John Adams Cummins: Prince of Entertainers

Called the "prince of entertainers" and the "entertainer of princes,"\(^1\) John Adams Cummins was a prosperous businessman known for his generous and lavish hospitality to royalty and commoner alike and for his knowledge and love of Hawaiian traditions. He was also a staunch monarchist who, in his later years, was arrested, tried, imprisoned, and heavily fined by the new Republic of Hawai‘i.\(^2\)

High Chief John Adams Kuakini Cummins was born on O‘ahu on March 17, 1835,\(^3\) the son of High Chiefess Kaumakaokane Papali‘ai‘aina and Thomas Jefferson Cummins, Jr.\(^4\) His mother was a descendant of the Lonoikahapu‘u line and was a cousin of King Kamehameha I. His father was a wealthy and aristocratic Englishman, born in Lancashire and reared in Massachusetts, who came to the Islands in 1828.\(^5\)

Cummins was a favored and pampered child of his Hawaiian grandfather, High Chief Kame‘eiamoku, and, as befitting a child of high birth, he was carried around on the shoulders of uncles and family retainers. (Favorite children were carried so that they wouldn’t have to walk, were not allowed to do work that dirtied their hands, and were not allowed to carry anything heavy in their hands or on their shoulders.)\(^6\) As a child, he played with children from other chiefly families, such as the Kalākaus, Beckleys, Sumners, and I‘aukeas, and was dandled on the knee of King Kamehameha III.\(^7\) Consequently, Cummins easily learned the traditions and nuances of his

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Hawaiian heritage, while his father exposed him to Western business practices.

Thomas Cummins purchased or leased lands known as the Waimānalo Sugar Plantation. The first record of this was March 27, 1842 (recorded at the land office on July 2, 1851), when High Chief Pāki leased Cummins a parcel of land on which to build a house. This residence was later named Mauna Loke, or Rose Mont. On November 25, 1850, Cummins leased 970 acres in the same vicinity from King Kamehameha III. This property extended from Popo'oka'ala point to the hills of Ka'iwa and Ka'akaupu of the Ko'olau district.

John eventually became foreman of his father's cattle and horse-breeding ranches. Through the business of supplying beef to ships and beef and fine horses to merchants and others, young Cummins came into contact with many kinds of people: sea captains, officers of military vessels, businessmen, and wealthy individuals. He also often acted as driver to his Hawaiian horseman in rounding up herds of cattle. He conceived the idea of converting the ranch into a commercial sugar venture in 1877, three years after King Kalākaua had concluded a reciprocity treaty with the United States, greatly enhancing the sugar industry in the kingdom. Its first mill started grinding cane in January 1881.

Control of the plantation passed to W. G. Irwin and Co. in 1885, with Cummins continuing as manager. Cummins was ahead of the times in adopting a sort of "social welfare" plan for his employees, building a large structure containing a reading room and a section for dances and social gatherings for the plantation laborers. It was handsomely decorated (Chinese and Japanese fans on the ceiling, pictures of King Kalākaua and other members of the royal family on the walls), and contained books, tables, an organ, and singing canaries. The laborers formed a plantation band, often playing in the evenings after their work was done.

Cummins married his first wife, High Chiefess Kahalewai, in 1861. She was reared by the Princess Kekauonohi, whose family were sacred bird trappers under King Kamehameha I. (Princess Kekauonohi was a daughter of Kamehameha I and Kinaʻu, who became kuhina nui [prime minister] in 1832. She became a wife of Kamehameha II and governor of Kauaʻi in 1842.) Cummins and Kahalewai had six children: Matilda Kaumakaokane, Jane Piʻikea,
Fig. 1. John Adams Cummins (1835–1913), prince of entertainers. (Bishop Museum.)
Kaimilani, ‘Imilani, Thomas Puali‘i, and May Kaaolani. Kahalewai died in 1902. Her pallbearers included Princes David Kawanana-koa and Jonah Kalaniana‘ole. Cummins also had two “secondary” wives: Maria Maliē Merseberg Kaha‘i (a close friend of Kahalewai) and Hattie Hiram. Cummins and Hiram had a daughter, Kapua Kahanolani.

In 1903 he married his son-in-law’s sister, High Chiefess Elizabeth Kapeka Merseberg. They adopted a son, Leo Lonoka‘ehu Lorillard (most likely named after New York tobacco heir Pierre Lorillard, from whom Cummins purchased race horses, as he also did from California railroad magnate Leland Stanford). “Papa,” as Cummins was called by Hawaiian people, adopted his wife’s niece, Elizabeth Kapeka Cummins Kekahio, around 1905. She married Hawaiian singer and musician Ernest Valentine Holbron, also known as Ernest Valentine Renken, in 1918. Their grandson, son of Elizabeth Leihala Renken and John Topolinski (a native of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada), is kumu hula John Renken Kaha‘iali‘iokiwi‘ulao Kamehameha Topolinski.

MAUNA LOKE

Along with the “Cummins Block” at Fort and Merchant Streets and other real estate, Cummins owned three homes in town. One was located on a strip of land he owned fronting St. Andrew’s Cathedral on Beretania Street, between Queen Emma Street and Washington Place (the land was purchased by the cathedral in 1920). Another was located on thirteen acres in Nu‘uanu valley. The latter home was called Ahipu‘u, “Flamingo Hill,” named after the hill and caves behind the house. Today it is the site of the O‘ahu Country Club. In his final years, he lived in a house in the Pawa‘a area, on Alexander Street, near Bingham Street. Cummins Street, in the Kewalo area, was named after him sometime after 1910.

However, it was Mauna Loke, the family home in Waimānalo, the scene of lavish Hawaiian-style living and entertaining, that was synonymous with Cummins’s name. It was said that the food served there excelled that of the best in San Francisco, and the wines were of the choicest vintage. Although always offering plenty to drink, Cummins himself never touched a drop. King Kalākaua often
FIG. 2. High Chiefess Kahalewai, first wife of John Adams Cummins. (Bishop Museum.)
Fig. 3. High Chiefess Elizabeth Kapeka Merseberg, second wife of John Adams Cummins. (Bishop Museum.)

enjoyed Cummins's hospitality at the spacious home. There were several grass houses scattered throughout the grounds, one for the exclusive use of Kalākaua and one exclusively for Princess Kaʻiulani. As a child, she helped “Uncle John” erect a flagpole nearby, then she raised the Hawaiian flag and christened it with a bottle of champagne. King Kamehameha V also liked to visit Mauna Loke. In order to avoid the difficult trip over the Pali trail, the portly king purchased a small steamboat in which to ride around the island from town and had a short railway line installed from the boat landing to the house.
A huge celebration took place at Mauna Loke in November 1875, the first stop of a two-week “Grand Tour of O’ahu” by Queen Emma. The queen stayed three days, by which time the number present—both invited and uninvited—was in the hundreds. Guests brought food by the wagon load: hogs, bullocks, ducks, turkeys, and poi. Three hundred torches burned throughout the night of the lu‘au, which included fireworks and hula troupes performing one after another until daylight the next day. There were bonfires, swimming, surfing, stream fishing, lei making, horse racing, and rifle shooting. Cummins then escorted Emma on the rest of the tour.

After a visit to Mauna Loke by Queen Kapi‘olani in 1883, members of the Cummins family composed three commemorative chants for her. One, a feather chant, is titled “Mele Lei Hulu” (Feather Lei Chant). Along with references to feathers as taboo ornaments for Chiefess Kapi‘olani, it mentions the Cummins croquet court and the plantation trains that hauled the sugar cane to the Waimānalo landing and to the “glass railroad house,” meaning the railroad coach with its glass windows.

Cummins supposedly never liked Lili‘uokalani and, although she did visit Mauna Loke, no parties or lu‘au were given in her honor. The feeling appears to have been mutual. After several years of polit-
ical differences, Liliʻuokalani wrote Cummins a letter from Washington Place dated October 19, 1903, saying

My dear Friend. Day before yesterday Wakeki reminded me of the promises I had made you about sending you a Royal Standard—From that day I have regretted having been too hasty in making the promise, and think it best that I should recall my words, that you may not be waiting unnecessarily. Sincerely Yours Liliuokalani.38

During his lifetime, Cummins also entertained the Duke of Edinburgh, two German princes, and army and naval officers from Great Britain, the United States, Germany, France, and Austria.39

After visiting the site of the house in 1977, Kahaʻi Topolinski composed a chant, “Mauna Loke he Hale Wili Aloha” (Rose Mount, the Home of Woven Love), in tribute to the home.40 He says his “great-grandfather” was a kind, sensitive, generous man who was a good role model, able to live within his two cultures without conflict.41

ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Cummins was elected representative for his Koʻolau district in 1873 and assisted in the election of King Lunalilo that same year.42 The following year, he aided in the election of King Kalākaua.43 As a reward, Kalākaua desired to make Cummins his chamberlain, but Thomas Cummins required his son’s services at Waimānalo, at the time a cattle ranch with some sugar crops.44 Cummins was instrumental, however, in helping King Kalākaua effect a reciprocity treaty with the United States in 1874, after which the sugar industry prospered and the value of Waimānalo Plantation was greatly enhanced.45

Cummins was Hawaiʻi commissioner of the Paris Exposition in 1889,46 and Kalākaua appointed him minister of foreign affairs in 1890. Unfortunately, the king died in San Francisco on January 29, 1891. Cummins had the sad honor of supervising the funeral of his old friend and king the following month.

Liliʻuokalani took the oath of office as queen, swearing to support the constitution, on January 29, 1891. One of her first acts was to demand the resignation of John A. Cummins and his co-ministers. He decided to give up politics and devote himself to his business affairs.47
After frequent changes in her cabinet, the queen let it be known that she intended to abrogate the constitution she had sworn to support and withdraw certain rights of the people confirmed in that constitution of 1887. The shock of this news was followed by meetings held around town, centering on removing the queen from the throne.

Queen Lili‘uokalani turned to Cummins for advice, which he gave, but she ignored it. On January 17, 1893, a group of annexationists took possession of Ali‘olani Hale, the judiciary building, proclaimed the abrogation of the monarchy, and announced a new Provisional Government.

President Grover Cleveland sent a special commissioner, James M. Blount, to investigate the overthrow of the monarchy. Although royalist businessmen coached the queen in what to say to Blount, she lost their good will by supposedly telling Blount she would show no clemency to the revolutionists, would have them beheaded and their property confiscated. Although she denied having said this, Cummins and others were completely disillusioned with her.

After formation of the Republic of Hawai‘i on July 4, 1894, Lili‘uokalani again sent for Cummins, saying she wanted him to head a commission to Washington, D.C., for a final appeal for restoration of
her throne. Initially refusing, feeling it was useless, he soon changed his mind and agreed.\textsuperscript{51} Included, as a guest of Cummins, was American Maj. W. T. Seward. A supporter of Liliʻuokalani, he was a permanent houseguest of and sometime secretary to Cummins.\textsuperscript{52} The mission was, indeed, a failure.\textsuperscript{53} Cummins decided to adhere to his original plan of withdrawing from politics.\textsuperscript{54}

**COUNTERREVOLUTION OF 1895**

Major Seward returned from a visit to the west coast of the United States on December 3, 1894. Cummins later testified that he knew nothing of the reason for Seward's trip, which turned out to be as an emissary of Liliʻuokalani to purchase arms and ammunition for a counterrevolution to return her to the throne.\textsuperscript{55} Government personnel were suspicious of Seward because of his many visits to the home of Charles T. Gulick, minister of the interior under Queen Liliʻuokalani.\textsuperscript{56} This, in turn, made them suspicious of Cummins, Seward's host and friend.

The events that followed in January, after the arrival of almost three hundred Winchester rifles, were under the direction of what became known as the Big Four: Charles T. Gulick, Maj. W. T. Seward, William H. Rickard, and Thomas Beresford Walker (the latter being Cummins's son-in-law).\textsuperscript{57} The ill-conceived plot was discovered, and the Big Four, along with Cummins and many others, were arrested to be tried for treason.

Cummins, aged sixty, was arrested without a warrant on January 16, 1895, and confined in Oʻahu Prison, called the "Reef."\textsuperscript{58} He was arraigned before the Military Commission on January 17, 1895. The charge read:

That the said **JOHN A. CUMMINS**, upon the Island of Oahu, one of the Hawaiian Islands, at divers times within six months now last past did commit Treason, by procuring and providing munitions of war, arms and forces to be used, and which were used, in levying war against the Republic of Hawaii, and in attempting to overthrow the same.

To which the said **JOHN A. CUMMINS** pleaded, "GUILTY."
The commission declared Cummins guilty of the charge and sentenced him to five years' imprisonment at hard labor and a five thousand dollar fine.\(^59\)

Upset by being linked with the episode, which he said was only because of his having hosted Seward in his home, Cummins made a sworn statement before the Military Commission at the Republic of Hawai'i General Headquarters in the throne room of 'Iolani Palace on January 21, 1895.\(^60\) He said he had first learned of the arms situation on December 3, 1894, after the fact, directly from Seward. He told Seward he was sorry Seward had gotten involved and that it would bring trouble to the Cummins household, as Seward was living there. After warning Seward again a few days later, Seward said any blame would be attached only to him and that he had now ceased his association with the affair.\(^61\) Cummins admitted eventually knowing that, along with the arms purchase, Seward had used his servants to land the arms on his Waimānalo property.\(^62\)

After testifying, Cummins was confronted by an official who asked him to take an oath of allegiance to the Republic of Hawai'i. He took the oath and was immediately arrested by a deputy sheriff on the charge of treason. Cummins protested that he had never acted against the Republic nor taken any part in the rebellion. He hired a young lawyer, John Alfred Magoon, who explained to him that in the eyes of the law he was just as guilty by having knowledge of treason (called misprision of treason) as those who had participated in treasonous acts. Magoon urged him to plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court, arguing that the only men marked for hanging were the "Big Four." Cummins refused, saying he had not committed a crime and therefore was not guilty.\(^63\)

Cummins testified again on his own behalf on February 5th. Looking at the men of the Military Commission, he realized that most of them were newcomers to the Islands, with whom he was barely acquainted, who knew little, if anything, of his proroyalist background and friendship with monarchs.\(^64\)

Although it is not clear why Cummins changed his plea to guilty after testifying earlier that he wasn't, he was supposedly so crushed and broken by the stigma now attached to him that perhaps he did not realize the gravity of the plea, nor understand that the law man-
dated that such a plea carry a severe sentence. It was also said he may have believed the sentence would be annulled.65

President and Commander-in-Chief of the Republic of Hawai‘i Sanford B. Dole added a paragraph to the formal charge, stating that the cabinet recommended that the sentence be mitigated to the paying of the fine only, Cummins to remain imprisoned until the fine was paid—in cash. Unable to borrow cash from his friends, as most had already lent their money to the cause of Lili‘uokalani, Magoon suggested borrowing it from Bishop’s bank or mortgaging the Waimānalo property, using the race horses as security.66 Cummins shook his head, saying the bank wouldn’t trust him anymore. Magoon was adamant and soon returned from the bank with the $5,000. The bank would trust him, as long as Cummins gave them the mortgage to his South King Street house, which he did.67

In a letter about the Cummins arrest and trial, Dole, as a member of the Senate of the Territory of Hawai‘i, wrote to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock on October 16, 1903, that

Mr. Cummins was tried on the charge of treason before a Military Commission convened at a time in the year 1895, when Martial Law was in force in said Honolulu, for the trial of his and other cases connected with said insurrection, to which charge he pleaded GUILTY. . . . and was sentenced to be imprisoned at hard labor for the term of five years, to date from February 5th, 1895, and to pay a fine of five thousand dollars with a recommendation by the members of the Commission of extreme clemency and a commutation by the reviewing authority of the sentence made mandatory by our statutes, and that imprisonment, if any, be inflicted [sic] may be served without hard labor. . . .

In view of the circumstances of Mr. Cummins’ age and health and the recommendation of the Military Commission for clemency in his case, his sentence was commuted to the payment of the fine adjudged against him on or about February 27th, 1895, which fine he paid and was thereupon released from imprisonment.68

During the year following this humiliating chain of events, Cummins forgave Seward, even sending food and other items to Seward during his imprisonment for treason.69 When Seward was released in January 1896, he returned to Cummins’s home. He lived
there again for some time, then took a steamer to the mainland and was never again seen in Hawai‘i.⁷⁰

Although Cummins lived for another eighteen years after his arrest, imprisonment, and trial, he seems to have disappeared from public life and was not heard of again until his death on March 21, 1913. He died from influenza, two earlier paralytic strokes having left him too ill to fight the disease.⁷¹ His funeral followed ancient Hawaiian customs.

From his death to his burial on March 24, his body lay in state in the drawing room of his Alexander Street home. Although Cummins wanted neither pomp nor unusual ceremony at his funeral, two pūlo‘ulo‘u, or taboo sticks, draped in purple, stood at the head of the casket, which was surrounded by kāhili bearers, befitting the rank of

Fig. 6. The Cummins home at Waimānalo circa 1880. The photo, probably taken by A. Montano, is from the Hedemann Collection. (Bishop Museum.)
a high chief. On the wall behind the casket was a Hawaiian standard draped with lei. Flowers and floral arrangements were in great profusion. A whitened stone fish god, Cummins's 'aumakua, or personal god, stood on a pedestal in the front yard, also draped with lei. Cummins had cherished this shapeless stone since boyhood, moving it from Mauna Loke to his other residences as he lived in them.72

In mid-afternoon of the 24th, the Royal Hawaiian Band, which had often played at lu'au and parties at Mauna Loke, played various selections before and during the funeral service. Following a mele chanted by an elderly Hawaiian woman and the singing of “Nearer My God to Thee” and “Asleep in Jesus,” the Reverend Henry H. Parker of Kawaiaha'o Church read the service in Hawaiian. Honorary pallbearers were a mixture of men from monarchy and postmonarchy days. They were Sanford B. Dole, who had the last word in condemning Cummins at his trial; Senator Cecil Brown and Mark P. Robinson, who helped to plan the overthrow of the monarchy; Chief Justice A. G. M. Robertson, C. A. Brown, and Henry Smith, who belonged to the annexation party; A. Fernandez, a royalist; and Dr. George Herbert. The last rites of the Episcopal church were given at O'ahu Cemetery by the Reverend Leopold Kroll of St. Andrew's Cathedral. The casket was placed in its grave by six police officers.73

And so, on a quieter note than one might expect, the “prince of entertainers” and “entertainer of princes” and the personification of aloha was laid to rest.

Notes
Mahalo to John Kaha'i Topolinski, owner of the “Cummins-Merseberg Collection 1836–1935,” who generously shared family information with me.

Topolinski, "Sugar Days" 4.

Topolinski, "Sugar Days" 4.

Topolinski, "Sugar Days" 4.


Kilbey, "Waimanalo Sugar Plantation" 3.

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Topolinski, "Sugar Days" 4.

Henry Bond Restarick, Hawaii From The Viewpoint of a Bishop (Honolulu: Paradise of the Pacific, 1924) 252; Topolinski, letter to author, 12 Aug. 1995.


Logan, A History 192.


PP Sept. 1902: 223.


Day, History Makers of Hawaii 69–70.


Lili'uokalani Collection M93, document no. 552, AH.
42 Yardley and Rogers, *Queen Kapiolani* 61.
43 Yardley and Rogers, *Queen Kapiolani* 61.
56 Girvin, *The Cummins Case* 16.
63 Taylor, “Tales,” no. 38.
70 Taylor, “Tales,” no. 3.
71 PCA 21 Mar. 1913: 1.
72 PCA 24 Mar. 1913.
73 *HSB* 24 Mar. 1913.