King Kalākaua: An International Perspective

This year marks the 100th year of the death in San Francisco, on January 20, 1891, of David Kalākaua, Hawai‘i’s last king.

The King Kalākaua Jubilee Centennial Celebration, organized by the Friends of ‘Iolani Palace in November of 1986, presented an opportunity to reassess the achievements of this seventh monarch of the Hawaiian Islands. For an entire week, from November 9 until November 16, the most impressive events staged 100 years earlier were reenacted, such as the firemen’s torchlight parade, the first public illumination of the Palace with electric lights, the royal ball, the military drill, the grand lū‘au. Nothing of importance was omitted, and when on the last day the traditional 21-gun salute reserved for a head of state thundered across the palace grounds, those who had the good fortune to be present witnessed a scene they would not easily forget.

Kalākaua, of course, did not always enjoy such popularity. Most historians present this sovereign, who was born in 1836 and who reigned from 1874 until his death in 1891 (fig. 1), as a fairly controversial figure. They generally leave us with the impression of an unpredictable leader and lighthearted spendthrift who, above all, liked parties, drank inordinate amounts of champagne, and most certainly deserved the epithet of “the Merry Monarch.”

A good part of this criticism is the legacy of Kalākaua’s ene-
Fig. 1. One of the last photos taken of the King, aboard the U.S.S. Charleston: (left to right) Colonel G. W. Macfarlane, King Kalākaua, Major R. H. Baker. (AH photo collection.)
KING KALĀKAUA

In recent years, attempts have been made to evaluate Kalākaua and other leading Hawaiian figures in a more sympathetic vein. In addition, the long-neglected Native point of view is now reinterpreting the colonial experience in the strongly accentuated theses, articles, and speeches delivered by young Hawaiians like Haunani-Kay Trask, Mililani Trask, and Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa (Dorton). While not everyone applauds this trend, it nevertheless constitutes an important part of a process which is as necessary as it is inevitable and which ultimately will enrich our understanding of these Islands and their fascinating history.

A central aspect of Kalākaua’s reign has so far not been given the attention it deserves, however, and that is his foreign policy. It is precisely from a closer examination of his respective efforts that we gain important insights into the character and the goals of a king who shaped the future of his realm to a greater extent than is generally recognized.

When High Chief David Laʻamea Kamanakapuʻu Mahinulani Nalōiaʻehuokalani Lumialani Kalākaua ascended the throne on February 12, 1874, the outlook for his small kingdom located in the central Pacific was not particularly propitious. The second age of colonialism, dominated by England and France and influenced towards the end of the 19th century by the German Empire and the United States, cast a growing shadow onto the world’s largest ocean. To the southwest of Hawai‘i, Fiji had shortly before yielded her sovereignty to Great Britain, while Sāmoa barely held her own. In 1880, the king of Sāmoa would have to submit to the collective wisdom of a council formed by the consuls of England, Germany, and the United States; and in 1900, his archipelago would be carved up by the latter two, while London would be given carte blanche in the Solomons and Tonga. The Tongan sovereign, Tupou I, would manage to cling to his throne but would also have to consider foreign “advice,” in his case the guidance of a British agent and consul with headquarters conveniently located next to the royal palace. As to Australia and New Zealand, they had been British colonies from the beginning of British exploration.
To the south, Kalākaua and his advisors were confronted with the tragedy of the valiant Queen Pomare IV of Tahiti, who in 1843 had been obliged to submit to a French protectorate, notwithstanding strong Native opposition against the intruders. In 1874, she was still the sovereign, nominally at least, but, just as in Tonga, a foreign governor, French in this case, resided next door. In 1880, her son Pomare V would ignominiously sign his kingdom over to Paris as a co-called “gift.”

To the northwest, the ancient Empire of Japan had been “opened” in 1853 by Commodore Matthew Perry and his “black ships,” and the even older Empire of China was under great pressure to grant trading concessions to an assortment of Western nations including Germany and the United States. To the north, the icy wastes of Alaska, known also as Russian America, had been purchased in 1867 by Washington from Tsar Alexander II.

To the northeast, the United States, having overcome the ravages of the Civil War, oscillated between a policy of expansionism advocated by the Republican Party and one of self-restraint championed by the Democrats. Far-reaching minds were discussing the feasibility of digging a canal through the isthmus of Nicaragua. They reasoned that such a waterway, built in a similar manner to Ferdinand de Lesseps’ Suez Canal, which had opened in 1869, would enable Washington to guard the Pacific as well as the Atlantic coasts with only one fleet instead of two. In such a case, control of the Hawaiian Islands would help to defend the western approaches to the envisioned canal.

The international situation was, therefore, not promising. To make matters worse, the dubious notion that might makes right had of late received a strong if unintended impulse from Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). This work, which at first glance appeared to be limited to the fields of biology and geology, was swiftly applied by social scientists to politics as the doctrine of “the survival of the fittest.”

At home in Hawai‘i there was not much cause for optimism, either. It was true that the Hawaiians still represented the majority of the population, and it was equally true that they were deeply loyal to the throne, regardless of the fact that many would have preferred the unhesitatingly pro-British attitude displayed by
Emma, the dowager queen, to Kalākaua’s friendly overtures towards Washington. The mortality rate of the Native people exceeded the birth rate with depressing regularity, however, and the small but vigorous Caucasian population kept growing just as steadily as the Native ranks were thinning.

Prominent among the Caucasians were the children of the missionaries. Their parents had undertaken the dangerous voyage to the Islands, inspired by noble dreams of doing God’s work in a remote land. They had displayed much courage and resolve, but they had also been driven by convictions which elsewhere were considered rather excessive. They cherished their Calvinist faith and thus occupied a position not far removed from the radical fringes of Protestantism. As the lineal descendants of those Puritans, who in 17th century England had executed the unfortunate Charles I and had established a short-lived republic, they were by nature opposed to pomp and circumstance in general and monarchy in particular, unless it served their own purposes. They had a tendency to be self-righteous, and, in accordance with their Calvinist creed, money played a considerable role, because in a curiously roundabout way the possession of wealth was supposed to prove that a man was reckoned by God among the saved and would thus be spared everlasting damnation. As a matter of course, they did not much value the cultural achievements of indigenous peoples.  

It was difficult for Hawaiians to forget various threats to their autonomy. In 1854, for example, missionary advisors had suggested to a hard-pressed Kamehameha III, who had seen his country’s independence challenged first by Great Britain, then by France, and finally by the possible arrivals of filibusters from California, that as a last resort he could cede his realm to the United States. It was still harder to ignore the fact that many missionary families had kept American flags at the ready to be hoisted immediately over their houses, should the King have followed this advice.  

There resided more moderate Caucasians in Hawai‘i, notably leading British and German citizens, as well as a number of Americans, but the Hawaiian patriots could hardly be blamed if they remained skeptical.

Even earlier, in 1815, Georg Anton Schaffer of the Russian
America Company had tried to first take over O‘ahu, and a year later Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau. In 1843, Lord George Paulet had hoisted the Union Jack over the Islands, and it had flown for half a year. There followed several threatening appearances of French men-of-war, culminating in the so-called “War of the Calabashes” of 1847 when Admiral Legoarant de Tromelin fired the guns of the *Poursuivante* at the fort of Honolulu.

By the year of Kalākaua’s accession, these dangers of dominance had been overcome, however, and the new king was not willing to give in to the demands of some other power now. Thus, he set about to fashion his policies which essentially rested on three pillars:

one, in order to placate the restless Caucasians who at that time were mostly interested in securing their struggling sugar plantations and related ventures, the King supported long-standing efforts to conclude a reciprocity treaty with the United States, the nearest market for the Kingdom’s exports;

two, since close economic cooperation with a great state inherently carried the risk of political domination, Kalākaua at the same time set out to pursue a foreign policy designed to emphasize the status of Hawai‘i as a fully independent nation;

three, the King took measures to strengthen the viability of his own people and to support their rich heritage. He established the policy of *ho‘oulu i ka lāhui*, to make the nation grow, and initiated a revival of the hula, “the life-blood of his people,” as he called it.

Ultimately, Kalākaua’s actions can be understood in the light of these three principles. Although they were never officially formulated in any one particular government document or master plan, they were apparent in the strategies pursued, and little time was lost in implementing them.

In 1874, Kalākaua personally went to Washington, D.C., and became the first head of state of any foreign nation to address a joint session of Congress. He successfully concluded the negotiations for the reciprocity treaty which eventually was ratified by both Hawai‘i and the U.S. When the treaty became effective, it brought huge profits to the planters and to business in general.

Kalākaua also stepped up the diplomatic and consular presence of his nation. By 1892, the monarchy maintained no fewer than 93
legations, consulates general, and consulates, a network which spanned the globe. In Great Britain alone, there were a legation and 13 consulates from Liverpool to Edinburgh. In the United States, there was the legation in Washington, D.C., and there were eight consulates reaching from coast to coast. In the German empire, the Hawaiian colors were displayed in five cities. There was a consul in Vienna and one in Rome, and a Hawaiian consul even resided in Pape‘ete, the capital of Tahiti. Most of these positions were honorary, but that was the general custom in those days, and the extent of Hawai‘i’s presence abroad in any case was noteworthy.\(^7\)

In close conjunction with these diplomatic measures, the requirements of protocol and international etiquette were strictly observed in Honolulu. The King, the Queen, and the national flag were accorded a 21-gun salute, an ambassador extraordinary and plentipotentiary rated 19 guns, a governor or high commissioner 17, an admiral of the fleet 15, a minister resident 13, a chargé d’affaires 11, a consul general nine, and a consul seven.

On the educational plane, a “studies abroad program,” as it would be called today, was designed to ensure a pool of gifted and highly schooled Hawaiians who would enable the government to fill important positions in the foreign ministry and other governmental branches. As Agnes Quigg states in “Kalākaua’s Hawaiian Studies Abroad Program,” a group of 17 promising young men and one young woman were sent on government funds to the four corners of the world: five to Italy, four to the U.S., three to England, three to Scotland, two to Japan, and one to China. Several other students went abroad on funds of their own.\(^8\)

Royalty was not spared the pangs of homesickness and the challenges that had to be faced in foreign lands. Princess Ka‘iulani, expected to become the next heir to the crown after Lili‘uokalani, left the Islands for Great Britain to receive the education deemed necessary for a sovereign destined to reign in the 20th century. The three princes, David Kawananakoa, Jonah Kūhiō Kalaniana‘ole, and Edward Keli‘iahonui, who ranked directly after Ka‘iulani in the line of succession, attended a private school in San Mateo, California.

Kalākaua himself decided to see the world firsthand and cir-
cumnavigated the globe in 1881, a feat never before achieved by any ruling monarch in history (fig. 2). This unique royal progress added greatly to the prestige of the small mid-Pacific nation, notwithstanding the fact that it was carried out with a minimum of means. The King was accompanied by two officials and one valet. Kalākaua’s erudition, his excellent command of English, and his charm left a lasting impression in many places. He is still remembered in Vienna and in Berlin, and it was while he was traveling in the German empire that he was presented with a resplendent *Schellenbaum*, an ornamental instrument characterized by a boom.

Fig. 2. The King’s visit to Japan in 1881: (seated left to right) Prince Yoshiaka, Lieutenant General of the Order of Meiji, King Kalākaua, and T. Tsunatami, Minister of Finance; (standing left to right) Colonel Charles Hasting Judd, Chamberlain to the King, Jugai Okuno Ryoiski, First Secretary, Finance Department, William Armstrong, Commissioner of Immigration for the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. (AH photo collection.)
Fig. 3. King Kalākaua and the Pickelhaube, the spiked helmet that was a symbol of the Prussian army. (AH photo collection.)
in the shape of a crescent mounted on a staff complete with one large bell, many small bells, and two horsetails in the national colors. This instrument, recently restored to the Royal Hawaiian Band in the form of an exact replica, is but one of many symbols of esteem accorded this Hawaiian ruler (figs. 3 and 4).

Other missions on the highest level followed. In the spring of 1883, Kalākaua was invited by Tsar Alexander III of Russia to send an envoy to his coronation. This interesting invitation came about as a direct consequence of Kalākaua’s own coronation on February 12 of the same year, which had attracted international attention. The Hawaiian sovereign dispatched Colonel Curtis Piʻehu Iʻaukea as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Iʻaukea, who was not yet 28 years old, had at his disposal the services of a single secretary, part-Hawaiian Henry Poor. The United States, on the other hand, dispatched a warship to accommodate the large American delegation headed by Minister William Henry Hunt.

Notwithstanding the miniscule size of his party, Iʻaukea made a most favorable impression with the potentates of Europe and the brilliant society gathered at the Kremlin. He was received by the tsar and tsarina, met with a great number of dignitaries, and conversed no fewer than five times with Count Nikholai Karlovich von Giers, Russia’s foreign minister. Deeply moved by the importance of the mission entrusted to him, Iʻaukea later wrote of his first evening in Moscow that “the sight of my country’s flag floating over the entrance to the Hotel Duseaux besides those of the United States and Japan, gave me an added incentive to meet the responsibilities that lay ahead and discharge them with honor.”

From Russia, Iʻaukea traveled to Berlin, Vienna, Belgrade, London, Rome, and then by way of the Suez Canal to India and Japan. There he was received by Emperor Meiji and proved instrumental in the plans that established full scale immigration from Japan to Hawai‘i after an initial attempt in 1868 had ended in failure.

In 1887, Queen Kapiʻolani and Crown Princess Liliʻuokalani attended Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee in London, the capital of what then was the most powerful nation in the world.
Fig. 4. Prince Henry of Prussia visits Hawai‘i in 1879, as sketched by C. Salzmann, in Niklaus R. Schweizer, *Hawai‘i and the German Speaking Peoples* (Honolulu, Topgallant P, 1982.) (George Bacon photo.)
In the meantime, on January 1, 1882, Hawai‘i had joined the World Postal Union, one of the first truly international organizations. The Union had been established in Berne, Switzerland, in 1874, the year of the King’s accession. Kalākaua, who once had served as Hawai‘i’s postmaster general, understood the importance of worldwide cooperation, and thus Hawai‘i became an early member of this global institution. In addition to the increased prestige which membership conferred upon the Kingdom, the practical benefits were lower postal rates and unimpeached service to Europe.

No effort was spared to place the independence of Hawai‘i on a solid basis. All governments occasionally make mistakes and commit blunders, and Kalākaua’s administration was no exception. Walter Murray Gibson, premier from 1882 until 1887, came under particularly heavy attack by his opponents, the sugar planters, lawyers, and businessmen led by the sons and grandsons of the Calvinist missionaries. A complex personality, he was a dreamer and a visionary pursuing goals which were not entirely free from self-interest. He was eminently practical as well, contributing in substantial ways to the welfare of the Kingdom and in particular the indigenous Hawaiians. Recent reassessments of this controversial figure, to whom we owe ‘Iolani Palace and the statue of Kamehameha I, have rebalanced his legacy which was erased by his opponents. Gibson’s greatest mistake, which led to his downfall in 1887, was the attempt to forge an alliance of the Polynesian archipelagos which had eluded outright colonization, an effort culminating in the deployment of the Kaimiloa, the only vessel of the short-lived navy of Kalākaua (fig. 5).

In 1887, Gibson’s grand scheme ended in a hasty retreat. The debacle embarrassed the King and triggered the rebellion on the part of the Caucasian opposition who imposed a new constitution at gunpoint, which quickly came to be known as the “Bayonet Constitution.” The mercurial premier and foreign minister was unceremoniously dismissed and banished from Hawai‘i. He was lucky to escape alive.

One hundred years later, the political climate presents itself in a very different light, however. Regional cooperation has become the order of the day, and what was once considered an act of
extreme recklessness suggests now statesmanship and foresight. It is interesting to note that King Taufa‘ahau Tupou IV of Tonga has recently revived Gibson’s idea in a modified form on a strictly economic and cultural plane. The last Polynesian sovereign envisions a Polynesian Economic and Cultural Community which would embrace not only independent states, but would also recognize those islanders whose territories belong to metropolitan Western nations, such as the inhabitants of French Polynesia, the Maori of New Zealand, and the Hawaiians. It shall be interesting to see whether anything concrete will emerge from the plan advanced by the King of Tonga.

In any case, it was symptomatic of the state of affairs in the sec-
ond half of the 19th century that Kalākaua’s achievements were more readily noticed by temporary residents and visitors from Europe than by the local Caucasian establishment. For example, Marie Gabriel Bosseront d’Anglade, first secretary in the French legation from 1889 to 1892, described the severely restricted role to which Kalākaua had been reduced by the “Bayonet Constitution”:

Despite his precarious mandate and legacy, Kalākaua remains a most outstanding example of the kind of devotion a sovereign can present to his people. He was sincere, he realized the impossibility of restraining the revolutionary process, he comprehended the larger interests at work, and then he submitted with good grace. Identifying immediately with the new political situation, however painful to him, he became the most proficient of constitutional kings. He presided at the opening of the legislature and read his speeches from the throne. In solemn audience he received foreign diplomats and representatives. He officiated at endless ceremonies etc.¹⁴

Frederich Richter, the first pastor (1833–1887) of the German Lutheran Church at Lihu‘e, on Kaua‘i, happened to be in Honolulu on October 29, 1881, when Kalākaua returned from his voyage around the world. In his rare diary entitled In ferne Welt, Richter described vividly and with admiration the jubilation and the pomp and circumstance with which the homecoming of the King on October 29, 1881 was greeted by his people:

Häusern entlang und über die Straßen weg. Besonders phantastisch und schön waren die chinesischen Baldachine, die sich an zwei Kreuzungspunkten der Straßen im Quadrat über den ganzen Straßenknoten spannten, über und über beladen mit wortbedecktem chinesischen Flitter, Lampions etc. in glühenden Farben. . . . Endlich war der Zug geordnet und setzte sich in Bewegung. Der Musik-Kapelle folgte das Militär, zwei Kompagnien Infanterie in ihren neuen preußischen Uniformen, die eine mit roten, die andere mit blauen Federbüschern, und eine Schwadron blauer Dragooner, alles Eingeborenen, von denen sich besonders die Dragoner auf ihren prächtigen Gängen recht stattlich ausnahmen, wenn auch die Haltung viel zu wünschen übrig ließ. Dann kam der König selbst in einem prächtigen Wagen, begleitet von den Hofchargen in godbetrafter Uniform zu Pferde und überall mit freundigem Zuruf empfangen. Er trug einen dunklen Anzug und schwarzen Zylinder und sieht in seinem schwarzen Vollbart sehr gut aus. Es folgte wieder Musik, und dann die verschiedenen Schulen und Korporationen, Feuerwehr, etc. in Uniform oder reich bekrausen und mit zahlreichen Fagnen und sonstigen Emblemen.

At 2 o’clock there suddenly resounded the thunder of cannons from Punchbowl and an endless whistling emerged from the harbor. One flag after the other shot up and in no time it was known everywhere that the steamer from San Francisco, expected only tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, was arriving already now, and that the King was abroad. I went down there to observe the entry. In the streets carriages and horsemen in uniform and civilian dress were rushing to and fro and created an awful dust. Everyone pushed towards the landing place and towards the streets leading from there to the Palace, which were decorated in a truly magnificent way. One green triumphal arch after the other had been erected; flags and garlands in the national colors and with messages of welcome in Hawaiian, English, and Chinese were strung in rich profusion along the houses and across the streets. Particularly fantastic and beautiful were the Chinese canopies extending above two intersections in a quadrangle across the entire square, covered completely with Chinese tinsel bearing inscriptions, lanterns etc. in glowing colors. . . . At long last the procession was organized and began to move. The band was followed by the military, two companies of infantry in their new Prussian uniforms, the one with red, the other with blue feather bushes, and a squadron of blue dragoons, all natives, among whom particularly the dragoons on their superb mounts looked rather imposing, even though their posture left much to be desired. Then came the King
himself in a magnificent carriage, accompanied by courtiers on horseback in gold-embroidered uniforms, and everywhere received with joyous shouts. He wore a dark suit and a black top-hat and he looked very well with his black beard. There followed again a band, and then the various schools, associations and societies, the fire brigade, etc. in uniforms or richly bedecked with wreaths and carrying innumerable flags and other emblems.

If one takes a wider view of Kalākaua's endeavors and achievements, it becomes increasingly clear that this Hawaiian monarch was more far-sighted than is usually granted. Hawai‘i under his leadership brought about a measure of good will around the globe that was without precedent. Kalākaua and his people enjoyed the friendship of Queen Victoria, Tsar Alexander III, the emperor of Germany, and even the sympathy of Japan, that mysterious Asian nation which in consequence of Perry's "black ships" created modern industry and built a formidable army and navy.

With a time lag of some 30 years, the wave of decolonization, which had engulfed first Asia in the late 1940s and 1950s, and then Africa in the late 1950s and the 1960s, finally reached the Pacific. Ripples of this epochal phenomenon are now being felt even in Ko Hawai‘i Pae ‘Aīna, "The Hawaiian Archipelago," a poetic way of referring to the Islands frequently used in the indigenous language. As Hawaiians are reasserting their right to autonomy after having gone the colonization route for a hundred years, Kalākaua's attempts to maintain his political and cultural sovereignty in the face of the highwater mark of the colonial tide serves them as a powerful inspiration.

Notes

1 Historians have frequently drawn from William D. Alexander, History of the Later Years of the Hawaiian Monarchy and Revolution of 1893 (Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette, 1896); Lucien Young, The Boston at Hawaii, or The Observations and Impressions of a Naval Officer ... (Washington, D.C.: Gibson Brothers, 1898), a work expanded into The Real Hawaii: Its History and Present Condition (1899, rpt. New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1970); John Leavitt Stevens and W. B. Olson, Riches and Marvels of Hawaii: A Charming Description of Her Unique History ... (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing, 1900); Sanford Ballard Dole, Memories of the Hawaiian Revolution (Honolulu: Advertiser Pub-


5 Winston Churchill wrote of the original pilgrims on the *Mayflower*: “as one of their number records, ‘The place they had thoughts on was some of the vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for habitation; being devoid of all civil inhabitants; where there are only savage and brutish men, which range up and down little otherwise than the wild beasts of the same’”; *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*, 4 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1956) 2:167.

6 Ethel Mosely Damon, for example, wrote: “It was during the middle years of 1850 that the little Malumalu colony kept a silk flag of stars and stripes ready in case the news of annexation to the United States should be suddenly announced by word from abroad. The patriotic ladies of Lihue had made the flag themselves, Mrs. Reynolds, Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Rice, and held it ever in readiness against such a happy emergency. To those who lived through the thrills of actual annexation at the end of the century, 1853 and 1854 seem remote dates indeed for such excitement to have been at white heat. But so it was.” Damon, *Koamalu, A Story of Pioneers on Kauai and of What They Built in That Island Garden*, 2 vols. (Honolulu: privately printed, 1931) 1:441.

7 *Directory and Handbook of the Kingdom of Hawaii* (San Francisco, F. M. Husted, 1892) 48-51.


11 James McGuire, a member of Queen Kapiʻolani’s retinue, wrote a moving account in Hawaiian: He moolelo pokole o ka huakai hele a ka Moiwahine Kapiolani i Enelani i ka makahiki 1887 i ka iubile a ka Moiwahine Vitoria o Beretania Nui (Honolulu: Collegiate Press, 1938).


13 The King is quoted as having said: “It [the proposed Polynesian Economic and Cultural Community] is an attempt to have people sit down at the table and talk to one another—people who have been barred from doing so such as French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and Hawaii, who cannot get membership of the South Pacific Forum. The idea is to have discussions and exchanges with people who otherwise would be barred.” In David Lomas, “King Taufaʻahau Tupou,” Island Business, Feb. 1988:10.

