

SUBMITTED BY J. SUSAN CORLEY

Notes & Queries

National Museums Scotland Displays One of Kamehameha II's Featherwork *'Ahu'ula* Cloaks

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

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

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red and yellow feathers as seen in modern NMS photographs appear not to have lost any of their original brilliance, and the cloak's general condition appears excellent. William Brigham of the Bishop Museum and NMS accession records describe the cloak: red *'i'iwi* and yellow *'o'o* feathers are attached to a fiber network base to form a pattern of red rhombs and crescents on a yellow background; the cloak is made in the familiar semi-circular style, with a length down the back of 50.5 inches, at the front edge of 45 inches, and at the neck edge of 27 inches; at its base it measures 132 inches, which equals one-third, or 120 degrees, of a circle.³

How long the cloak remained in Byng's possession is not known. What is known is that the Rev. Colin A. Campbell, Jr., the Vicar at Widdington Rectory in the parish of Saffron Walden, Essex, gifted the cloak to the Saffron Walden Museum ("Saffron Walden") on August 7, 1838.⁴ Saffron Walden first opened on May 12, 1835 as a private museum and immediately began an aggressive acquisition campaign.⁵ Still open today, Saffron Walden is governed by a private charity and run by the local district council. It is one of the oldest museums in England.⁶

The Rev. Campbell, who was the husband of Byng's sister Beatrice-Charlotte, wrote that he had received the cloak from Byng, but he does not state how long he had it in his possession before gifting it.⁷

Facing page:

Photograph of the display case in the Facing the Sea gallery of National Museums Scotland which contains the Byng cloak.

The display case description of the cloak reads:

Wrapped in Feathers

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

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

Cloak, 'ahu'ula

Hawaiian Islands, early 19th century.

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Local connections
The hat is made from local materials and is a traditional item of clothing in the region. It is often worn during festivals and ceremonies.



Local history
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Byng may have chosen simply to use Campbell as an intermediary for him with Saffron Walden. Jokesters and at least one cartoonist had teased Byng mercilessly during Kamehameha II's visit, claiming that the king had given him a pair of yellow feather breeches, and Joseph Jekyll had repeated the tease as recently as 1831.⁸ By 1838, Byng had become a prominent man in London society. In June of that year as a "gentleman usher," he escorted Queen Victoria to her Westminster coronation.⁹ Byng may have feared that had he donated the cloak to a London museum, the publicity would have resurrected stories about those imaginary yellow feather breeches and brought ridicule down on his head once again.

In any event, Saffron Walden welcomed the gift. Liholiho's cloak became an important item in their ethnological collection, and it is listed in their 1845 catalog.¹⁰ By chance, Queen Emma (widow of Kamehameha IV) toured Saffron Walden during her 1865 trip to England and saw the cloak exhibited. Queen Emma obtained permission from the trustees for the cloak to join other Hawaiian artifacts and products in the Kingdom's extensive exhibition at the 1867 Paris *Exposition Universelle*.¹¹ Back at Saffron Walden after the *Exposition*, the cloak continued to occupy a prominent place.¹² By the mid-20th century, however, Saffron Walden was short of funds. The building's roof leaked, and the museum was forced to sell off some of its collections in order to make repairs.¹³

Consequently, Liholiho's red and yellow cloak was offered for sale. In 1948, NMS paid £600 for the cloak and two *kahili*, described as fly whisks, which had been gifts to Saffron Walden from Queen Emma and her hostess, Lady H. Hervey.¹⁴ In 2009, however, NMS' catalog did not reference the cloak; neither did NMS' archives possess its photograph.¹⁵ Thus, it appears that Liholiho's gift to Byng had languished in NMS' vaults—well cared for but out of public view—until Ms. Chantal Knowles, NMS' Principal Curator Oceania, Americas and Africa, became involved in the creation of the Pacific Islanders' gallery, "Facing the Sea." Six weeks after the gallery opened, Ms. Knowles wrote me that the cloak is "exciting a lot of interest," and she requested copies of my research about Kamehameha II to offer visitors.¹⁶ Now NMS' library contains copies of the 2008 and 2010 *The Hawaiian Journal of History* volumes with my articles about Liholiho to link with their exhibit.

NOTES

- ¹ http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/national_museum/explore_the_galleries, accessed 19 December 2011.
- ² NMS Accession number A.1948.274.
- ³ William T. Brigham, "Hawaiian Feather Work," *Memoirs of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum of Polynesian Ethnology and Natural History*, Vol. I—No. 1 (Honolulu, H.I.: Bishop Museum Press, 1899), 73–74; Accession Records, National Museums Scotland ("NMS"), reproduced in an email from Chantal Knowles, Principal Curator Oceania, Americas and Africa, NMS to J. S. Corley, 07 Sep 2009.
- ⁴ Knowles to Corley, Accession records, 07 Sep 2009; Brigham, "Hawaiian Feather Work," 73 reproduces Campbell's letter.
- ⁵ John Player, *Sketches of Saffron Walden and its vicinity* (Saffron Walden: G. Youngman, 1845), 77.
- ⁶ Len Pole, "'Stand Awhile and Admire,' A History of the Saffron Walden Museum 1935–2010" (Saffron Walden Museum, 2010), 11.
- ⁷ Joseph Jackson Howard, ed., "Genealogical Notes—Extracts from the Felbrigg Register," *Miscellanea Genealogica et Heraldica*, Vol. V, 2nd Series (London: Mitchell & Hughes, 1894), 333; Knowles to Corley, Accession records, 07 Sep 2009, by email.
- ⁸ Letters from Hon. Frederick Gerald Byng, London, The National Archives, Levenson-Gower, 1st Earl Granville and predecessors and successors: Papers 1604–1909, 01 Jun 1824, 30/29/7/12/5; Robert Cruikshank cartoon, British Museum Registration No. 1868,0808.8620; Algernon Bourke, ed., *Correspondence of Mr. Joseph Jekyll with his sister-in-law, Lady Gertrude Sloane Stanley, 1818–1838* (London, 1894), 271, places Jekyll's comment in 1831.
- ⁹ Sylvanus Urban, ed, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. X, New Series, August 1838, 190.
- ¹⁰ *An Abridged Catalog of the Saffron Walden Museum* (Saffron Walden: Youngman, 1845), 74.
- ¹¹ Knowles to Corley, Accession records, 07 Sep 2009, by email; Brigham, "Hawaiian Feather Work," 73–74; J. F. Hunnewell, "Hawaii at the 'Exposition Universelle,' Paris, 1867," *Hawaiian Club Papers*, October 1868, 25, showing that Queen Emma's Saffron Walden host, Lord C. Hervey, is listed as the exhibitor of a "grand royal mantle."
- ¹² "Saffron Walden Museum," *The Museums Journal*, Vol. 4, April 1905, 222.
- ¹³ Pole, "Stand Awhile," 9.
- ¹⁴ Knowles to Corley, Accession records, 07 Sep 2009, by email.
- ¹⁵ Margaret Wilson, NMS to J. S. Corley, 25 and 26 Aug 2009, by email.
- ¹⁶ Chantal Knowles, NMS to J. S. Corley, 07 Sep 2011, email message.

