***Pālemia: A Memoir.* By Tuila‘epa Sa‘ilele Malielegaoi with Peter Swain. Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2017. 301 pp. illus, appendix., bibliog., index. ISBN: 978-1-77656-105-6. NZ$50.00.**

Unlike politicians from other parts of the Pacific region, Samoa’s politicians tend not to write memoirs. There are collections of speeches and writings by former prime minister and head of state, Tui Atua Tupuola Tufugua Taisi Efi, and long-time Deputy Prime Minister, Misa Telefoni Retzlaff. There is also a short profile of former prime minister Vaai Kalone in Kathleen Hancock’s book *Men of Mana* (2002)*.* But, no biographies or autobiographies of note. A senior Samoan politician once told me that this is because the genre is ‘un-Samoan’. Perhaps it is, although *Pālemia* might change that. Regardless, it makes this a unique book. Rarity aside, the work is an especially welcome addition to the regional political life writing canon because its subject, Prime Minister of Samoa Tuila‘epa Sa‘ilele Malielegaoi, is such an intriguing figure.

The common storyline about Pacific leadership invokes a vacuum created by the passing of the independence generation, a roll call that includes leaders like Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Sir Albert Henry, Taufa‘ahau Tupou IV, Amata Kabua, Sir Robert Rex, Hammer DeRoburt, Walter Lini, Sir Peter Kenilorea and Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare. These men, pundits and scholars claim, were the strong leaders. They founded nations, forged consensus, and conducted politics the ‘Pacific Way’. By contrast, the current crop of parliamentarians are perceived to be weak, self-serving and corrupt.

For many, Tuila‘epa is the exception; a second generation leader of equivalent stature. This claim rests on the fact that the stability of Tuila‘epa’s Samoa stands apart in a region of increasingly fragmented and fragile political parties. For much of the last three decades the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) has maintained power virtually unchallenged. Major policy reform has been undertaken. Once conservative and inward-looking, Samoa has become one of the most assertive and outspoken countries in the region. Donors in particular fall over themselves to laud the Samoan example. Tuila‘epa was there when the HRPP came to power and after nearly two decades as prime minister, he has come to embody this ascendance.

The question is: How has the HRPP done it? And, by extension, how has Tuila‘epa defied the basic logic of democratic politics ‒ that the longer you stay in office, the more people you disappoint ‒ for so long? These are the questions that make this memoir so important. *Pālemia* offers some ‒ but not all ‒ of the answers.

While this book is unique, it in fact follows the regional genre of political life writing very closely. For one, it is ghost written by a foreign academic (Peter Swain) based on extensive interviews with the subject. But it also follows a similar narrative arc to other regional auto/biographies by politicians. We start with a simple and idyllic rendering of village life in which a young Tuila‘epa is raised in the warm embrace of his extended family. Fortune intervenes in the guise of an opportunity to attend school in Apia, followed by university in New Zealand. On returning home with a masters degree, Tuila‘epa enters the civil service in 1970 and rises rapidly through the ranks. He moves overseas for work but eventually feels called home and shortly afterwards wins the Lepa constituency at the 1981 election. He has been an MP ever since. The fact that a version of this basic storyline would fit many politicians of Tuila‘epa’s generation lays bare the core claim of the book: that it is the personality of the man, rather than the context from which he emerged or the structure of the HRPP machine, that marks him out as a unique leader.

Tuila‘epa has a reputation for straight talking and plain language, and the extensive interview extracts in *Pālemia* are no exception. This book is political theatre at its best. Tuila‘epa defends and justifies key and controversial decisions. He settles old scores. He takes long and pointed jabs at his rivals (and the Tui Atua ‒ former Prime Minister and Head of State ‒ in particular). The force of his personality oozes through the pages and so by the end it is not hard to imagine that he is the master puppeteer that his supporters (and critics) proclaim.

The problem is that, as much as I would like to, I don’t quite believe it. To be sure, political leadership in small states all over the world is typically a personalised affair in which power is highly centralised. And memoir lends itself to the ‘great man in history’ narrative better than any other genre. But, these caveats aside, the issue is this: Tuila‘epa claims to have built a great party (the HRPP won 47 out of 50 seats at the last election) but given his importance one is left to wonder whether the HRPP’s dominance will continue after he has gone. If, on the other hand, the HRPP retains its ‘aura of invincibility’ post-Tuila‘epa then this would also provide evidence for the counter-claim ‒ that the sum of the party machine is more than its individual parts.

Only time can answer these questions and, to be fair, memoir is rarely the vehicle for this type of analysis. What it does reveal, however, is the desperate need for a substantive history of the HRPP, which is by far the most successful political party in the region. If and when that story is written, *Pālemia* will provide welcome material.

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