A Danish Sailor’s View of Hawai’i in 1846

In 1985 Karen Rasmussen found an old diary in a bureau on the Rasmussen family’s farm, Graesbjerg, in Ulstrup on northwestern Zealand. The diary was written by Cornelius Schmidt, one of the crew members on the Danish corvette *Galathea*, which from 1845 to 1847 made a cruise around the world. None of the Rasmussen family knew who Cornelius Schmidt was. The bureau came from Mrs. Rasmussen’s home, but whether her parents had inherited it or had bought it at an auction is unknown.¹

*Galathea*, 32 guns, Capt. Steen Andersen Bille, anchored three-quarters of a mile outside Honolulu at nine o’clock on Monday, October 5, 1846. She carried a crew of 231, including five scientists and two artists. At noon, the fort, on which the Sandwich Islands flag flew, was saluted by twenty-one guns; the fort responded in kind.²

*Galathea* had left Copenhagen on June 23, 1845, and had called at ports in Europe and the Far East before arriving at Honolulu. Apart from showing the Danish flag and furthering Danish trade and shipping, the corvette had other missions. The English East India Company had bought the two Danish colonies in India, Tranquebar and Serampore. By a royal decree of June 6, 1845, Captain Bille had been instructed to witness the transfer. Bille was also instructed to attempt to reestablish the Danish colony in the Nicobar Islands. In the Pacific a most-favored-nation trade agreement should be negotiated between Denmark and the government of the Sandwich Islands. This

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agreement should also lead to Danish recognition of the independence of the Sandwich Islands.

Upon *Galathea*’s return Captain Bille wrote a book in three volumes, with an exhaustive description of the geography and the history of the ports of call, and refers to his negotiations with foreign authorities and the like. In 1930 an abbreviated version in two volumes was published (I refer to both editions in the notes). Bille got his information on Hawai‘i’s history from the books of J. J. Jarves and Sheldon Dibble. Schmidt probably got his information by word of mouth, as is indicated by his spelling of proper names, where the *ls* in the printed books become *rs*. He does not give his source.

Cornelius Schmidt was born in Døstrup in Southern Jutland in 1823. His father was a school teacher. The only thing that is known of his life before he joined the *Galathea* is that his military service had been in the navy. Schmidt kept a diary during the entire cruise. He recorded detailed information about everything he observed and learned at the different ports of call, but the diary tells relatively little about the tough everyday life aboard a small man-of-war. Hawai‘i, or the Sandwich Islands, as Schmidt consistently called the Islands, is not only described, but alone of all the places he visited, its history is told in the diary.

Below is a translation of the part of Schmidt’s diary in which he describes the Sandwich Islands and their history. I have not attempted to translate Schmidt’s mid-nineteenth-century Danish into mid-nineteenth-century English. I do, however, try to follow his language structure, and I retain his spelling of personal and place names.

**Cornelius Schmidt’s Diary**

*October 6, 1846*

At noon the governor was on board. He was saluted by 11 guns. He was a native, tall and broad. His face was rather dark, and he had a fine bearing. His uniform coat was blue with a gold braided collar, with fine epaulettes in the style of a naval officer’s, a sword, and a three-cornered hat.
October 19, 1846

The secretary of finances, an Englishman,9 was on board; he was saluted by 13 guns. He was dressed in black and had a red ribbon across the breast, like the one the Danish Knights of the Elephant wear.10 He wore a silver star on the breast. By the way, he was chief chamberlain.

October 28, 1846

At 11 o’clock the Sandvichian king, Tamehameha III [Kamehameha III], came on board with his suite. He was greeted with a 27-gun salute, and the crew manned the yards. The English frigate Juno and the French corvette Lamproia11 also saluted. When the king disembarked, he was saluted again. The crew manning the yards shouted hurrah three times. The king is very tall and rather black, but with a well-formed face. He was wearing a beautiful gold-embroidered uniform with epaulettes, sword, and a three-cornered hat. His suite included the heir to the throne and a couple of other princes; some of the suite were wearing fine uniforms.

October 31, 1846

The Sandvich Islands were discovered by the English Captain Cook, who later was killed by the natives on Ovaihi [Hawai‘i]. The Sandvich Islands are situated between 21 and 24 degrees northern latitude, approximately halfway between America and China in the middle of the North Pacific. They are used as a supply station by the whaling ships visiting these waters. When the islands were discovered Teriubu [Kalani‘ōpuʻu] ruled over Ovaihi, but he died shortly after their [Cook’s ships] departure. Tamehameha, who later became very famous, was a son of Teriubu’s brother. Immediately upon Teriubu’s death Tamehameha gathered his supporters and attacked Teriubu’s heir. In this battle, Tamehameha personally killed his opponent. When Vancouver visited the islands in 1791, Ovaihi and Mouhi [Maui] were under Tamehameha’s sway. Shortly thereafter he conquered O‘ahu, and in 1817, through the actions of his brave favorite
Kreimaku [Kalanimōkū], he became ruler of all the Sandvich Islands. Vancouver contributed much to establish the power of this king and held him in the greatest esteem. He built him a decked boat, which increased his power considerably. In the presence of Vancouver and all the chiefs, Tamehameha formally ceded the
islands to the king of Great Britain, and since that time the natives have regarded themselves as under the protection of the English.

The murder of Captain Cook, Lieutenant Hergest's murder, and the treacherous attack on an American ship, which they took, made sailors distrustful of the natives. When it was learned that Tamehameha had punished the murderers, and when Vancouver and the other sailors distributed more correct information on their character, the islands little by little were visited by an increasing number of the whalers working in the Pacific. Several strangers were persuaded by the king to take up residence on the islands. A trading post for the products of the islands was established. The goods were paid for in Spanish dollars, garment articles, and the like. The native chiefs followed the king's example and began to wear European clothes. A fort was built to protect the capital, and a number of natives were trained in the use of weapons. Honolulu harbor was soon filled with ships of all nations, and at the present time the town has the look of a European colony.

The first king Tamehameha died in May 1819, 63 years old. His [missing word; son must have been intended] Reio-Reio [Liho-liho], who as heir received the crown, has taken an important step toward the transformation of these wild people. He burned all the idols and demolished the moraits. Furthermore he abolished the taboo, which had led to so much cruelty and oppression. When the idolatry of the natives was abolished no missionary had as yet arrived in the islands, so for a whole year they were completely without religion. In the year 1826 [sic] the United States sent missionaries. Several nations committed unlawful acts, so Reio-Reio decided to travel to England in order to talk to the king of that country and ask for his protection. Reio-Reio and his queen both died in England, and the frigate *Blonde*, Capt. Lord Byron, was sent out with the royal bodies. With great splendor they were interred in a house built for that purpose on O'ahu. The late king's brother became king.

The town of Honolulu lies on the island O'ahu, and it is the place that whalers favor most for refreshing their crews when they have been to sea for a long period. The town is situated in a bay, and behind it is an extensive, well-populated valley. Honolulu has well-regulated streets, but they are not paved. Many houses are already
Fig. 2. Artist August Plum used pen and watercolor for this portrait of Queen Kalama (1817–1870), painted during the visit of the Galathea to Hawai‘i in 1846. (Bishop Museum.)

built of stone,¹⁶ and over them the flags of foreign consuls fly. The natives’ huts, as they are always called, are constructed as a farmhouse at home, although not nearly as high. That which should be the wall is like the roof, thatched with a kind of tall grass.¹⁷ The houses have no ceilings, and the doors are so low that one almost has
to crawl into the huts. One seldom sees windows or other ventilation holes, but the chiefs’ huts have their interiors covered by painted boards. These houses also have tables, benches, beds, and so forth. That the natives also do not scorn to live in brick-built houses is natural. In the huts of the poor neither table nor chair is found. The huts are covered with plaited rush mats. The town is divided into small segments, where a number of huts are surrounded by a dike made from earth. In the middle of the town is the king’s house, surrounded by a garden. The house is in two stories, and rather nicely decorated. Outside is a flagstaff on which the Sandvichian, or Hawaiian, flag flies, red and white in stripes, with the English Union Jack in the corner. The entrance to the garden is guarded by finely uniformed soldiers. At the arcade yet more finely uniformed soldiers are placed. The town has three or four brick-built churches. Their services are well attended, but in entering such a church you involuntarily smile, for here you see ladies clad in the most brilliant fashion, but if you look at their legs, you often find that the ladies have neither shoes nor stockings. Many are also completely dressed, but they often put their legs on the bench on which they are sitting. The missionaries have converted nearly all to the Christian faith, and the religion is preached in the Sandvichian language. Everything that is ungodly or is against the point of view of the missionaries is strictly forbidden by law. The officials have to attend church at regular intervals, and they risk their offices if they do not attend. These offices are poorly paid. The best paid are occupied by Europeans. Americans, that is, white Americans, are commonly called Europeans. The king has an army consisting of 600 soldiers and a navy consisting of a few small brigs and schooners. Native military and civilian officials are well uniformed, but normally they have another occupation besides their office. The admiral was a washerman; he washed, though hardly himself, for the officers of Galathea. The police are very good here. You do not have to fear attack or robbery. Alcohol is strictly forbidden for the natives, but they can drink secretly. On Sundays they dare not do anything, as the preacher condemns the smallest offense from the pulpit. One preacher told his congregation that all future disasters on the islands would be due to the facts that a native had carried a branding iron across the street on a Sunday, that some natives had
towed a ship into the harbor on a Sunday, and that five Europeans had ridden through the streets at a gallop on a Sunday. In the last few years the king has been talked into moderation by the missionaries. What he likes most is to play billiards; he has a billiard table at his house. The native sometimes surfaces. You can see him coming from having played billiards arm in arm with a barefooted native. The queen liked the portrait of her that an artist from Galathea had painted so much that she embraced him. Sometimes you can see the native officers walking naked except for a shirt, but they rarely forget their gold- and silverbraided caps.

The inhabitants are called Kanaks. They are big, strong people, very dark or black-brown with flat noses. The commoners are quite naked if you except a blouse or a shirt, with a belt around the middle with a small strip covering their shame, like the inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands. The women wear thin gowns. They have beautifully combed hair; it covers their shoulders and is fastened by a comb at the nape of the neck. Sometimes they wear a garland of flowers round their heads, but their debauchery knows no borders. Everyone can enter a house where he has never been before and take what woman he likes and have his will by her, even if the hut is full of men and other women. The men will offer you their wife and grown-up daughters. They love to swim, and it is not unusual to see women, clad in silk and satin, remove their finery on the beach, bundle it on their heads, and swim out to the ships, where they dress again. Sometimes they remain on board whole days and nights and swim back in the morning. This debauchery must be the reason for the decrease in population. There are, on average, one-third more deaths than births, and the debauchery is also the reason for contagious illnesses. These excesses can even be found in the royal family.

The huts in the countryside are poorer than those in the town. Many look like pig sties from the outside, and also nearly so inside. The most important food is poi, which is made from the root of the taro plant, a root that tastes nearly like yams and potatoes. Poi looks like a thin porridge. When they eat it, they dip a finger into the calabash, wherein it is made, and they lick their finger, and so they go on until they aren’t hungry any more. If the person eating is very hungry, or violates ordinary table manners, he dips two or even three
fingers into the poi. The calabash-fruit is very common. The shell of
the fruit is used for storage of nearly all kinds of goods. It grows on a
vine and looks very much like a melon or a pumpkin, with a yellow-
ish-brown shell. It is, I suppose, the largest fruit in existence; it can
reach from 3 to 4½ ells in circumference.23 There is a great deal of
cattle on the island, many of them half wild because they graze on
the mountains without ever being stabled. When they are caught to
be slaughtered, a herd is driven into a pen, where two mounted men
are ready with lassoes, which they throw over the horns. When they
have caught one, one of the men rides in front of, the other behind,
the animal at a distance of about 30 paces.24 They take care not to
come close to the animal, because when it realizes that it is caught
and is led away from its friends, it gets furious and bellows terribly
and runs as fast as it can after the man riding in front. When meet-
ing such a procession, you have to get out of its way, because the ani-
mal will attack anything that comes close to it. At the slaughterhouse,
it is tied to poles and is pulled into the house by ropes. No one gets
near it until it lies bound on the floor. On the island live fine horses,
cows (the horned cattle are specially good), sheep, goats, pigs, tur-
keys, ducks, geese, dogs, and cats. There are many fruits such as pine-
apples, bananas, oranges, lemons, yams, a root or tuber with a taste
close to that of potatoes, and taro. In many places excellent wild
potatoes are growing, among which is a sort whose taste is sweet, as if
it were mixed with sugar, its pulp looser than that of the ordinary
potato.25 Taro, which is the most common food of the inhabitants,
grows in low and moist areas. It looks almost like the Danish turnip,
but the leaves are taller and have a kind of stem. Taro also tastes
somewhat like potatoes, but the taste is dryer. Every hut usually has
a small sugar plantation and a small coffee plantation. The clime is
healthy, and the stay at Honolulu had restored the lost strength of
the crew.

The island is high, and the clouds rest on the top of the moun-
tains. There are several dead volcanoes, one of which lies just above
the town.26 On the top of it is a battery of 8 guns. At the harbor is a
fort which has 40 guns. The harbor is safe even during the strongest
winds. It is entered by a channel that is about 50 paces wide.27 It is
shaped by nature itself. The king’s court is organized on the Euro-
pean model. He has a council of state, home secretary, foreign secretary, persons of rank such as chief chamberlain, chamberlain, and so forth. A day's wages is very high; a common day-laborer gets as much as 3 pjesters a day. One pjester = 1 daler 84 skilling in Danish currency. There were 80 whaling ships in the harbor, mostly American and French. There were 3 ships from Hamburg. It is evident that the great number of sailors who are constantly here do not advance morality. Nearly all the natives are tattooed, mostly on their arms and thighs. During our stay a treaty was agreed upon between the king of Denmark and the king of the Sandvich Islands. It was negotiated by Captain Bille and the Sandvichian foreign secretary, Mr. Weyle [Wyllie].

**November 1, 1846**

Weighed anchor at Honolulu.

**November 7, 1846**

At noon anchored in Byron’s Bay just outside the town of Hilo on the island Hawai'i. Five American whalers were anchored here. The town of Hilo consists of a couple of brick-built houses, some huts, and a church. It is situated in a beautiful valley. The island Ovaihi, or Havaihi, from which the king's formal title is taken, "His Havaian Majesty," is the largest of the islands and very high with a great many waterfalls along the precipitous coast. One of the tallest mountains is constantly covered with snow, a beautiful sight in the morning, which is the only time the air is clear and the top visible. The rest of the day it is hidden by clouds. The largest volcano in the world is the volcano Kilanea [Kilauea], which lies at 3,760 feet on the way to the top of the 13,000 feet high Manna-Lua [Mauna Loa], approximately 9 Danish miles from the town of Hilo. The road, which has a constant gradient, runs at first through the lower parts, mainly covered with taro plantations and breadfruit trees, then through a forest and continues across an old lava stream, now nearly covered by tall ferns and bordered by forests.

The crater does not have a raised rim; one does not see it until one
is directly above it. It looks like a colossal cauldron, 3 Danish miles in circumference, mostly with perpendicular walls more than 1,000 feet high. The bottom is formed by lava. In the furthest end of the crater the bottom dips into a lake of fluid lava; it is 1,100 by 1,500 feet. Here and there the lava is thrown up to 10 feet in the air. Steam and sulphurous vapors seep through cracks. The first mentioned condenses and gathers in dips and holes around the crater and is the source of most of the drinking water in the area. The condensed sulphurous vapors form beautiful crystals on the rim of the crevices. Monna-Kea [Mauna Kea] is higher than Monna-Loa by a couple of hundred feet and is the highest mountain on Hawaii, and on all the Sandwich Islands. The last eruption of the volcano happened in 1840. The lava forced its way through the sides and flowed all the way to the sea. One can still see the tall promontories it has formed.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{November 13, 1846}

Weighed anchor at 4 o'clock in the morning and left the island in the luminous glow of the volcano.

\textbf{Postscript}

From Hawaii', \textit{Galathea} went on to Tahiti and ports on the west and east coasts of South America. She arrived at Copenhagen on August 31, 1847, at 5:30 P.M. Her crew was depleted: sixteen were left in the Far East to man the Danish Navy's steam schooner \textit{Ganges} patrolling the waters around the Nicobar Islands; fourteen died from tropical diseases or scurvy; five deaths were due to accidents; and two of the crew deserted in Chile. According to Cornelius Schmidt, the distance of \textit{Galathea}'s cruise was 57,849 English (nautical) miles or 14,462 Danish miles.\textsuperscript{35}

King Christian VIII, in whose reign \textit{Galathea} made her voyage, was a patron of science and art. He died a year after \textit{Galathea}'s return to Denmark. Due to this fact, and to the two wars with Germany (1848–1850 and 1864), the scientific results of the cruise were meager. The plants and animals gathered by the scientists participating in the cruise went into storage, and the planned publication of their
description was canceled. When they were taken out of storage much had been damaged or destroyed. The Danish Zoological Museum, the Danish National Museum, and the Danish Maritime Museum all have effects gathered on the cruise in their collections. The works of the two artists on the voyage, August Plum and Christian Thornam, are still found in the Royal Library and the Maritime Museum. Plum’s double-portrait of King Kamehameha III and Queen Kalama is at the Bernice Bishop Museum in Honolulu.36

Very little is known of Cornelius Schmidt’s life after his return from this long journey. In the lists from the census of 1850 he is mentioned as having been honorably discharged after the 1848–1850 war. The rest is silence.

Notes

1 Mrs. Rasmussen has donated the diary to the Danish Maritime Museum, Helsingør (Elsinore).

2 Cornelius Schmidt, Dagbog holden paa en Reise rundt Jorden med Corvetten Galathea i Aarene 1845, 46 og 1847, 1, 91. Hereafter cited as Diary.


4 James Jackson Jarves, History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands (London: E. Moxon, 1843). Bille refers to a book by Sheldon Dibble without giving its title. Although I have been not been able to identify it positively, it was probably A History and General Views of the Sandwich Islands Mission (New York: Taylor and Dodd, 1839). Dibble also wrote A History of the Sandwich Islands (Lahaina, Maui: Press of the Mission Seminary, 1843).

5 My guess is that it was a Hawaiian-speaking person, maybe one who knew Ka ‘Oolelo Hawai‘i, which was written by scholars of the high school at Lahainaluna. See Jarves, History viii.

6 The only evidence is Schmidt’s diary: “April 24, 1847, Montevideo. . . . The town is now as it was 5 years ago, beleaguered by the Republic of Argentina or Buenos Ayres . . . ” (p. 120). Schmidt was probably a crew member on the navy’s brig Òrnen, Captain Polder, which visited La Plata in 1843, or possibly on the frigate Bellona, Captain Wulff, in 1840. See Bille, Corvetten Galathea’s Reise 2: 172–73.

7 Bille, Corvetten Galathea’s Reise 2: 83, gives the name of the governor as Kekoa-noa (Kekūanao‘a), but it was not the governor himself but his representative. Governor Kekūanao‘a visited the ship later. See Bille, Beretningen 3: 15.
Bille's first action after contact was established with the Hawaiian authorities was to transfer his sick crew members to "a small hospital situated a nautical mile from the town in the Nuanu [Nu'uanu] valley." Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 3.

Bille, *Beretningen*, gives the name of the financial secretary, Gerrit P. Judd, but Judd was an American; maybe the foreign secretary, Robert C. Wyllie, who was English, is meant.

The Order of the Elephant, instituted in the middle of the fifteenth century, is the highest Danish order, normally only given to royalty and heads of state. See *Denmark* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1964), 20–21.

The name of the ship was *La Lamproie*. "*La Lamproie* was possibly the oldest ship in the French navy. It was one of the so-called Corvettes de charge (cargo corvette), which were built during the imperial period as Gabarre-écure (transport ship for cavalry horses).... Their constructor had hardly thought that they should receive the honor of sailing round Cape Horn. *La Lamproie* was built in 1813, and I had seen her outside Cadix. She was 33 years old now." Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 216.

The killing of Captain Cook is described in many books about Hawai'i. Lieutenant Richard Hergest was in charge of a boat crew supplying the English store-ship *Daedalus* with drinking water. Hergest and the astronomer William Gooch strayed from the rest of the group and were killed by some natives at Waimea on O'ahu. This incident took place in 1792. See Jarves, *History* 141.

The American ship referred to is probably the *Fair American*, which in 1790 was attacked and all but one of its crew killed in retaliation for Captain Simon Metcalf's massacre of the natives. Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 6–7.

By Spanish dollars Schmidt meant the currency he elsewhere calls *pjaster*. The *pjaster* was a Spanish silver coin, which at that time was widely used in world trade. See Per Nielsen, "Freja i frihedskrigen," *Skalk* 2 (1995): 26.

Here Schmidt is probably using a form of the Polynesian word *marae*, a temple or place of worship, the equivalent of the Hawaiian *heiau*.

Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 9, informs us that the stones are coral blocks.


Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 10, has "the natives, even the most important, look at such buildings as a cumbersome luxury. If they for some reason own such a splendor they treat it as if it was a full-dress uniform, which they wear at official ceremonies, but as it inconveniences them greatly, they take it off as soon as it is decently possible.... I am less astonished that the good Hawaiians do not enjoy all this European comfort than I am that they ever have accepted using it. This is what happens when civilization is introduced into a hothouse."
According to Bille, the seventeen-year-old Kamehameha III was led astray by the infamous English consul Richard Charlton. The king took to gambling and drink and participated in the wildest orgies. Bille, *Corvetten Galathea's Reise* 2: 97.

Bille, *Corvetten Galathea's Reise* 2, refers to the vernacular as Kanakian. In the vernacular, the language was called *hawaii nei*. See Jarves, *History* 1.

“The only garment, if you can call it so, they wear on their body is a narrow strip of cloth around their loins, covering their shame.” Schmidt, *Diary* 36.

The Danish word is *alen*. One *alen* equaled 0.6277 meter. See *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* (Copenhagen, 1919–), vol 1, cols. 434, 435.

Paces = Danish *skridt*. One *skridt* normally equals 2.5 Danish feet. In the army and in surveying, the *skridt* equaled 5 feet. The Danish foot equaled 0.31385 meter. See *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, vol. 5, col. 69.

When yams, taro, and potatoes are included in the list of fruits, it is because the older Danish word *frukt* (fruit) included *traefrugter* (tree fruits) as well as *jordfrugter* (earth fruits). See *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, vol. 9, col. 856.

Pūowaina, or Punchbowl. See Bille, *Corvetten Galathea's Reise* 106.

Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 10, has 200 ells.

The Danish *daler* (one daler = 6 mark = 96 skilling).

A very high number, but Schmidt may have meant during the entire stay. Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 13, has “60 whalers in the inner harbor at one time.”

Bille, *Corvetten Galathea's Reise*, has the name as Wyllie. See, e.g., p. 79.

Bille, *Corvetten Galathea's Reise*. 117, has “Byrons-Bai or as the natives call it Wajakea.”

Probably English feet (0.3048 meter). There is no evidence that *Galathea's* officers did any surveying in Hawai‘i. They determined the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Honolulu (21° 18' 21" N, 157° 55' 00" W) and the longitude at eight other locations on the islands. Bille, *Beretningen* 3: 512.

The old Danish mile had a length of 7.5 kilometers.

Schmidt probably took part in the excursion to the volcano. Eighteen persons participated: sixteen officers, scientists, and artists and two ordinary crew members. Bille, *Corvetten Galathea's Reise* 2: 118–19, gives the volcano’s name as Kilau-Ea.

Schmidt, *Diary* 134.