

TOM DE WOLF'S PACIFIC VENTURE:
The Life History of a Commercial Enterprise in Samoa*

by Doug Munro

It has been stated that the nineteenth-century history of Samoa is the history of the Hamburg shipping company of J. C. Godeffroy & Sohn and its commercial successor the Deutsch Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft der Südsee-Inseln zu Hamberg (DHPG). Although this statement exaggerates, the activities of the Godeffroy/DHPG establishment nevertheless had profound repercussions on the course of Samoan history. So extensive were its interests and so great its influence that it sometimes takes an effort to remember that a multiplicity of smaller retail and trading concerns were based in the port town of Apia. Among them were W. C. Cunningham, W. C. Turnbull, William Yandall, Pritchard & Sons, J. C. Williams, and Sergent & Co.

Their names are familiar enough and so too are the reasons for their high turnover. They depended largely on provisioning visiting whalers and suffered accordingly when this line of business ended in 1866 after a decade of decline. They were then too numerous in relation to local resources and provided each other with too intense a degree of competition for any to be successful. Nor were they sufficiently capitalized to diversify within Samoa or to expand their operations into Samoa's hinterland of outlying islands and island groups.¹ They fell by the wayside so frequently that their passing was barely noticed; not once is the collapse or withdrawal of any such British firm mentioned in any of the British Consular

*The following collections of documents were consulted on microfilm either at the Mitchell Library (Sydney) or the National Library of Australia (Canberra): Records of the Colonial Office, British Consul in Samoa, London Missionary Society, Royal Navy Australian Station, and Western Pacific High Commission. The Restieaux manuscripts and Thurston's Gilbert and Ellice Islands Journal were consulted on microfilm in the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Australian National University. I am grateful to Mr. J. E. Traue for permission to quote from materials held by the Alexander Turnbull Library.

¹R. P. Gilson, *Samoa 1830-1900: The Politics of a Multi-Cultural Community* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 181-87; Caroline Ralston, *Grass Huts and Warehouses: Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), pp. 55-56, 87-88, and 163. For a description of Apia in 1884, see W. B. Churchward, *My Consulate in Samoa* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1887), pp. 19-23. The hinterland concept is developed in Alexander Spoehr, "Port Town and Hinterland in the Pacific Islands," Thomas G. Harding and Ben J. Wallace, eds., *Cultures of the Pacific: Selected Readings* (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 412-18.

Trade Reports to 1884.² In some cases, the proprietors' political adventures have received a measure of attention from later historians; but otherwise, very little is known about these smaller business ventures.³ The loss or destruction of their papers provides one explanation for this state of affairs. So too does the fact that historians have focused their attention on other aspects of Samoan history--namely great power relations and international rivalries, the activities of the Godeffroy/DHPG establishment, and the Samoans' response to European encroachment.

The Apia branch of J. S. De Wolf & Co. was another of these smaller trading enterprises, though of a different order to Cunningham and the others. It was involved in copra trading outside Samoa, using Apia as its base and being a segment of an extraterritorial company rather than a locally-sponsored enterprise, it was far more heavily capitalized. Despite these ostensible advantages, success was elusive and De Wolf's Pacific branch became yet another European business undertaking in Samoa which tried and failed. Apparently no company papers or ship's logbooks survive to tell the tale,⁴ but at least the De Wolf experience need not be consigned to oblivion. During the course of research into a larger topic, sufficient evidence was located to reconstruct the saga of Tom De Wolf's Pacific venture. What follows is believed to be the first such study of one of Apia's smaller commercial undertakings.

J. S. De Wolf & Co. was a Liverpool shipping and merchant firm founded in 1840 by two Canadian brothers, John Starr and James Ratchford De Wolf. A number of the firm's vessels were built in Canada and its main line of business was the Atlantic run. De Wolf also ran a packet service to Australia where its agents were Bingle, White & Co. of Newcastle and Sydney.⁵ In the late 1870s, John De Wolf Jr., who became the firm's principal upon his father's death in 1874, decided to join the island trade. Prompted by ever-increasing world copra prices and the glowing ac-

²The annual Trade Reports of the British Consul in Samoa are published in Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers (Accounts and Papers)*. The originals are located in the Records of the British Consul, Samoa (hereinafter cited as BCS) 3/2-4, Wellington, National Archives of New Zealand.

³But see the illuminating account of the Williams family's transition from missionary to trading and other secular activities in Niel Gunson, "John Williams and His Ship: The Bourgeois Aspirations of a Missionary Family," D. P. Crook ed., *Questioning the Past* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972), pp. 73-95.

⁴Personal communications from The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, London, 13 October 1979, and the Liverpool Record Office, 23 October 1979; Phyllis Mander-Jones, ed., *Manuscripts in the British Isles Relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1972).

⁵E. C. Wright, *St. John's Ships and Their Builders* (Wolfville, Nova Scotia: E. C. Wright, 1976), p. 24; Captain E. A. Woods, "Liverpool Fleet List" (copy of manuscript kindly pro-

counts of the publicists of Pacific trade, he dispatched *The Venus*, a three-masted schooner of 191 tons register, to Samoa in April 1878.⁶

At that time, the commercial life of the Pacific basin was dominated by German interests which controlled an estimated 70 percent of its commerce.⁷ Preeminent among them was the house of Godeffroys which had pioneered the Pacific copra trade. Godeffroys gained this commercial ascendancy almost from the moment of their arrival in Apia in 1857. The firm had massive overseas capital backing at its call and within a decade presided over Samoa's largest plantation system. Godeffroys also expanded into other islands and archipelagoes and by degrees established a far-flung network of permanent trading stations, each manned by a company agent who collected cargoes for company vessels to take to Apia for transshipment. By 1864, Godeffroys had established forty-six such trading stations outside Samoa; and in 1874, a traveller in the Pacific found an established Godeffroy agent wherever he set foot ashore.⁸ Expansion continued unabated until the late 1870s; and by that time, Godeffroy's hinterland extended from Tahiti to the Marianas.⁹

Apia was developed as the main *entrepôt* for the produce of this growing trading network, and visitors to the port almost invariably commented on the extent of German shipping there.¹⁰ As early as 1869, a French ad-

vided by M. K. Stammers, Merseyside County Museums, Liverpool); W. H. Shaw ed., *The Newcastle Directory and Almanac 1880/1881* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1978), pp. 13, 28, and 121 (for this and other information concerning Bingle, White & Co, I am indebted to H. J. Gibbney of the Australian National University).

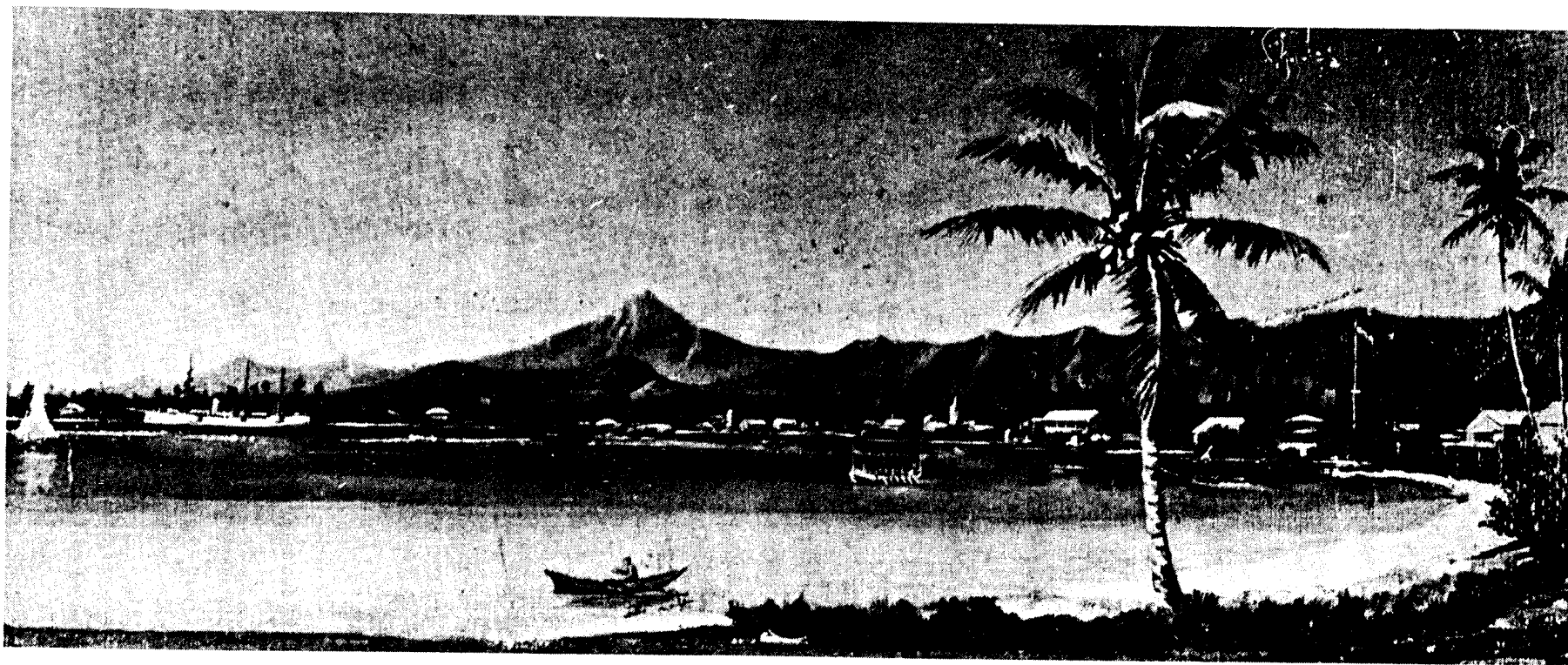
⁶*Liverpool Mercury*, 22 April 1878; *Samoa Times*, 28 September 1878. Unless otherwise indicated, all references from newspapers are taken for their Shipping Intelligence columns.

⁷Paul M. Kennedy, *The Samoan Tangle: A Study in Anglo-German-American Relations, 1878-1900* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1974), p. 28.

⁸Peter J. Hempenstall, "A Survey of German Commerce in the Pacific, 1857-1914," B.A. (Hons.) thesis, University of Queensland, 1969, p. 38; S. G. Firth, "German Recruitment and Employment of Labourers in the Western Pacific Before the First World War," D.Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1973, p. 14.

⁹Hempenstall, chs. 1-3; Stewart Firth, "German Firms in the Western Pacific, 1857-1914," *The Journal of Pacific History* (hereinafter JPH), 8 (1973), 11-12; Miss C. F. Gordon Cumming, *A Lady's Cruise in a French Man-of-War* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1885), pp. 80-81; H. Stonehewer Cooper, *Coral Lands* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1880), II:48-58; Kurt Schmack, *J. C. Godeffroy & Sohn, Kaufleute zu Hamburg: Leistung und Schicksal eines Welthandelshauses* (Hamburg: Verlag Broschek & Co, 1938), p. 140.

¹⁰⁰*Report of Captain Wakeman to W. H. Webb on the Islands of the Samoa Group . . .* (New York: Slote & Jones, 1872), p. 12; James L. Young, Private Journal. entry for 7 September 1875, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (hereinafter cited as PMB) Microfilm 21; Cyprian Bridge, *Report on Tour of H.M.S. Espiegle to the Tongan and Samoan Islands . . . 1884* (print), Vol. 42, Royal Navy-Australian Station, Records of the Commander-in-Chief, Wellington, National Archives of New Zealand.



Apia Harbor around 1889 by A. G. Plate (Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia. ML Ref. ZML 575).

miral noted that among the commercial shipping in Apia Harbor there were "no French flags, like Tahiti, no stars and stripes, scarcely a Union Jack--everywhere there was the unmistakable flag of the North German Confederation."¹¹ From 1873, both the total annual tonnage of German shipping as well as the number of German vessels to call at Apia each year exceeded those of all other nationalities combined.¹²

The Venus eventually arrived at Apia on 5 January 1879 having "visited numerous islands of the South Pacific" en route from Liverpool.¹³ During the course of that voyage, Captain Scott had constantly taken refuge in the bottle and had otherwise "rendered himself incapable of attending to his duty." De Wolf & Co.'s troubles had begun even before they established a presence in Samoa. Robert Swanson, the British Consul in Samoa, promptly reported the matter to the firm's head office by telegram and received an alarmed response from John De Wolf who instructed that the first mate of *The Venus* be put in command and that Scott was not to be paid off but held liable for any losses incurred through his mismanagement.¹⁴

However De Wolf's wishes were not received by Swanson in time to be acted upon. In fact, *The Venus* was preparing to depart from Apia Harbor at the very time its owner was drafting his instructions to Swanson. Lacking instructions, the consul decided not to interfere with Scott's command and this despite his reservations that Scott could not 'be trusted with the management of a speculation such as the one over which he now has control."¹⁵ Nor did the captain of another De Wolf vessel, the iron barque *Enterprise* (Captain Hilton) which happened to call at Apia Harbor during that time on her passage from Tokyo to Valparaiso,¹⁶ see fit to dismiss Scott and return *The Venus* to Sydney.

Instead, *The Venus* departed from Apia Harbor in February on an extended trading cruise with David Scott still in command.¹⁷ During the course of that eight-month voyage, *The Venus* visited several island groups to the east and the northwest of Samoa, including such improbable places as Easter Island.¹⁸ Scott continued to act "worse than foolishly,"

¹¹Quoted in Hempenstall, p. 5.

¹²Sylvia Masterman, *The Origins of International Rivalry in Samoa, 1845-1884* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), pp 64-65.

¹³Samoa Times, 11 January 1879.

¹⁴J. S. De Wolf to Swanson, 12 February 1879, pp. 109-12; Bingle, White & Co to Swanson, 28 February 1879, pp. 119-20; T. De Wolf to Graves, 11 September 1879, p. 227, BCS 2/3.

¹⁵Swanson to J. S. De Wolf, 6 February 1879, pp. 283-84, BCS 5/2.

¹⁶ *Samoa Times*, 18 January, 25 January 1879.

¹⁷ *Samoa Times*, 8 February, 15 February 1879.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereinafter cited as *SMH*), 10 November 1879.

and a description of his malfunctionings and sloppy business practices is provided by Alfred Restieaux, Godeffroy's resident trader at Nanumea in northernmost Tuvalu. *The Venus* visited Nanumea in April.¹⁹ Scott went ashore and was reluctantly supplied with two bottles of gin by Restieaux's frightened wife. By the time Restieaux returned, Scott was "lying on his side under a Tree dead drunk. . . . I tried to rouse him but all I could get out of him was oh get me a Lassie Oh get me a Lassie I must have a Lassie."²⁰ The following day, Restieaux saw Scott in action and heard more about his idiosyncracies from Larry Sutherland, a Shetland Islander whom Scott had just landed at Nanumea as De Wolf's agent:

Scott took what little Copra & trade there was he did not weigh the Copra or look at [the] trade but just took it on board he appeared to be very careless Larry said that was his way that when he was in Samoa he was generally Drunk & that the sailors were on shore if they meet him in Company with any one they would go and take off their hats & say Beg Pardon Captain Scott but will you let me have a little money. All right my lad how much do you want & give them a handful of Dollars with[out] Counting & say remind me to book this in the morning if I forget He generally did forget & so did they very Pleasant for the Sailors but not for the owners. Then he told me there was a lot of gold watches & jewelry on board he said every one on board had a gold watch & several Rings except himself how did they get them said I the skipper left them laying about in the Cabin and they just picked them up²¹

¹⁹In May 1879 the *Matautu* returned to Apia from a trading voyage to the northwest and reported that *The Venus* had been in Tuvalu waters the previous month. See *Samoa Times*, 11 May 1879.

²⁰Alfred Restieaux, "A Fragment Concerning Trading in the Gilbert and Ellices and the Search for Guano Islands," pp. 1-2, Restieaux Manuscripts, Part II: Pacific Islands, Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library, Micro MS 14. Restieaux (1832-1911) spent the last thirty years of an eventful life in Tuvalu (formerly the Ellice Islands). For biographical details, written by a fellow trader who knew him well, see Julian Dana, *Gods Who Die: The Story of Samoa's Greatest Adventurer* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), ch. 8; G. E. L. W[estbrook], "Death of an Old Trader", *Samoaianische Zeitung* 6 January 1912.

²¹Restieaux, p. 5. The right hand side of most pages of this manuscript have been eaten away by insects and often the last word or two of a line is missing. Where possible I have silently added these missing words when quoting from Restieaux's "Fragment." Otherwise, the quotes appear exactly as Restieaux wrote them.

I said it was enough to pay for all
 he had I told you that Larry had no invoice
 Scott took what little Copra & Trade there
 was he did not weigh the Copra or look at
 Trade but just took it on board he appeared
 to be very careless Larry said that was his
 way that when he was in Samoa he was
 generally Drunk & that the Sailors were on
 show if they met him in Company with
 any one they would go & take off their hats
 & say Beg Pardon Captain Scott but will you
 let me have a little money. All right they
 had how much do you want & give them a
 hand handfull of Dollars with Count
 I say remind me to Book this
 morning if I forget He generally did
 forget & so did they very Pleasant to
 the Sailors but not for the owners &
 he told me there was a lot of Gold &
 Jewelry on board he said every one
 had a Gold watch & several
 themselves how did they get them the
 Shipper left them Laying at
 about & they first picked them
 I you have none well I
 but sort of thing no go

The decision to land Sutherland at Nanumea was itself an unwise move. Restieaux thought Sutherland to be

a very decent sort of Chap he knew nothing about trading of course . . . he lost what trade and Provisions he . . . [?] he had no money or trade . . . knew nothing about what he had brought ashore so he got a list of prices from me & Harry [another trader on the island] his clothing was good but everything else was Cheap Swiss Rubbish he of course got very little Copra.²²

With Sutherland's arrival at Nanumea the number of trading stations on the small atoll rose to five,²³ thus aggravating an already impossible situation. Whereas a solitary trader could usually set his own prices for copra, competing traders soon found themselves being played off against each other by the islanders, or raising the buying price of copra from the native producer on their own accord in an attempt to undercut their rivals. At the very least their profits were reduced, and often they forced each other out of business. This is precisely what happened at Nunumea; the inevitable readjustment was soon to take place; and by 1881, only one trader remained. He was not Larry Sutherland. Scott was sacked a few months later when *The Venus* arrived at Sydney, but not before he had "lost thousands of Pounds for the owners."²⁴

In response to Swanson's warnings about Scott, John De Wolf sent his younger brother Tom to Apia to retrieve the situation. Tom De Wolf finally arrived in Apia on 15 June 1879²⁵ where he set himself up in direct opposition to Goeffroys for a share in the Pacific copra trade. In addition

²²Restieaux, "Fragment," p. 3.

²³Namely Alfred Restieaux for the DHPG; Larry Sutherland for J. S. De Wolf & Co; Harry Johnstone for Henderson & Macfarlane; two agents of Tem Binoka, the high chief of Abemama, Gilbert Islands: and Tupou, the agent for T. W. Williams. See Alfred Restieaux, "Recollections of Harry Johnstone, trader in Nanumea," p. 11, Restieaux Manuscripts; H. E. Maude, "Baiteke and Binoka of Abemama: Arbiters of Change in the Gilbert Islands," J. W. Davidson and Deryck Starr, eds., *Pacific Islands Portraits* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970), p. 218; S. H. Davies, "Report of a Voyage in *John Williams* to Out-Stations of Samoan Mission in Tokelau, Ellice and Gilbert Groups during August, September, & October of 1880," p. 13, and letter dated 12 November 1880 appended to Report, South Sea Journal 179, Records of the London Missionary Society, London, School of Oriental and African Studies.

²⁴Restieaux, "Fragment," p. 6.

²⁵*Samoa Times*, 21 July 1879. T. A. De Wolf should not be confused with the Captain Wolf of the trading schooner *Vavau* who died as a result of a shooting accident shortly before De Wolf's arrival in Apia--*Samoa Times*, 15 February 1879, 2bc, 8 March 1879. Nor should De Wolf's ship *The Venus* be confused with the *Venus*, a cutter built in Auckland in 1877--Clifford W. Hawkins, *A Survey of the Commercial Sailing Craft Built in the Auckland Province* . . . (Auckland: C. W. Hawkins, 1960), p. 188.

to *The Venus*, De Wolfs Apia branch eventually operated two other vessels--the *Red Coat*, another three-masted schooner of 157 tons register which arrived "from Liverpool via the Cook Group" in July the following year²⁶ and also the ninety-five ton brigantine *Mana*, formerly a Hawaiian government labor vessel. The latter had piled up on the reef at Funafuti, one of the southern Tuvalu atolls, and was condemned. She was then sold by auction to a local trader.²⁷ "This vessel," proclaimed the *Samoa Times*, "is a good example of British pluck and enterprise. . . . Repurchased by an enterprising Liverpool firm, who we understand will shortly begin business operations in this and neighbouring Groups, she was re-sparred and refitted, and about three weeks ago entered this harbour as trim and staunch a vessel as one could put foot in."²⁸

Tom De Wolfs activities eventually involved retail trading in Apia as well as copra trading among the island groups beyond Samoa. But it took De Wolf a long time to establish the retailing side of his affairs; and by then, his whole venture was on the point of collapse from losses incurred in the island copra trade. To summarize the sequence of events, Tom De Wolf arrived in Apia in July 1879, almost fifteen months after *The Venus* had first left for the Pacific. The following October, he departed for Sydney and remained there until the arrival of *The Venus*, when he could settle accounts with Scott.²⁹ Early in the new year, he returned to Apia accompanied by John Bingle, his agent in New South Wales; and in February 1880, the two men departed for Funafuti to bring the *Mana* back to Apia for repairs.³⁰ This having been done, Bingle returned to Sydney³¹ and De Wolf remained in Apia where he commenced preparations for the arrival of the *Red Coat* which was carrying a large general cargo from Liverpool. Only a month before the *Red Coat* arrived in July 1880 (or a full year after his first stepping ashore at Apia), De Wolf set himself up in established premises at the Matafele side of town.³² He took over the late retail store of D. S. Parker, the only American merchant in Apia who had just left Samoa in a huff.³³ The *Samoa Times* understood the *Red Coat's*

²⁶ *Samoa Times*, 10 July 1880.

²⁷ J. A. Bennett, "Immigration, 'Blackbirding', Labour Recruiting?: The Hawaiian Experience, 1877-1887," *JPH*, 11:1 (1976), 13 and 26; *Samoa Times*, 8 February 1879.

²⁸ *Samoa Times*, 22 May 1879. The movements of De Wolf's vessels in and out of Apia Harbor may also be traced in the "Register of British Ships Entering the Port of Apia, Samoa, 1878-1886" (hereinafter cited as Shipping Register), BCS 6/3(a).

²⁹ *Samoa Times*, 11 September 1879; *Fiji Times*, 27 September, 18 October 1879; *SMH*, 24 October 1879, 10 November 1879.

³⁰ *SMH*, 27 December 1879, *Samoa Times*, 7 February, 21 February, 8 May 1880.

³¹ *Samoa Times*, 15 May 1880.

³² De Wolf ran a standing advertisement for his retail store in the *Samoa Times* from August until November 1880.

cargo to be "well assorted and particularly suitable for the Island Trade."³⁴ Yet De Wolf made no headway to break into this sphere of activity. He wore his ships ragged in the attempt and is said to have lost \$20,000 in the process.³⁵

According to Louis Becke, the trader-cum-writer who was De Wolf's agent at Nanumanga in northern Tuvalu, the firm's Pacific branch collapsed in the face of opposition from the DHPG, "which robbed and swindled whites and natives alike."³⁶ The big German firm, however, "was generally above reproach in its commercial dealings with foreigners" and its German staff have been described as "orderly almost to the point of being dull."³⁷ They were ruthless enough when the need arose and had a lot to do with the downfall of serious competitors in Samoa, such as H. M. Ruge & Co. and the Apia branch of Hort Brothers of Tahiti.³⁸ At the same time, they were content enough to allow insignificant competition, such as De Wolf, to go unmolested, a policy the firm maintained until its property was expropriated with the outbreak of World War I.³⁹ Moreover, De Wolf was on good personal terms with the DHPG management and on one occasion was invited by August Godeffroy to join a party of friends for a short pleasure cruise on the company's steamer *Südsee*.⁴⁰ In other words, Apia's small independent commercial ventures were overshadowed by large, heavily-capitalized, diversified firms because the latter were better equipped to exploit economic opportunities and not because they overtly worked to eliminate their smaller rivals.

Becke was closer to the mark when he claimed elsewhere that: "Owing to bad management and the eccentric conduct of one of their captains, who later became insane, the firm suffered heavy losses."⁴¹ Captain

³³ *Samoa Times*, 8 May 1880, 3b; Gilson, p. 336; Thomas Trood, *Island Reminiscences: A Graphic Detailed Romance of Life Spent in the South Sea Islands* (Sydney: McCarron, Stewart & Co, 1912), p. 52.

³⁴ *Samoa Times*, 10 July 1880.

³⁵ A. Grove Day, *Louis Becke* (Melbourne: Hill of Content, 1967), p. 152.

³⁶ Quoted in Day, p. 152.

³⁷ Gilson, p. 367.

³⁸ Trood, p. 70; Ralston, p. 87.

³⁹ R. W. Dalton, *Trade of Western Samoa and the Tongan Islands*, Cmd. 200 (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1919), pp. 22-23.

⁴⁰ *Samoa Times*, 30 October, 6 November 1880.

⁴¹ Louis Becke, "The Loneliness of It," *Neath Austral Skies* (London: John Milne, 1909), p. 61. It should be added that Becke's brief account of his association with De Wolf contains many factual inaccuracies. Nor does this published account of his eleven-month residence on Nanumanga always tally with the letters he wrote to his mother from the island. Lengthy extracts from these letters have been published in Day, pp. 30-35. The other contemporary account of De Wolf's activities (Restieaux, "Fragments"), is, by contrast, trustworthy.

Scott apart, De Wolf was indeed largely the maker of his own misfortunes. Quite inexperienced in island trading--unlike his larger rivals who knew what they were doing--he made fundamental errors that resulted in costly failures and setbacks. The general problem was that he spread his energies too thinly and in the process over-extended the working capacity of his vessels. Unable to consolidate his position in one area before moving to another, as Godeffroys had done, De Wolf then tried to do overnight what had taken the German firm twenty years to achieve. Before long, his three ships were trying to service a trading network extending over island groups as far apart as the Tuamotus, Tonga, and the Caroline Islands. In the attempt to force the pace, De Wolf found he could not keep his network of trading stations intact, and that is where the rot set in.

Tom De Wolf was thus faced with a dilemma. Clearly, three vessels were insufficient to service such a far-flung trading network, but neither could he confine his ships to a narrow geographic area if their holds were to be filled. Since there were few remaining commercial openings in Samoa and with the more valuable Tongan copra trade being so competitive, De Wolf was forced to opt for a dispersed and inefficient trading strategy. But the impermanence of his trading stations undermined his whole system. Unable to build up his trading operations from a few well-chosen stations, De Wolf's ships were forced to roam far and wide in search of speculative cargoes, a form of trading which had effectively died out two decades before.

In addition to being inexperienced and overextended--a dangerous combination--De Wolf arrived on the scene when competition among trading companies was fiercer than ever. The rise in world copra prices during the 1870s had attracted other firms to the area, notably Henderson & Macfarlane of Auckland, Wm. & A. McArthur & Son of London, and Hedemann, Ruge & Co. of Suva and Apia.⁴² De Wolf was ill-prepared to counter their presence. Being a latecomer on the scene at a time of accelerating competition had two major consequences: in addition to the general lack of commercial opportunities, De Wolf was forced to engage unsuitable men because the best men in the island trade were already in the employ of his competitors. However, the steady decline in world copra prices beginning in 1880 had no bearing on De Wolf's fortunes because he

⁴²L. Hallett, "A History of Henderson & Macfarlane: 1840-1902," p. 25, PMB 62; Deruyck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission, 1877-1914* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1967), pp. 78-81; Trood, p. 70; G. W. P[artsch], "Fifty Four Years Ago: How I Came to Samoa", *Samoa Herald*, 30 June 1933.

departed from the scene long before they had begun to descend to untenable levels.⁴³

On 2 October 1880, all three De Wolf vessels were in Apia Harbor together for the first time, giving De Wolf the opportunity to assess his predicament and plan the next move. As early as mid-1880, he had contemplated winding up his affairs;⁴⁴ but by October, his luck seemed to be changing. To begin with, the *Mana* started earning money for probably the first time when she was chartered by the DHPG for three weeks to bring return cargoes of cotton from its plantation at Mulifanua. The *Venus* was also dispatched for Liverpool with "a full cargo of island produce."⁴⁵ It was then that De Wolf received certain commercial intelligence from a Frenchman named Gabriel Deseigneur which resulted in a last-ditch effort to retrieve his financial situation. On the strength of Deseigneur's testimony the *Red Coat* (Captain Foster) departed from Apia Harbor on a secret mission to the "North West."⁴⁶

The speculative, ill-considered and *ad hoc* nature of De Wolf's operations are no better demonstrated than by reference to the *Red Coat*'s 1880-81 cruise. Restieaux, who described De Wolf as one "of the smart People who come out to show Old Traders how to do Business," relates both the proceedings and the outcome of that voyage:

She had been Cruising about the Gilbert Group looking for a rich Guano Island De Wolfe [sic] had heard of in Samoa they had a Frenchman on Board who knew all about it & was going to show them where it was Captain Forbes [Foster] said they sailed backwards and forwards right over where it was situated at last they had given it up Gabriel De Seigsuer [sic] the Frenchman knew no more about it than I did Perhaps not so much.⁴⁷

In addition to chasing rainbows, the *Red Coat* also collected a cargo of copra but, said Restieaux, had "Paid a high price for it." The copra was also of poor quality, and Foster discovered that the price it would fetch at

⁴³The European price of copra peaked at £22 per ton in 1879 and fluctuated during the early 1880s before slumping to £14.12s per ton in 1886. See Firth, "German Firms," pp. 15 and 16. De Wolf withdrew from the Pacific trade in 1880 before copra prices were causing concern. Moreover, he disposed of much of his copra in Sydney where the market price per ton at the end of 1880 ranged from £19 to £19.10s loose to £19.17s.6d in bags. See *Samoa Times* 8 January 1881, 2a.

⁴⁴Becke to his mother, postscript of 24 August to letter dated 8 July 1880, Becke Papers, Sydney, Mitchell Library.

⁴⁵*Samoa Times*, 6 November 1880.

⁴⁶*Samoa Times*, 30 October 1880.

⁴⁷Restieaux, "Fragment," p. 8.

Apia was less than its initial purchase price. Rather than sell out at such a loss, he chose to take it to Sydney.

The retail side of De Wolf's activities was no more successful. Part of the *Red Coat's* general cargo from Liverpool consisted of firearms and ammunition, and these De Wolf sold on credit to a group of Samoans from the Malietoa party for their wars. Shortly thereafter he became embroiled in a long and acrimonious dispute with J. Hicks Graves, the new British Consul, over the legality of the sale. Graves refused to witness the signatures of the Samoans involved in the arms deal on a bond or even to register the bond at the Consulate; and as a result, De Wolf never received the \$7,777.90 owing to him for the munitions. For his part, he refused to surrender his (expired) license to sell firearms when Hicks Graves demanded this, a hollow victory in the circumstances.⁴⁸

Midway through this altercation, matters were further complicated for De Wolf when news reached Graves concerning serious misconduct on the part of some of De Wolf's sailors in the Marshall Islands. In July 1880, two men from *The Venus* had grossly insulted the Acting German Consul at Jaluit, making an uninvited entrance into his private residence and blasting him with obscenities. He wrote an immediate letter of complaint to the Western Pacific High Commissioner in Fiji but sent it unsealed to Graves to deal with on the spot. De Wolf assured the Consul that he would make a personal explanation to the High Commissioner himself as he was due to call at Fiji in the near future; and then made sure to give the place a wide berth.⁴⁹

But economic realities could not be brushed aside so readily. Due to loss of the company's papers it is impossible to cost De Wolf's Pacific venture. But available evidence points to heavy and sustained losses, and it is not difficult to see how \$20,000 was lost. One recurring source of

⁴⁸Graves to De Wolf, 10 July, 117 of 1880, p. 358; 30 July, 131 of 1880, p. 363; 16 August, 133 of 1880, p. 363; 11 December, 207 of 1880, p. 47; 13 December, 210 of 1880, p. 49; 10 January, 4 of 1881, p. 57, BCS 5/3; De Wolf to Graves, 9 December 1880, p. 517; 12 December 1880, pp. 518-20, BCS 2/3; 10 January 1881, BCS 2/4.

⁴⁹Acting German Consul at Jaluit to Western Pacific High Commissioner, copy in Graves to De Wolf, 24 November, 198 of 1880, pp. 40-42; Graves to De Wolf, 9 December, 204 of 1880, p. 46; Graves to German Consul in Samoa, 9 December, 205 of 1880, p. 46, BCS 5/3; Graves to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 14 December 1880, 26 of 1881, Records of the Western Pacific High Commissioner, Inwards Correspondence-General; Francis X. Hezel, comp., *Foreign Ships in Micronesia: A Compendium of Shipping Contacts in the Caroline and Marshall Islands, 1521-1885* (Saipan: Office of Historic Preservation, 1979), p. 137. For a further incident arising from the 1880 voyage of *The Venus*, this time without repercussions for De Wolf, see John Prout, William Price and Frank Volleiro, letter to the editor, *Samoa Times*, 14 August 1880, 2c; "Missionaries V. Traders," *Samoa Times*, 20 November 1880, 2d; S. H. Davies, "Report of a Voyage in *John Williams* . . . 1880," pp. 21-22.

expenditure was repairs to his fleet. *The Venus*, which came close to being wrecked when leaving Apia Harbor in February 1879, had her sails torn to shreds on her return voyage from Sydney early in 1880, and later that year had to be overhauled.⁵⁰ The *Mana* fared even worse. In addition to the initial costs of resparring and refitting, the vessel suffered severely in a hurricane in the Cook Islands during its first (and only) trading voyage and required a complete overhaul.⁵¹ Only the *Red Coat*, which entered the Pacific in sound condition and worked there for only a few months, evaded major repairs.

On the credit side are the cargoes of island produce collected by De Wolf's vessels. *The Venus*, for example, arrived in Sydney in late 1879 carrying 200 tons of copra, one ton of sharkfin, six hundred-weight of pearlshell, and two tons of "old copra." The price of copra at Sydney at that time was about £20 per ton, so the value of the cargo, including the sharkfin and pearlshell, may have approached, or even exceeded £10,000. Although the value of "the full cargo of island produce" taken to Liverpool by *The Venus* in November 1880 is unknown, the sixty tons of low grade copra taken to Sydney by the *Red Coat* in mid-1881 was valued at £1,080.⁵²

But expenses and overheads far exceeded earnings. In addition to losses incurred through Scott's mismanagement and the nonpayment for the munitions, De Wolf paid the penalty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He came when Samoa was passing through its period of greatest political instability, with native wars breaking out in 1879 and again in 1880.⁵³ The upshot from a commercial point of view was a business recession, and the Commercial Columns of the *Samoa Times* were almost uniformly gloomy throughout 1880. On 23 October, readers were told of the "present utter stagnation of trade in our midst," and after that the newspaper ceased to run a Commercial Column, perhaps because its contents were having such a bad effect on local business morale.

Given the stagnant economic situation and the glut of consumer goods on the local market, it is hardly surprising that the valuable general cargoes imported by *The Venus* and the *Red Coat* failed to sell in Apia. This bleak commercial climate was, paradoxically, aggravated by the very men

⁵⁰ *Samoa Times*, 8 February 1879, 7 February 1880, 9 October 1880.

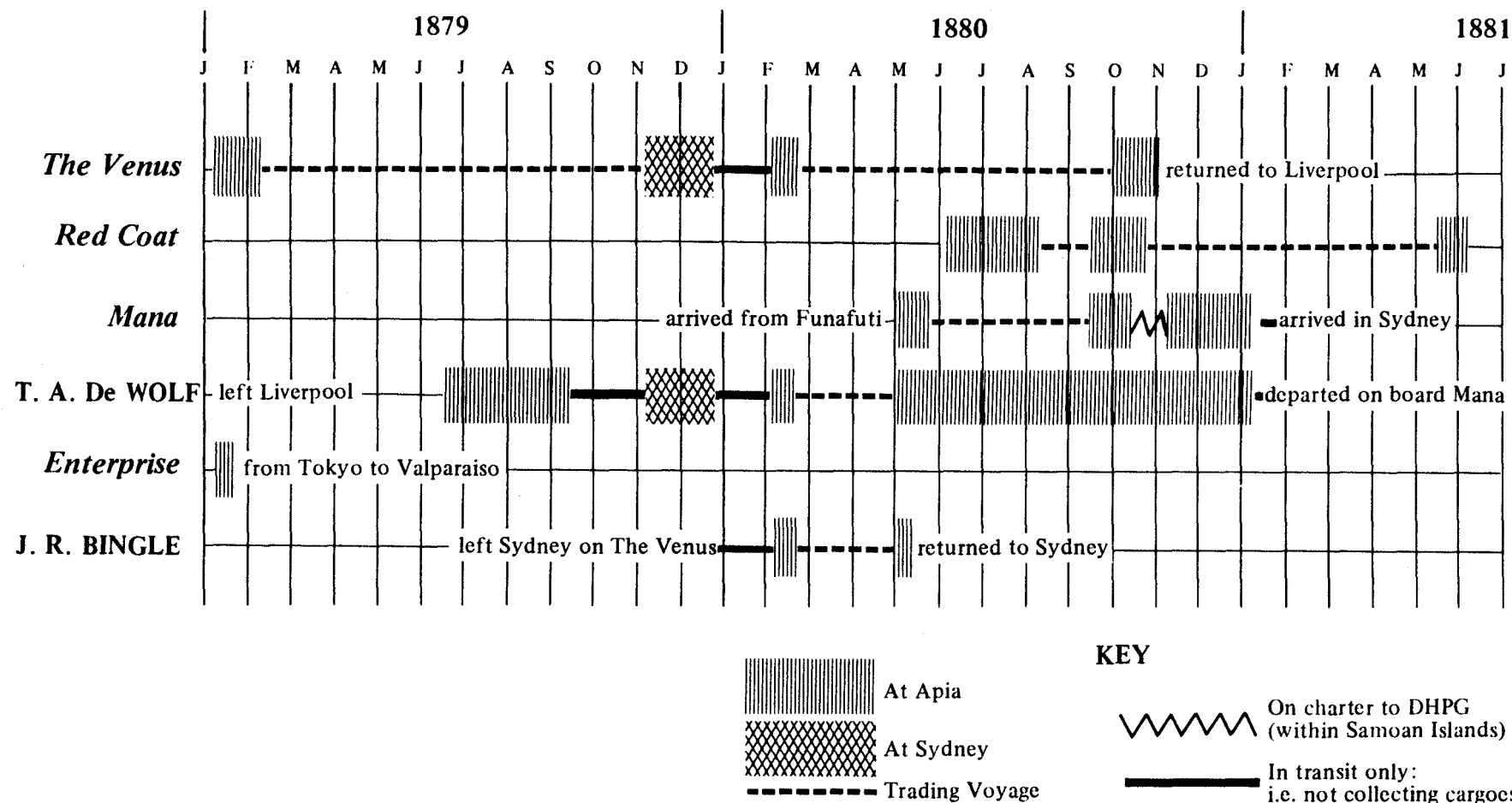
⁵¹ *Samoa Times*, 22 May 1879, 25 September 1880, 9 October 1880. See also Roger Turpie, "Report of the Voyage of the L.M.S. Barque John Williams," *Samoa Times*, 7 August 1880, 2a.

⁵² Shipping Register, p. 13, BCS 6/3(a); *Samoa Times*, 28 May 1881.

⁵³ Gilson, pp. 351-73; Kennedy, pp. 23-25. For a Samoan scholar's view see S. Muli'aumaseali'i, "The Quest for Sovereignty: Western Samoa, 1800-1962," LL.B. (Hons) thesis, University of Auckland, 1973, ch. 1.

J. S. De WOLF & CO.

Movement of ships and personnel connected with the firm's agency in Apia



whose interests lay in remedial action, and De Wolf had no more foresight than his fellow merchants and traders. At a time of intense business rivalry, he added, by his very presence, to the level of competition which helped force him and others out of business. And at a time when Samoan political instability was at its height, intensifying the local business recession, De Wolf helped insure its continuation by gun-running. His selective support for the British Consul is another indication of this short-sighted, self-centered attitude. Always ready to impose upon Graves when this suited his purpose,⁵⁴ De Wolf was equally capable of withholding support and openly defying the Consul--what Graves' successor described as:

the gross personal insults occasionally heaped upon . . . [the British Consul] by some wrong-headed ruffian or other, just fresh from a spree, who may choose to thrust his unnecessary presence on the office, for the ventilation of what he invariably proclaims to be his "blanked" rights as a Britisher.⁵⁵

There were inherent defects in consular power in Samoa--whether British, German or American--without it being further eroded by refractory nationals.

Faced with failure on all fronts, De Wolf had little option but to wind up his affairs before further losses were sustained; and in December 1880, he engaged an agent to auction off the remaining merchandise imported by *The Venus* and *Red Coat*. No reserve was put on many of the lines.⁵⁶ In the event, forty tons of merchandise remained unsold and this was placed in the hold of the *Mana* where it rubbed shoulders with twenty tons of copra. Early the following year, De Wolf left Apia forever, travelling on board the *Mana* to Sydney. In a perverse sort of way, the inadequacy of the whole De Wolf enterprise and the dominance of German interests were symbolized by the final departure of the *Mana*. Unable to effect an egress from Apia Harbor in the light and baffling winds that January morning, the brigantine had to be taken in tow by the German warship *Hyäne*.⁵⁷ But Tom De Wolf's Pacific venture did not finally draw to a close until the *Red Coat*, long overdue from its search for the guano island

⁵⁴De Wolf to Graves, 11 September 1879, BCS 2/3; Graves to De Wolf, 24 September, 168 of 1880, p. 18, BCS 5/3.

⁵⁵Churchward, p. 298.

⁵⁶*Samoa Times*, 18 December 1880, 3c.

⁵⁷*Samoa Times*, 15 January 1881; *SMH*, 3 February 1881. See also "The Departure of the *Mana*," *Samoa Times*, 15 January 1881, 2c. There is no record of the *Mana* ever leaving Sydney. See Maritime Services Board, "Register of Arrival and Departure of Vessels, October 1867-January 1882," Sydney, New South Wales Archives, 4/7738. Presumably the *Mana* was in such poor condition upon arriving in Sydney that she was condemned.

with Gabriel Deseigneur, returned to Apia, then departed for Sydney with the cargo of low-grade copra which couldn't fetch the right price.⁵⁸

Although intended as a long-term proposition, the Pacific branch of J. S. De Wolf & Co. was a comprehensive and short-lived disaster. Eventual failure was the norm among European commercial ventures in the Pacific so the De Wolf experience is by no means atypical. There were exceptions, of course. Eduard Hemsheim, for example, is described by his biographer as being "notable as one of the few speculative traders of any period in the Pacific whose commercial adventures paid off as he hoped when he first ventured there."⁵⁹ It might also be said that Hemsheim's enterprises were cut off at a happy juncture by the outbreak of the First World War and the expropriation of German property in the Pacific, otherwise he would have had to contend with the ruinous fall in the European price of copra beginning in the 1920s.

But the experience of most others involved in the island trade attests that the Pacific was a place where fortunes were lost or never realized, rather than made. When C. P. Holcomb was killed in 1885, he only had "a small island with a thatched hut and little more" to show for eleven years trading in the western Carolines.⁶⁰ Thomas Woodhouse traded in the [Solomon] islands for thirty years, but was penniless and living on charity at the time of his death" in 1906.⁶¹ Restieaux too ended his life in similarly reduced circumstances. During the 1880s, he fell heavily in debt to the DHPG who simply abandoned him when they pulled out of Tuvalu early the following decade. He then took up residence on the southern Tuvalu atoll of Nukufetau where he ended his days "a broken, miserable, and querulous old man."⁶²

Even the DHPG was hard pressed to survive during the lean years of the 1880s and 1890s when copra prices in Europe were spiralling ever downwards. A combination of economic and physical restrictions forced the company to rationalize its overall strategy by selling out or abandon-

⁵⁸ *Samoa Times*, 4 June 1881; *SMH*, 1 July 1881.

⁵⁹ Stewart Firth, "Captain Hemsheim: Pacific Venturer, Merchant Prince," Deryck Scarr, ed., *More Pacific Islands Portraits* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), p. 115.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Francis X. Hezel, "A Yankee Trader in Yap: Crayton Philo Holcomb," *JPH*, 10:1 (1975), p. 18.

⁶¹ K. B. Jackson, "*Tie Hokara, Tie Vaka*--Black Man, White Man: A Study of the New Georgia Group to 1925," Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1978, p. 137.

⁶² E. H. M. Davis, *Papers Respecting the Declaration of a British Protectorate over the Gilbert Islands . . .*, Foreign Office confidential Print 6269 (London 1892), p. 31; John B. Thurston, *Gilbert and Ellice Islands Journal*, 1893, p. 8, Suva, National Archives of Fiji; Arthur Mahaffey, "Report . . . on the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorates, 1909," p. 26, CO 225/86 (Australian Joint Copying Project 2879).

ing most of its interests outside Samoa and concentrating instead on consolidating its commercial predominance within the Samoan Islands. To that end, the DHPG devoted its energies to expanding its plantation system but also maintained an interest in trading, becoming the largest buyer of Samoan produced copra. However, little immediate progress was possible in the face of falling European copra prices and the DHPG unsuccessfully tried to sell out to British interests in 1889 and again in 1894-95. It was only with the return of viable copra prices in 1898 that DHPG shareholders were paid their first dividend in fourteen years. After that "profits on the company's Samoan plantations quadrupled . . . even though output hardly increased."⁶³

But the DHPG's changed fortunes were not simply a function of better European copra prices. The company had sole right to import cheap plantation laborers from German New Guinea whereas its numerous competitors were forced to rely on scarce and expensive Chinese coolie labor. Moreover, German annexation of the Samoan Islands west of Tutuila in 1900 at last insured that the plantations were protected from Samoan raids.⁶⁴ Lastly, the company reaped the benefits that accrued from being agents of the major shipping lines in the Australia/New Zealand trade, and also the Union Steam Ship Company which ran the only shipping service to Samoa. In addition to collecting various commissions, the DHPG was charged lower rates of freight, sometimes to the order of 35 percent.⁶⁵

But the De Wolf venture enjoyed none of these advantages and was poorly managed and badly organized into the bargain. In addition, De Wolfs of Apia was plagued by unsuitable seagoing employees; and to make matters worse, its manager lent a ready ear to rumours concerning nonexistent guano islands. Although an extraterritorial company with overseas capital backing, De Wolf was neither large enough or diversified enough to absorb losses and ride out hard times. Nor was De Wolfs a privileged company, like the DHPG was in Samoa after 1900, enjoying officially-sanctioned protection from serious competition. Instead, it had to cope with prevailing market forces in a period of intense competition that coincided with a business recession in Apia and an unprecedented level of political turbulence within Samoa which De Wolf himself helped

⁶³Firth, "German Firms," p. 19. See also Kennedy, pp. 106-07, 147n, and pp. 297-98; Firth, "German Recruitment", p. 83; John A. Moses, "The Coolie Labour Question and German Colonial Policy in Samoa, 1900-1914," *JPH*, 8 (1973), p. 101n; Scarr, *Fragments of Empire*, p. 73.

⁶⁴Kennedy, pp. 274-75; Stewart Firth, "Governors versus Settlers: The Dispute Over Chinese Labour in German Samoa," *New Zealand Journal of History*, 11:2 (1977), 155-79; Firth, "German Firms," pp. 27-28.

⁶⁵Dalton, pp. 22-23.

to fuel by gun-running. For reasons such as these, Samoa was a graveyard of expatriate commercial ambitions, especially after 1880. This pattern of failure was summed up retrospectively by Alfred Retieaux's friend George Westbrook, himself a failed trader and storekeeper who lived almost fifty years in Apia: "The missionaries like to talk about traders exploiting the natives. Very few old-timers in the Pacific have made more than a bare living and die penniless. . . . All the indepenent trading firms, and captains sailing their own ships through the group have lost out in the end."⁶⁶

Unlike Westbrook, Tom De Wolf turned his back on Samoa and later became a London stockbroker.⁶⁷ Louis Becke's book *Pacific Tales*, published in 1897, was affectionately dedicated to his former employer. Meanwhile, the firm they had both once represented was in the process of gradually running down its shipping interests and concentrated entirely on shipbroking after 1914 when its last ship went missing. This process of contraction continued until 1933 when the firm of De Wolf and Co. finally wound up its affairs in the face of the world depression.⁶⁸ The parent firm fell prey to the same wider economic imperatives which had helped destroy its Pacific branch half a century before.

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⁶⁶Westbrook to Rowe, 25 December 1934, Westbrook Papers (19), Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library, MS Papers 61.

⁶⁷Day, p. 45.

⁶⁸I am grateful to Naomi Evetts of the Liverpool Records Office for providing this information.