History of Tuvalu

The original inhabitants of Tuvalu were probably Polynesian migrants who came to the islands at various times from six hundred to two thousand years ago. Each Tuvalu island developed its own political and social system before European contact. Ceremonial and social visits took place between islands.

In 1568, Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña sighted Nui (and Niulakita in 1595), but the islands remained largely unknown by outsiders until a passing ship captain named one atoll Ellice Island in 1819. By 1825, the islands were on European maps, and by 1830, all had been visited and charted (and given various names by the explorers). In 1841, the entire group was named the Ellice Islands.

Whalers from New England were the most frequent foreign visitors. By the 1860s, however, peaceful visits were replaced by the establishment of permanent trading posts and disastrous encounters with slave-trader ships. In 1863, Peruvian slavers raided the southern islands of Funafuti and Nukulaelae, carrying away forever two-thirds of their population to work in Peruvian guano mines.

Also in the 1860s, Samoans representing the London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived to spread Christianity and establish churches and schools. The British claimed the Ellice Islands in 1886 and granted them protectorate status in 1892. Britain left most local government in the hands of island councils. The LMS handled education until the 20th century, when the British founded a boys' primary school under the direction of Donald Gilbert Kennedy. Kennedy left a legacy in administration, land tenure, cooperative and resettlement efforts, language, and technical skills.

In 1916, the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) and Ellice Islands were joined to form the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC). World War II brought airstrips, U.S. soldiers, and money. During GEIC’s independence movement in the 1960s, Ellice Islanders demanded separation from the Gilberts, being heavily outnumbered and culturally different. A referendum was held under UN auspices, and the Ellice Islands became a separate British colony in 1975. A subsequent vote changed the name to Tuvalu, and three years later Tuvalu became an independent nation within the Commonwealth. Tuvalu became a member of the United Nations in 2000.

References: