Notes & Queries

National Museums Scotland Displays One of Kamehameha II’s Featherwork ‘Ahu’ula Cloaks

National Museums Scotland (“NMS”) reopened its Edinburgh museum on July 29, 2011 with much fanfare. Completely renovated, there is a new collection of eight galleries which explore traditional ways of life in different world cultures. One of these themed-galleries contains artifacts from the cultures of island groups through which the famous British explorer, Captain James Cook, sailed during the late 18th century. NMS calls this gallery “Facing the Sea” and describes it as the only gallery in the United Kingdom dedicated to the cultures of the South Pacific.¹

Prominently displayed in Facing the Sea gallery and on the gallery’s website is one of the several ‘ahu’ula featherwork cloaks that Kamehameha II carried to England in 1824 to distribute as gifts.² Liholiho gave this particular feather cloak to the Honorable Frederick G. F. Byng, the gentleman assigned by the British Foreign Office to serve as the king’s escort during his stay in England. The cloak’s

¹ J. Susan Corley holds a master’s degree in history from the University of Arizona with an interest in Hawaiian history. She is currently enrolled in the history doctoral program at University of Hawai’i–Mānoa. Other of Ms. Corley’s articles about Kamehameha II have appeared in the 2008 and 2010 editions of The Hawaiian Journal of History. Ms. Corley also holds an M.B.A. from the University of Hawai’i and is a member of the Maui Historical Society, the Hawaiian Historical Society, and the Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society.

Wrapped in Feathers

Hawaiian feather cloaks were made from thousands of bundles of feathers attached to a fibre base. The feathers come from the tiny honeycreeper bird which is unique to the Hawaiian Islands. Only people of the highest social rank could wear such cloaks.

This cloak has a tragic history. The Hawaiian King and Queen, Liholiho and Kamamalu, presented it to the Honourable Frederick Byng in 1824, during a visit to London. Sadly, the King and Queen contracted measles and died during their stay.

Cloak, 'ahu'ula

Hawaiian Islands, early 19th century.
Byng may have chosen simply to use Campbell as an intermediary for him with Saffron Walden. Jokesters and at least one cartoonist had teased Byng mercilessly during Kamehameha II’s visit, claiming that the king had given him a pair of yellow feather breeches, and Joseph Jekyll had repeated the tease as recently as 1831. By 1838, Byng had become a prominent man in London society. In June of that year as a “gentleman usher,” he escorted Queen Victoria to her Westminster coronation. Byng may have feared that had he donated the cloak to a London museum, the publicity would have resurrected stories about those imaginary yellow feather breeches and brought ridicule down on his head once again.

In any event, Saffron Walden welcomed the gift. Liholiho’s cloak became an important item in their ethnological collection, and it is listed in their 1845 catalog. By chance, Queen Emma (widow of Kamehameha IV) toured Saffron Walden during her 1865 trip to England and saw the cloak exhibited. Queen Emma obtained permission from the trustees for the cloak to join other Hawaiian artifacts and products in the Kingdom’s extensive exhibition at the 1867 Paris Exposition Universelle. Back at Saffron Walden after the Exposition, the cloak continued to occupy a prominent place. By the mid-20th century, however, Saffron Walden was short of funds. The building’s roof leaked, and the museum was forced to sell off some of its collections in order to make repairs.

Consequently, Liholiho’s red and yellow cloak was offered for sale. In 1948, NMS paid £600 for the cloak and two kahili, described as fly whisks, which had been gifts to Saffron Walden from Queen Emma and her hostess, Lady H. Hervey. In 2009, however, NMS’ catalog did not reference the cloak; neither did NMS’ archives possess its photograph. Thus, it appears that Liholiho’s gift to Byng had languished in NMS’ vaults—well cared for but out of public view—until Ms. Chantal Knowles, NMS’ Principal Curator Oceania, Americas and Africa, became involved in the creation of the Pacific Islanders’ gallery, “Facing the Sea.” Six weeks after the gallery opened, Ms. Knowles wrote me that the cloak is “exciting a lot of interest,” and she requested copies of my research about Kamehameha II to offer visitors. Now NMS’ library contains copies of the 2008 and 2010 The Hawaiian Journal of History volumes with my articles about Liholiho to link with their exhibit.
Notes

2 NMS Accession number A.1948.274.
5 John Player, Sketches of Saffron Walden and its vicinity (Saffron Walden: G. Youngman, 1845), 77.
10 An Abridged Catalog of the Saffron Walden Museum (Saffron Walden: Youngman, 1845), 74.
11 Knowles to Corley, Accession records, 07 Sep 2009, by email; Brigham, “Hawaiian Feather Work,” 73–74; J. F. Hunnewell, “Hawaii at the ‘Exposition Universelle,’ Paris, 1867,” Hawaiian Club Papers, October 1868, 25, showing that Queen Emma’s Saffron Walden host, Lord C. Hervey, is listed as the exhibitor of a “grand royal mantle.”
14 Knowles to Corley, Accession records, 07 Sep 2009, by email.
15 Margaret Wilson, NMS to J. S Corley, 25 and 26 Aug 2009, by email.
16 Chantal Knowles, NMS to J. S. Corley, 07 Sep 2011, email message.