated son, J.G. Whibley, who had slipped into dereliction as a beachcomber on the island of Niutao.\(^{32}\) Then, in 1920, there was a windfall contract to repatriate 73 ‘time expired’ Melanesian labourers, recruited during the German regime, from Samoa to Rabaul. For Fred, who captained the *Rob Roy* on this expedition, and for Bill, who was 2nd engineer, it was also welcomed as an opportunity to meet some of their maternal relations, including their great-aunt Phoebe Parkinson and various descendants of her sister, the pioneering New Guinea planter ‘Queen Emma’ Coe.\(^{33}\)

As an index of his continued optimism, Allen bought Blacklock out of his share in the company in 1918. And, in 1920, according to his son Joe, he even refused an offer from Burns, Philp ‘of $1,000,000 for a half share in the company’. That statement, though, can at best be no more than half true. Even if there was an offer the amount cited is certainly not to be credited.\(^{34}\)

But if a serious offer ever was made, Allen was unwise not to have accepted it. As early as 1915 Frederick Wallin of Burns, Philp, in a critical appraisal of the company, considered that it might not be as sound as it appeared.

> [They] will rue the day they locked up so much capital in Funafuti [he estimated £3,500] as, in addition thereto, they have the small steamer *Rob Roy* laid up in the lagoon for the last five months, it is said, owing to her machinery being done. The steamer *Dawn* and the barque *Laura* are also reported to be ancient and ripe. Withall, [though] I should say the Samoa Shipping and Trading Company’s running expenses will be cheap, Captain Allen having [his sons] working with him.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{31}\) Allan, ‘Memoir’.


\(^{34}\) Allen, ‘Memoir’; notes by R.C. and M.E.A. Allen, courtesy of Eric Allen. Whatever the sum that was offered, Briar Wilson is surely correct in saying that it was in pounds, not dollars; letter to Laracy, 27 Aug, 2001.

As experience would show, these were perceptive comments. The *Rob Roy* broke down on the return voyage from Rabaul and drifted for 65 days before coming to Ocean Island, where the crankshafts could be repaired. About the same time the *Dawn* was long overdue on a voyage to Noumea for repairs. Instead of three weeks, it was there for three months. These problems were compounded in 1921 when Allen bought a wooden steamship, the *Samoa*, of about 400 tons from the American administration in Pago Pago for the seeming bargain price of $10,000. It was a disastrous purchase. The then new German-built vessel had been interned in Pago Pago on the outbreak of war in 1914. But it had lain there idle until 1921. Moreover, unseasoned oak had been used in its construction, so leading the company to undertake ‘an abortive and financially crippling effort … to build a new hull around the engines’.

In the midst of these concerns Allen also lost an invaluable asset, his sons, through his excessive drinking and abusiveness, followed by fits of remorse. By 1922 not one of them was working for him, but had sought employment elsewhere. Robert and Joe, for instance, joined the colonial administration in Apia, in the native affairs and customs departments, respectively.36 There, in a department rather too glibly maligned, as revisionist research has shown—and as his own presence suggests—as being careless of Samoan interests and out of touch with Samoan opinion, Robert worked closely with the administrator (1923–1928), Sir George Richardson. Like Richardson, Robert saw O.F. Nelson, a wealthy *afakasi* (half-caste) businessman and leader of the antigovernment Mau movement, as something of a carpetbagger tending to mislead and exploit the Samoans for his own advantage, rather than as an unalloyed nationalist.37

The last Robert and Joe saw of their father was in 1924 when he passed through Apia with his wife en route to Sydney. In an apparent salvage attempt, he asked Joe if the brothers would go back and take over the business as he would like to retire and live out his days on Stanley Point in Auckland, near Devonport. While being unable to speak for the others, Joe declared himself to be willing—but time had run out. Returning from Sydney the Allens reached Suva in August 1924, intending to join the brigantine *Jeanette* for the trip to Funafuti. Instead, Ernest was admitted to hospital, and died there from cirrhosis of the liver on 20 September. He was aged 57.38 His company, of which his widow was now the sole director, was liquidated in 1925, on the petition of a San Francisco-based

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36 Allen, ‘Memoir’.
38 *Fiji Times*, 22 Sept. 1924; Allen, ‘Memoir’. 

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firm to which it owed money. By Allen’s own estimation shortly before his death there was an excess of assets over liabilities of £59,000. These were duly offered for sale by tender and were bought by Burns, Philp for £20,000.\(^{19}\)

With the death of Ernest Allen—’the last of the overseas owner-captains’, as one commentator has called him—and the demise of the Samoa Shipping and Trading Company, the day of the island trader as an independent operator was finally over.\(^{10}\) Conversely, the long foreshadowed ascendancy of ‘the big firm’, a public company run from a corporate boardroom outside the islands in which it operated was complete. Both events, though, were but phases of the larger process of economic change that had begun for the islands before the middle of the nineteenth century with the visits of whalers and the growth of ‘beach communities’ around serviceable anchorages, such as Apia, and which has continued into the age of international aid and development programs. Allen played a discernable, and not inconsiderable, role in that process. He also finds significance in another, but related, area of enquiry through his family. Although they defined themselves as Europeans, and although by the 1930s his children had nearly all left Samoa for administrative, professional and commercial employment in New Zealand, Australian and England, they did not forget their ancestry. They thereby remained witnesses to the permeability and imprecision that may be attendant on convenient ethno/racial classifications such as European and ‘native’, Samoan and *palagi*, indigenous and alien. Accordingly, when Polynesians began flooding into New Zealand (and America and, later, Australia) in the 1960s many of them were entering a society in which they already had some well-established *afakasi* relations and acquaintances. The descendent of Ernest Allen are a case in point. So, too, are the Kronfelds, a German–Samoan family with Tongan connections, who settled in Auckland about 1890, and who cared for the future Queen Salote of Tonga during her school years there.\(^{41}\) Such people as these point to a history not just of contact and encounter between Oceaneans and Europeans but also to one of integration and, indeed, of symbiosis.

