An English Entrepreneur in the Hawaiian Islands: The Life and Times of John Kidwell, 1849–1922

During the nineteenth century hundreds of thousands of British people emigrated to the United States. Among them were many highly successful entrepreneurs. A classic example was Andrew Carnegie, who became a millionaire iron and steel tycoon. For every Carnegie, however, there were hundreds of what Charlotte Erickson has described as “invisible immigrants.” Native English speakers assimilated into the American population much more quickly than many of their counterparts from continental Europe. Many British entrepreneurs abroad, although they did not become millionaires, were nonetheless successful. John Kidwell, the father of the Hawaiian pineapple canning industry, was one of them.

John Kidwell was born near Barnstaple in the north Devonshire village of Marwood on 7 January 1849, the illegitimate son of Mary Ann Kidwell. His father is unknown. His mother was probably a domestic servant. Very little is known about Kidwell’s childhood. Not surprisingly, perhaps, he chose not to mention his parents in an autobiographical interview he gave shortly before his death. All he would say about his childhood was that it was a hard but not unhappy one. It is also probably significant that he used his retirement years to live out a second childhood.

Dr. Richard A. Hawkins is senior lecturer in economics at the University of Wolverhampton, England, and is the author of a number of articles on the history of the pineapple canning industry.

In 1864, at the age of fifteen, Kidwell left his Devonshire home to be apprenticed to a distant cousin and nurseryman in London. According to Kidwell, his cousin was a hard taskmaster. This may explain why he left the employ of his cousin in 1872 and emigrated to the United States. Kidwell later claimed to have established himself as a nurseryman in San Francisco two years later in 1874. However, he is listed in the 1879–1882 San Francisco city directories as a gardener. In the 1880 and 1881 directories he is listed as an employee of John H. Sievers. Kidwell met many visitors from the Hawaiian Islands who came to his nursery to purchase flowers, shrubs, and plants nonindigenous to the Islands. Many of his best customers from the Islands repeatedly pointed out the advantages that might arise from the establishment of a nursery in Honolulu. So eventually, with letters of introduction to many of the more influential people on the island of O‘ahu, he arrived in Honolulu in 1882 and established a nursery.

At the time of Kidwell’s arrival, the Hawaiian Islands had nearly completed the transformation to a market economy. Partly as a result of land reform in the mid-nineteenth century, native Hawaiian subsistence agriculture was in terminal decline. It was rapidly being replaced by commercial agriculture in the form of sugar cane plantation monoculture. The transformation of the economy was also accompanied by demographic transformation. For various reasons, the native Hawaiian population was also in decline. Some of the demographic decline had been counterbalanced by European and American immigration. Indeed, commercial agriculture in the Islands was dominated by these immigrants, who also recruited Asian laborers to work on their sugar plantations. In the early 1880s the Islands were nominally still under a native Hawaiian monarchy, government, and legislature, but in practice the monarchy was greatly influenced by white advisers and administrators. Furthermore, the economic power of the sugar planters meant that the Hawaiian government was dependent upon them for its revenues.

Although sugar dominated the Hawaiian economy, there was a great demand at this time for fresh Hawaiian pineapples in San Francisco. They were picked green by Charles Hensen on the island of Hawai‘i and transshipped through Honolulu to San Francisco. These pineapples grew wild and were of extremely poor quality. So
with a view to avoiding the need to transship these pineapples to Honolulu, Kidwell and Hensen secured shoots of wild pineapples from the Big Island and planted four or five acres in Mānoa Valley in 1885.

Under cultivation, there was some improvement in the size of the pineapples produced, but the fruit was still of very poor quality. Kidwell started searching for better quality plants. Scanning various nurserymen's periodicals, he finally, in *The Florida Agriculturalist*, read an advertisement relating to a variety called the Smooth Cayenne. In 1885 Kidwell ordered a dozen of this variety, and a year later he ordered a thousand plants from Jamaica, of which six hundred grew and flourished. Not satisfied with his initial success, he ordered from London four specimens of every known variety of pineapple. He received thirty-one different species. In turn, these were carefully
tested, but the Smooth Cayenne produced the best results and was selected for propagation on a commercial scale.

Before engaging in this experiment, Kidwell had converted an old residence into a forcing plant and developed a number of ideas with respect to the propagation of plants from stumps, ideas that were closely followed by later agronomists. The early work was carried out in cooperation with Charles Hensen, but the latter died soon after the Mānoa Valley plantation had been established. Kidwell carried on the work alone, selling as much of his produce locally as possible until 1889, the surplus being shipped to California. It soon became apparent to Kidwell that the market for pineapple must be enlarged, and he began to consider the possibilities of expanding the market by canning pineapple as well.9

With his friend John Emmeluth, an American citizen from Cincinnati who had emigrated to Hawai‘i in 1879, Kidwell in 1889 began three years of experiments in pineapple canning. Emmeluth was the owner and director of John Emmeluth and Company, Honolulu’s principal plumbing and household furnishings business and hardware importers. The first lots of a few dozen cans of pineapple were used by the families of those interested.

Emmeluth discovered during a business trip to San Francisco, Chicago, New York City, and Boston in 1889 that the U.S. 35 percent duty on canned pineapple made it very difficult to compete in Hawai‘i’s principal overseas market, the United States, even though the Hawaiian product was considered by the dealers to be superior to its rivals. He made a loss over the period 1889–1891 of $400 out of an expenditure of $2,000.10

In the early 1890s, Kidwell had ten acres under cultivation in Mānoa Valley. He later recalled that the problem of delivering the fresh fruit to San Francisco in marketable condition began to present almost insurmountable difficulties.11 In fact, in 1891 Kidwell had been sued for breach of contract by the Honolulu fruit exporter, Peter Camarinos. Camarinos alleged that Kidwell had supplied him with poisoned pineapples. Kidwell had contracted to sell his whole crop of pineapples to Camarinos in December 1888. The contract had been renewed twice. In April 1890 Kidwell had signed a new contract to supply all of his output of pineapples that were over three
pounds, for which Camarinos agreed to pay thirty-five cents each, for
a term of thirty months from 1 July 1890. In June 1891 Camarinos
had refused to receive any more pineapples from Kidwell.

The case lasted for four years, and Camarinos won a judgment
against Kidwell in April 1892. Kidwell subsequently unsuccessfully
appealed the verdict several times. In 1893 Camarinos tried to have
Kidwell’s land in Mānoa confiscated. While it seems unlikely that Kid-
well had deliberately inserted acid into the pineapples, as Camarinos
alleged, he admitted that he had removed the crowns from the pine-
apples when they were half grown in order to increase their size. The
crowns were legally part of the fruit Kidwell was obliged to deliver to
Camarinos. By removing the crowns, Kidwell caused the pineapples
to prematurely decay. Camarinos’s brother, who owned a commis-
sion house in San Francisco, alleged that Kidwell had written him a
letter saying “he had doctored the pineapples for the sake of killing
the growth to prevent persons who bought them from planting the
growth and themselves raising sugar loaf pineapples in the future.”12
This allegation was probably not too far from the truth of the matter.

The dispute between Kidwell and Camarinos has to be seen in the
wider context of the political situation in Hawai‘i in the early 1890s.
Kidwell was a supporter of the Reform Party, and Camarinos was a
prominent royalist businessman. In the late 1880s King Kalākaua had
tried to shift the balance of power away from the white business com-
community and back to the native Hawaiian community. A militant sec-
tion of the white community associated with the Reform Party, one
of the leaders of which was John Emmeluth, organized a coup d’État
against Kalākaua and forced him to sign the so-called Bayonet Con-
stitution, which enfranchised every resident white man, regardless of
whether he was a citizen, and disenfranchised many native Hawaiian
citizens.13

While the law suit was still in litigation, Camarinos developed his
own pineapple plantation at Kalihi. In August 1891 he also joined a
group of businessmen who founded the Pearl City Fruit Company,
Ltd., capitalized at $23,000, which also established a pineapple plan-
tation during the same year. By 1892, Camarinos and Kidwell were
the largest growers of pineapples in Hawai‘i.14 During 1892 Kidwell
leased one hundred acres of land from a local landowner, with the
understanding that the lease might subsequently be turned over to a corporation still to be formed. The Hawaiian Fruit & Packing Company, Ltd., was formed with Kidwell as president, Lorrin A. Thurston as vice-president, John Emmeluth as secretary, J. Gallagher as treasurer, and J. J. Lecker as auditor. The company had $40,000 in capital, and Kidwell and Emmeluth were the principal shareholders. One of its purposes seems to have been to compete with the Pearl City Fruit Company. Thurston was also leader of the Reform Party.

In 1891 Kalākaua died and was succeeded by his sister, Liliʻuokalani. Liliʻuokalani adopted a nationalist program that incurred the wrath of Thurston and his allies. The queen tried to make her government financially independent of the sugar planters by proposing to raise revenue through a lottery and opium licensing. She also tried to repeal the Bayonet Constitution and return to the previous constitution.

At the same time, Hawaiʻi was undergoing an economic crisis. Kalākaua had arranged a reciprocal trade agreement with the United States in the mid-1870s under which Hawaiian sugar cane entered the United States duty free. Under the McKinley Tariff of 1890, however, the United States had replaced its sugar duty with a domestic subsidy. The sugar bubble burst. The McKinley Tariff resulted in an annual loss of $5 million to the sugar planters. As F. W. Tausigg later observed, however,

The hard times that ensued meant, to be sure, not that profits had disappeared, but that the extravagances of the past were gone. Sugar-growing simply got down to hard pan, heavily-watered plantation stock shrank, and planters' expenditures could no longer be on a recklessly generous scale.

The sugar planters began to actively support agricultural diversification. They set up a Committee on Fruit Culture headed by Thurston, and he joined Kidwell's pineapple enterprise. Liliʻuokalani also strongly supported agricultural diversification, most probably to undermine her enemies' source of wealth. In her address at the biennial state opening of the legislature on 30 May 1892, Liliʻuokalani announced “the appointment of a special commission . . . with a view to enable the small land-holders to add to the wealth and progress of
the Kingdom by raising such products as the soil and climate of the country foster." The commission recommended the establishment of a Bureau of Agriculture and Forestry, the first government agency of this nature in Hawai'i. It was intended that the bureau would promote diversified agriculture based on small farms.

Even before the commission had reported, Lili'uokalani had begun to use the crown lands to promote this objective. The crown lands comprised more than one quarter of the land area of Hawai'i. The sugar planters cannot have been happy to read the following in the Honolulu Daily Bulletin: "[The queen] is leasing crown lands, not in large tracts to planters but in small lots... that is the way to diversified industries." Sanford Ballard Dole, a prominent member of the white community, had already begun a campaign to take control over the crown lands away from the queen in August 1891. By March
On 17 January 1893, Queen Liliʻuokalani was overthrown in a coup d'etat led by Thurston. One of the first actions taken by the revolutionaries was to expropriate the crown lands. As a member of the Reform Party and an annexationist since 1881, John Emmeluth played a prominent role in the coup. He was a member of the Committee of Public Safety, which organized the coup. After the coup, he served as a member of the advisory council of the Provisional Government. He was also a member of the Council of State of the Republic of Hawaiʻi, formed in 1894. Emmeluth gained a reputation as a firebrand and in 1893 called for the deportation of Liliʻuokalani and in 1895 the execution of Robert Wilcox, the leader of an unsuccessful counterrevolution in that year. In both cases, he was overruled by the more moderate republican leader, Sanford Ballard Dole, president of the Republic of Hawaiʻi between 1894 and 1898. Dole's administration also got in the way of one of Emmeluth's schemes to corral some mountain water and become a sugar planter.

After Hawaiʻi became a U.S. territory in 1898, Emmeluth broke with his fellow annexationists, many of whom joined the Republican Party. Emmeluth joined the Home Rule Party in October 1900. The *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, a supporter of the Republican Party, denounced the "drainpipe statesman" for joining forces with Robert Wilcox, the Home Rule Party's leader, and telling the native Hawaiians that the "robber whites" had stolen their country and robbed them of their queen and their rights. It pointed out that he was the very same man as the annexationist and antiroyalist Emmeluth of the 1890s. In November 1900, he was elected to the territorial legislature. As one of the Home Rule Party's leaders, he continued his feud with Dole, who was appointed the first governor of the Territory of Hawaiʻi. For a while, he was the most powerful member of the House of Representatives and was known as "Boss Emmeluth." But he soon fell out with many of his native Hawaiian colleagues and did not stand for reelection in 1902. Emmeluth remained active in business and died in May 1910, aged fifty-seven, after an unsuccessful operation to relieve a bladder condition.
It seems ironic that Emmeluth was opposed to both Liliʻuokalani and Sanford Ballard Dole, for both pursued policies designed to promote small farms and diversified enterprises. After Dole became president of the Republic of Hawaiʻi in 1894, he passed a Land Act the following year to use both the government and crown lands to promote small farms, a policy he continued as governor. The sugar
planters, however, do not seem to have been very enthusiastic about Dole’s small-farms policy.33

John Kidwell played a less significant role in the events of the 1890s. He served as a sharpshooter in Company A of the armed insurgents who supported the leaders of the coup.34 This may be where he acquired the title of “Captain,” which he used in the latter part of his life.

By 1893, one hundred thousand plants were growing at Apokaa, and the first cannery was established there. Since neither Kidwell nor Emmeluth had any experience in canning pineapples, they hired at considerable expense an expert canner from Baltimore, the principal center of the American canned food industry, where canned pineapple had been produced since at least 1865. However, he proved to know no more about canning pineapples than his employers. So Kidwell had to learn how to can pineapples through a process of trial and error.35

One of the last laws passed by the Legislative Assembly before the coup had been an act to encourage the cultivation, canning, and preserving of pineapples in an attempt to diversify the economy away from sugar. For a period of ten years after 1892, all tools, machinery, appliances, buildings, and all other personal property used in the cultivation, canning, or preserving of pineapples and held for export had been exempted from all taxes. Furthermore, all tools, machinery, or appliances to be used exclusively in canning or preserving pineapples for export, or for the manufacture of containers for the same, and also all containers for use in connection therewith and the material for making them, could be imported into Hawai‘i free of duty for ten years. This law appears to have had the support of both factions in the legislature.36

Kidwell was appointed the manager of the Hawaiian Fruit & Packing Company. The company’s cannery eventually had a capacity of ten thousand cans per day. According to Kidwell, he received testimony from his customers that no other canned pineapples put on the American market came near to his in quality.37 This was not the result of his cannery’s primitive technology but rather the result of the rigid system of inspection he maintained.38 Between 1895 and 1898, Hawaiian exports of canned pineapples increased from 468 cases worth $972 to 3,151 cases worth $5,816. As Dr. Auguste Mar-
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ques was later to report to the French Foreign Ministry, however, the excessive shipping charges and the high American tariff duties meant the pineapple industry was barely profitable. The exports of fresh pineapples appear to have been more successful because they entered the American market duty free until 1897. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, during the 1890s, San Francisco and the markets of the West Coast were largely supplied from Hawai'i. The *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* later argued that the Hawaiian growers had found these fresh pineapple exports to be unprofitable.

The first obstacle Kidwell met in exporting canned pineapple to the U.S. West Coast was a combine of buyers who sought to compel him to accept $1.50 a dozen for his superior product. Kidwell forced them above that price, but it took continual warfare with the men who controlled the market to get a mutually satisfactory price. His last shipment secured $2.35 per dozen cans ex ship at San Francisco.

Kidwell’s shipments were made to William, Dimond & Company of San Francisco. However, the firm was unable to sell Kidwell’s canned pineapple, although their price of $2 a dozen tins was considered to be reasonable. After keeping the goods on hand for a long time, the firm cut its price to $1.25 a dozen and sold all of its stock. At this price there was strong demand from both wholesalers and retailers. The Hawaiian product was considered to be of a much higher quality than the Singapore canned pineapple that had previously been imported by the San Francisco merchants. But although these merchants made a big profit, the reduced price was below the cost of production and freight.

Although there was a strong demand for canned pineapple by 1898, Kidwell’s cannery appears to have been unprofitable. Fortunately the Apokaa pineapple plantation was well adapted to the growing of sugar cane. The nearby Ewa plantation needed more cane for the profitable operation of its sugar mill. Ewa’s management wanted the Apokaa land adjoining their plantation, which they believed was being “wasted” on pineapple. Every argument was brought to bear upon Kidwell to cause him to change from pineapple cultivation to sugar cane growing. Eventually Kidwell formed the Apokaa Sugar Company, sublet his fields to the sugar plantation, and sold his cannery to the former rival Pearl City Fruit Company. Emmeluth appears
to have invested his proceeds from the sale of the cannery in the Pearl City Fruit Company. He retained an interest in this company even after British-owned Theo H. Davies & Company acquired majority control of Pearl City in 1905. Like Kidwell's company, however, Davies failed to make a success of the business and in 1927 closed it. In 1898 Kidwell retired from the pineapple business after ten years' active participation. This was also the year Hawai'i was annexed to the United States.

With the rent from the Apokaa Sugar Company and his share of the proceeds of around $5,000 from the sale of the cannery, Kidwell was able to retire at the age of fifty and never had to work again. He took up residence at 1835 Wilder Avenue, Honolulu. Around 1912 he moved to 2426 O'ahu Avenue, Honolulu, where he lived for the remainder of his life. Kidwell spent his retirement traveling around the world, and in particular in Africa. In June 1922 he took part in the twenty-first anniversary celebrations of the foundation of the Shriners' Aloha Temple. Kidwell had become a Shriner on 14 November 1908. During the celebrations he was taken ill. He died after an extended illness on 6 July 1922 at the Queen's Hospital in Honolulu, still a bachelor, as he had been all his life.

Kidwell's cannery was not the first pineapple cannery outside the United States within the American sphere of influence. It seems likely that the first successful pineapple cannery in the world outside the United States was established in the Bahamas in 1876. The American-owned Smith & Wicks cannery, which was later taken over by J. S. Johnson of New York City, was part of the Bahamas's largest industry, fresh and canned pineapple exports, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The greater part of the fresh pineapples consumed in the United States in the 1890s were imported from the Bahamas. The pioneer cannery in the Bahamas produced as much as ten thousand cases a year and by the early 1880s already had a capacity of seventy-five thousand cases a year. Kidwell's cannery was small by comparison.

Was the ultimate success of Hawai'i based on lessons learned from the experience of the Bahamas? The Hawaiian pioneer pineapple growers and Kidwell must have known of the existence of the Bahamian industry because the Hawaiian Planters' Monthly republished an
1882 report on it by the U.S. consul in the Bahamas in 1892. Furthermore, Bahamian records show that Hawai‘i imported 108,000 pineapple slips (planting stock) from the Bahamas in 1892. The pineapple industry of the Bahamas seems to have declined in reverse relationship to the growth of the Hawaiian pineapple canning industry in the first two decades and a half of the twentieth century. It ceased to exist in 1926.

As the Canning Trade observed shortly before Kidwell’s death,

The . . . development of the [Hawaiian] pineapple industry is founded on his selection of the Smooth Cayenne variety and on his conviction that the future lay in the canned product, rather than in shipping the fruit in the green state. . . .

John Kidwell had the prescience to see the potential of the canned pineapple industry in Hawai‘i. In the early twentieth century, American businessmen revived the Hawaiian pineapple canning industry, and it became the second most important industry in the Islands for much of this century. The success of these businessmen, in particular, James D. Dole, owed much to the efforts of John Kidwell. In the early 1900s there was a strong unfulfilled demand for Hawaiian canned pineapple in California, and now that Hawai‘i was part of the United States, it was no longer subject to any duty. The Pacific Commercial Advertiser reported in June 1903 that Harry Lewis of William, Dimond & Company was convinced that Kidwell’s company had shown that Hawaiian canned pineapple was superior to both the Singapore and Bahamian competition. This proved to be the case. Kidwell’s successors were also able to establish a premium for their product and achieve economies of scale through mass production. As a result, the canned pineapple industry was to prove highly profitable.

NOTES

3 General Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths, England, Birth Certificates,
March 1849, Barnstaple, vol. 10, 37. Kidwell’s birth certificate does not list his mother’s profession and does not list his father.

4 The 1851 census shows that the Mary Ann Kidwell and her son were no longer residents of Marwood.


7 PCA 9 Feb. 1921, B3.


12 Law 3043, P. G. Camarinos vs. John Kidwell, AH.

13 Tate, The Hawaiian Kingdom 197–98; PCA 3 Nov. 1900, 4.


18 Tate, The Hawaiian Kingdom 114.


22 "Queen Liliuokalani's Address at the Biennial Opening of the Hawaiian Legislature," PCA 30 May 1892, 2.
23 "An Agricultural Bureau," PCA 17 Dec. 1892, 2; Laws of Her Majesty Liliuokalani Queen of the Hawaiian Islands Passed by the Legislative Assembly at its Session 1892 (1893) 238–41.
27 PCA 11 Mar. 1892, 2.
31 PCA 18 Oct. 1900, 4; "John Emmeluth," PCA 3 Nov. 1900, 4; PCA 21 Feb. 1901, 1; PCA 28 Feb. 1901, 1; PCA 7 Mar. 1901, 4; PCA 9 May 1901, 4; PCA 3 June 1902, 4.
34 Chapin, “The Queen’s ‘Greek Artillery Fire’” 21.
36 Laws of Her Majesty Liliuokalani Queen of the Islands Passed by the Legislative Assembly at its 1892 (1893) 126–27; Thurston, “Report of Committee on Fruit Culture” 525.
38 PCA 9 Feb. 1921, B3.
42 “Pineapples Sold Cheap: San Francisco Is Treated to a Surprise: Get One
Cargo at Low Rates, Now Cries for More," PCA 18 June 1903, 3 (this article appears to be about Kidwell’s business); “The Hawaiian Pineapple Industry” 16.


45 While the 9 Feb. 1921 PCA interview with Kidwell is the only source for the account of Kidwell’s African travels, he definitely visited California after his retirement. He spent several weeks on the mainland in early 1922, according to the Canning Trade. PCA 9 Feb. 1921, B3; Canning Trade 45.26 (20 Feb. 1922): 28; F. M. Husted, Directory of Honolulu and Territory of Hawaii (Honolulu: Husted, 1902) 269; F. M. Husted, Directory of Honolulu and Territory of Hawaii 1905–6 (Honolulu: Husted, 1905) 239; Directory of Honolulu and the Territory of Hawaii 1912 (Honolulu: Polk-Husted, 1912) 408; Directory of Honolulu and the Territory of Hawaii 1922 (Honolulu: Polk-Husted, 1922) 498.

46 The Shriners are a nonsecret American version of the Freemasons. “Shriners Celebrate 21st Anniversary of Foundation of Aloha Temple,” HSB 22 June 1922, A4.


48 “Man Who Developed Pines Dies: Capt. John Kidwell, Father of Pineapple Industry, Is Summoned,” HSB 6 July 1922, 1, 10. The Aloha Temple’s records indicate that Kidwell died on 29 Apr. 1922, in Honolulu. I have taken the newspaper report to be the most authoritative source.


50 McLain, “The Pineapple Trade of the Bahamas” 564–70.


52 “The Hawaiian Pineapple Industry” 16.

53 PCA 18 June 1903, 3.