

## “Owhyhee’s Prodigal”

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Between novel and screen, nearly every aspect of that first Missionary Company to the Sandwich Islands has become familiar—from the tragic story of the young Hawaiian, Henry Obookiah, whose exemplary piety furnished the spiritual impetus for a pioneer mission, to the legacy of those early missionary efforts in contemporary Hawaii. Seldom mentioned in latter-day accounts is the quartet of native Hawaiians who accompanied that first expedition, who shared the grueling 159-day journey around the Horn to Hawaii and seemed to offer such promise as assistants in spreading the gospel to their countrymen.

One of the treasures to be found in the Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society Library is a slender pamphlet, pages brittle with age, relating the early history of the five young men on whom so much hope rested. Published in 1816, *A Narrative of Five Youths from the Sandwich Islands* was intended as a means to stimulate interest in and attract financial support for the Foreign Mission School at Cornwall, Connecticut, which opened late that year.<sup>1</sup> The training of ministers’ assistants prior to establishing a missionary field in the Hawaiian Islands was a prime objective; the five biographies were offered as proof of the eagerness and sincerity with which the Hawaiian people would accept religious enlightenment. Though the subjects of the pamphlet had come by various routes to the Connecticut school and by equally diverse religious experiences to embrace Christianity, each had proved an inspiration to his benefactors. Opukahaia far outshone his companions in devotion to the new religion—he is often referred to as “the saintly Obookiah”—and it was largely through his efforts that the others had been converted. All were devoted to him: Hopu had been his shipmate on the 1807 voyage that brought him from his Kealakekua home to New England; Kanui had special reason to be grateful for Opukahaia’s charity following a personal loss; Honolii, though a late-comer to the Mission circle, shared with Opukahaia the same island of birth; while Kaumualii (Prince George, son of Kauai’s king) was rescued from twelve years’ wandering when he was found in a Boston ship-yard and welcomed into Opukahaia’s group of displaced Islanders.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of a family of his own, Opukahaia seems to have considered them all as a surrogate

family. All had been at his bedside in February of 1818 when the young man—only 26—died of typhus;<sup>3</sup> all had promised him on his deathbed that they would carry the Word of God to their people.

The opportunity for which they'd been prepared came twenty months later when the Pioneer Mission to the Sandwich Islands set sail from Boston on the *Thaddeus*. Prior to departure, a portrait of each of the company had been painted by Samuel F. B. Morse; engravings from these paintings of the four native "helpers" were later published as fund-raisers for the Sandwich Islands Mission<sup>4</sup> and thereby offer a glimpse of the "Owhyhean Youths" on the eve of their Grand Experiment: Thomas Hoopoo, eldest of the group at 24, appears a mature, determined young man; George Tamoree (Kaumuali'i) is pictured as a sad-eyed, sensitive youth of 19 or 20; curly-haired William Tennooe (Kanui) has been preserved for posterity as a sedately earnest 23-year-old; and John Honoree (Honolii), who looks youngest of the four with his rather melancholy expression, was supposed to have been about 23 at the time.<sup>5</sup> But all appeared firmly dedicated and equal to the task that lay ahead—nothing less than the religious conversion of an entire nation.

Without exception, once on home ground, all fell far short of the missionaries' high expectations.<sup>6</sup>

Kanui was first to return to the "old ways". Hiram Bingham, the Pioneer patriarch, recorded, "William Kanui, who had been placed at Kailua, having in a few short months violated his vows by excess in drinking, . . . was excluded from Christian fellowship. . . ."<sup>7</sup> The date was July 23, 1820,<sup>8</sup> just three months after the first missionary contingent landed on Hawaiian soil.

Thomas Hopu, a devoted helper at first, periodically suffered suspension from the church for "irregular conduct" and eventually, perhaps in disgust at having been refused a license to preach,<sup>9</sup> fell from grace by joining King Kamehameha III's (Kamehameha III) retinue of pleasure-lovers. Subsequently he left Hawaii for the gold fields of California.<sup>10</sup>

John Honolii, shuttling between his home island of Hawaii and Maui, labored for the Church longest of all his companions but his valued assistance was cut short by premature death.<sup>11</sup>

Prince George's defection was more gradual but sooner terminated. Of the four, he had shown the least zeal for Christianity so his lapse was not unexpected. Once returned to his Kauai home in June of 1820, he steadily declined till he died on Oahu six years later, a virtual prisoner of Kalanimoku and a victim of influenza.<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite the sorry record compiled by the four native missionaries, there is a saving footnote. In a secluded corner of the private cemetery behind Kawaiaha'o Church—surrounded by headstones for Doles, Chamberlains, Cookes and Bingham—stands a grave marker for one of the four Hawaiians. The stone itself is impressive in size and bears this tribute to the man buried beneath: "In the life and death of Kanui, God's Providence and Grace were wonderfully manifested." It hardly sounds the appropriate eulogy for a drunkard! A lengthy biographical inscription on Kanui's tombstone fails to clear up the mystery:

"In memory of  
William Tennooe Kanui  
Born about A.D. 1796\*  
On the island of Oahu  
Went to America 1809  
Educated at Cornwall, Ct.  
Returned to Honolulu 1820  
Twice visited California  
Died in Honolulu Jan. 14, 1864"

The question remains: how had Kanui so distinguished himself in the years between his 1820 dismissal from the Church and his death that he alone of the four was deemed deserving of interment in the missionary cemetery?<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Thomas Hopu and Henry Opukahaia, Kanui left no memoirs to preserve his family history but, happily, Reverend Damon took an interest in the young man and helped somewhat to fill in the blanks of his early life. By birth a native Oahuan, Kanui was as an infant transplanted to Kauai. His father belonged to the entourage of a defeated Oahu chief when Kamehameha I subjugated the island in late Spring 1795; it may have been Koa-lua-kani, one of the few chiefs to escape the Pali Massacre, to whom Kanui, Sr., was attached.<sup>14</sup> At any rate, he was lucky to have survived and when King Kamehameha left for Hawaii in 1796, Kanui's father felt the time was ripe for a quick change of address. With his family he fled to Waimea, Kauai, for sanctuary under Kaumualii.<sup>15</sup> It may have been there that Kanui's young son came in contact with the alii's son, Prince George. (The friendship would have been short-lived, however, for early in the 1800's the young heir to Kauai's throne was entrusted to a visiting sea captain to be educated in New England.<sup>16</sup>)

Since Captain Cook's initial landing, Waimea had been a popular anchorage for foreign ships and the young Kanui would have had ample opportunity to bid many of his friends Aloha. Nearly every ship that arrived on the island to replenish its supplies of fresh water and food sailed away with a crew augmented by Kauaians, as replacements for deserters or shipboard deaths. Hawaiians were much in demand as sailors in those bygone years and a young age seems to have been no deterrent in signing them on as crew—Kanui was only 11 or 12 when he left home. (Opukahaia had been 15, but Hopu was only 12.)

He sailed with a Captain Davis of Boston; his companions on the ship included a brother and four other Hawaiians.<sup>17</sup> They touched at Alaska and the Pacific Coast in the course of their voyage and then were transferred to a Boston-bound ship as Captain Davis intended to delay his return to New England.<sup>18</sup>

In 1809 Kanui and his crewmates reached Boston and scattered to various states and pursuits. Taken into the households of New England families as

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\* *The obvious discrepancy between Kanui's birthdate on the tombstone and the implied birthdate of 1798 as indicated in S. C. Damon's obituary notice is curious, since Damon was responsible for both. Assuming the inscription was carved after Damon had contacted Hunnewell, perhaps the more accurate information was supplied by Hunnewell.*

servants or laborers on their farms, the young men picked up haphazard schooling. For William and his brother, three or four years' hard labor on a land-locked farm eventually soured and they chose to ship out on American privateers.<sup>19</sup> The War of 1812 gave them ample employment and may have also given them the chance to meet some of their countrymen in the course of their adventures: Hopu and Kaumualii (listed on the roster as "George Prince") both served at various times in the War.<sup>20</sup>

After military service, Kanui and his brother set out for New York to look for employment but en route—in Providence, Rhode Island—Kanui's brother died; alone, Kanui returned to New Haven and tried to learn the barber's trade. Interested New Havenites offered to send him to school but of that time Kanui described himself as feeling "so bad he did not care if he lived or died." Then Opukahaia found him and persuaded him to come to the Cornwall school.<sup>21</sup> Soon thereafter, Kanui joined the Church and began to share Opukahaia's vision of a Christian mission to the Islands.

Yet little more than two years after his friend's death, Kanui stood disgraced in the eyes of the Church.

The next twenty years in his life are a series of question marks; the records are strangely silent on his whereabouts (did he return to Kauai and seek out his family?<sup>22</sup>), his marital status or his occupation<sup>23</sup> during this time. Chaplain Damon assumes those years were spent in service to Kamehameha II and III, probably as teacher and translator. By 1842, the year Samuel Damon arrived in Honolulu, he reported that Kanui was teaching school on Oahu—in Malolo Valley (Palolo?)<sup>24</sup> but that rural existence was to suffer an upheaval in the summer of 1848.

June 23rd Honolulu received confirmation of the news that GOLD had been found in California.<sup>25</sup> The response of Hawaiian citizenry to the lure of "Gold Fever" was immediate and, to government officials, alarming. Each vessel that transported gold-hungry prospectors to California returned with stories of misery and debauchery in the squalid northern mining camps and in the raucous, wide-open village of San Francisco. Kanui felt his missionary instincts reviving and resolved to initiate his own project of offering spiritual aid and comfort to his countrymen. Prior to departing in early 1849, he wrote Hawaii's Foreign Minister, outlining his plan, and spent the following day being interviewed by Minister Wyllie. His letter of March 14th commends Kanui's project of acting as a "friendly Counsellor of your Countrymen", offers some advice Kanui might pass along to his fellow Hawaiians and suggests that he contact George T. Allan, HHM's consul in San Francisco, for assistance in his venture.<sup>26</sup>

A few months later, Chaplain Damon, on a recuperative trip to the West Coast, was surprised to find Kanui operating a small eatery at the then nearly deserted Sutter's Fort.<sup>27</sup> He told Damon of his self-imposed crusade and this was confirmed later when Damon went to San Francisco. The pastor of the Mariner's Church there vouched for Kanui's regular church attendance upon his arrival in California. Kanui had said he intended to go into the mining regions to retrieve his fellow countrymen who "had begun to go astray."<sup>28</sup>

And apparently Kanui's missionary zeal was rewarded for Indian Creek where he lived for a time was described as a "colony of devout Hawaiians."<sup>29</sup> He also seems to have been successful in striking paydirt for in the winter of 1854 he returned to San Francisco with over \$6,000.00 in gold. Not trusting banks, he kept the money in his possession until January of 1855 when he became ill; in the belief that his money would be securer from thievery in the Page and Bacon Company Bank, he committed his life's savings to their vaults.<sup>30</sup> That same month, only a few days after Kanui made his deposit, the bank's home office in St. Louis closed its doors and precipitated a rush on the San Francisco branch.<sup>31</sup>

Kanui recovered but the bank did not. His savings wiped out, his faith shaken, he barely managed to eke out a living in the notoriously expensive city with a boot-blackening stand. Continuing in that enterprise until 1859, he recognized the error of his ways and gave up the occupation since it necessitated his working on Sundays.

Once again, Kanui found solace in the Church. Chaplain Damon published a letter of June 20, 1860, from the Reverend Albert Williams confirming the prodigal's return to righteousness; the letter also related an incident illustrative of Kanui's renewed commitment and faith: penniless and without work, the old man (now a venerable 64 years) had prayed to God for relief of his destitute condition and specifically for means to pay his past-due rent. As an answer to his prayers, a wagonload of refuse was dumped near his dwelling; he retrieved rags and bits of iron from the heap, selling them to a junk dealer for \$1.50. Though an insignificant sum, it was sufficient to cover his rent and from that day forward he made his living as a humble scavenger. At the time his pastor wrote to Honolulu, Kanui was a candidate for membership in the Mariner's Church.<sup>32</sup>

Only a few years of life were left him, but apparently in those last years he fulfilled his youthful promise as a faithful Christian. When in 1863 he became ill, he asked and was granted his wish to return to the island of his birth. Perhaps in the waning weeks of his life he remembered the lament of a dying Opukahaia, "Oh, how I want to see Hawaii!! But I think I never shall. . . ."<sup>33</sup> (A tomb in Cornwall, Connecticut, bears witness to the futility of Opukahaia's last hope.)

William Kanui arrived in Honolulu August of 1863, blind and in rapidly deteriorating health. Captain Smith of the Bark *Comet* had allowed him second cabin privileges at His Majesty's expense.<sup>34</sup> A hospital bed at Queen's was his home for the remainder of his days.

Mid-January death claimed the enfeebled old man, last surviving member of the pioneer mission's native helpers. Reverend Damon arranged for the burial and contacted James Hunnewell, a wealthy merchant of Boston, for assistance in purchasing a grave marker for their mutual friend.<sup>35</sup> Hunnewell's acquaintance with Kanui stretched back over 18,000 miles and forty years to when the two men—both in their twenty-fourth year—had shared shipboard experiences on the *Thaddeus*: Hunnewell as second officer, Kanui as combination sailor and passenger.

Then, in a final gesture to Hawaii's prodigal, Damon inserted an obituary notice in the February 5th issue of *The Friend*, closing the chapter on the man whom, years before, Hiram Bingham had characterized as "a wanderer."<sup>36</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *A Narrative of Five Youths from the Sandwich Islands* (New York, 1816).
- <sup>2</sup> Stauder, Catherine, "George, Prince of Hawaii", HJH, v. VI, 1972; pp. 28-44.
- <sup>3</sup> Dwight, Edwin, *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah* (Honolulu, 1968).
- <sup>4</sup> Published in 1822 by N. & S. S. Jocelyn of New Haven, Ct., the print bears this statement: "The profits arising from the sale of this print of four OWYHEAN YOUTHS will be applied to the SANDWICH ISLANDS MISSIONS."
- <sup>5</sup> *A Narrative . . .*, p. 29: "John Honooree is a native of Owhyhee and arrived in Boston in the fall of 1815. . . . He was supposed to be about nineteen years of age on his arrival. . . ."
- <sup>6</sup> Bingham, Hiram, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Island* (Hartford, 1847), p. 173: ". . . with all the facilities we possessed, and all the sanctions of the Word of God, it was almost impossible to save from reproach and ruin, the native assistants, who had been instructed and hopefully converted in the United States of America." The Reverend Sheldon Dibble accounts for their failure thusly: "But too much had been expected of them. Having been absent many years from their native land they had forgotten much of their own tongue, but the greatest deficiency was that they knew far less the force and meaning of English words than was supposed. They were exceedingly ignorant. . . . They were of course miserable interpreters and very poor teachers. . . ." (Sheldon Dibble, *A History of the Sandwich Islands* (Honolulu, 1909), p. 148). With the memory of Opukahaia's remarkable piety a constant standard of comparison, it is far from surprising that Hopu, Kanui, Honolii and Kaumualii failed to measure up—after all, Opukahaia's was a tough act to follow!
- <sup>7</sup> Bingham, p. 125.
- <sup>8</sup> Gast, Ross, *Don Francisco de Paula Marin—A Biography* (Honolulu, 1973), p. 242.
- <sup>9</sup> Dibble and Bingham, p. 165, 166.
- <sup>10</sup> Damon, Ethel Mosely, *Samuel Chenery Damon* (Honolulu, 1966), p. 56.
- <sup>11</sup> 1838 is the year generally accepted for Honolii's death making him about 42 (if the information in *A Narrative . . .* is correct) when he died.
- <sup>12</sup> Stauder, p. 42; see also Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time* (New York, 1968), p. 72.
- <sup>13</sup> Even the pious Opukahaia's memorial tablet is placed outside the gates to the private cemetery.
- <sup>14</sup> Kamakau, Samuel M., *The Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii* (Honolulu, 1961), p. 172: "The Chiefs and warriors of Kalani-ku-pule were slaughtered, but Koa-lua-kani escaped and fled to Kauai . . ." (following the Battle of Nuuanu).
- <sup>15</sup> All details on Kanui's early history are from F, Feb. 5, 1864, obituary.
- <sup>16</sup> Stauder.
- <sup>17</sup> Damon's statement in Kanui's obituary that Hopu and Obookiah were on the same ship is in error. Prior to Captain Brintnall's return to New York and New Haven in 1809, there was no stop in Waimea to pick up Kanui. Nor is he ever mentioned in Opukahaia's or Hopu's memoirs prior to 1815. The other four Hawaiians mentioned in Kanui's biography in *A Narrative . . .* had returned to the Islands before 1812.

- <sup>18</sup> The transfer of Kanui and his companions to the Boston-bound ship occurred at the Cape of Good Hope with Captain Davis proceeding on to England. It may have been William Heath Davis with whom Kanui sailed; if so, it might explain how Kanui acquired his first name.
- <sup>19</sup> Details from *A Narrative*. . . .
- <sup>20</sup> "Memoirs of Thomas Hopoo", HJH, v. II, 1968; also Stauder.
- <sup>21</sup> *A Narrative*. . . .
- <sup>22</sup> Knudsen, E. A. and G. P. Noble, *Kanuka of Kauai* (Honolulu, 1944); on p. 43 is mention of a Kanui Kino "one of the older kanakas" (sometime after 1850)—could this have been a brother or relative of Kanui's? Also, there is the possible connection with the illfated Marie Joseph Kanui whose history Rev. Fr. Yzendoorn traces in his *History of the Catholic Mission in the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu, 1927), p. 178. The young man had accompanied Boki to England with the royal party in 1823. From there John Rives had taken Kanui to Paris where he was educated at the Motherhouse of the Congregation of Sacred Hearts; after 14 years he returned to Lahaina, working to secure Catholic converts on that island until the lung disease he had apparently contracted in France terminated his life. Was it only coincidence that Marie Joseph Kanui's death in Honolulu April 13, 1842, occurred at roughly the same time as William Kanui's return to the church?
- <sup>23</sup> Smith, Bradford, *Yankees in Paradise—The New England Impact on Hawaii* (Philadelphia, 1956), p. 252: (1843) ". . . William Kanui . . . returned to the fold . . . he had been in California when he heard a voice telling him to change his ways. Immediately he had returned to Honolulu, given up his sailors' life. . . ." (Quoted from J. J. Jarves' *Scenes and Scenery in the Sandwich Islands* (Boston, 1844). It is the only mention of his occupation as a sailor; however, Chaplain Damon's inclusion of the specific phrase "Twice visited California" on Kanui's tombstone seems to verify Jarves' statement. On Kanui's voyage to Boston in 1809, the ship touched at only Alaska and the Northwest coast (per *A Narrative*. . .).
- <sup>24</sup> F, Feb. 1861, p. 12. Smith, (again quoting Jarves) adds further details regarding Kanui's school: he "taught English to 50 boys, using the Bible and Webster's spelling book."
- <sup>25</sup> June 23rd is the usual date accepted for the beginning of the mass exodus from Hawaii to the California mines, but it would seem the emigrant problem had become serious even before that time; in the July 1st, 1848, edition of *The Polynesian* appeared "An Act to Provide for Certain Amendments in the Law Relating to Passports"—requiring the posting of notices announcing the intention to depart the islands before a passport could be issued—the Act was dated June 15, 1848. Since there is no "notice of intention to depart" for Kanui or Hopu in the paper, presumably they worked their way to California.
- <sup>26</sup> FO & Ex, AH, R. C. Wyllie's letter to William Kanui dated March 14, 1849. Samples of Wyllie's advice include: cautions against drinking, gambling and breaking California's laws and suggestions to save their money and when they have collected \$2,000.00, to come home and invest it in Hawaiian land. He also asked, in a postscript to the letter, that Kanui write down his recollections of "the old times" which he and Wyllie had discussed the day before. Unfortunately, it seems Kanui did not comply with the Minister's request for there is no record of his memoirs.
- <sup>27</sup> Damon.
- <sup>28</sup> F, Feb. 1861, p. 12.
- <sup>29</sup> Joesting, Edward, *Hawaii—An Uncommon History* (N. Y., 1972), p. 122. Indian Creek is located east of Stockton in Calaveras County, between Altaville and San Andreas.
- <sup>30</sup> F, Feb. 1861.

- <sup>31</sup> Nadeau, Remi, *Ghost Towns and Mining Camps in California* (Los Angeles, 1965), p. 57.
- <sup>32</sup> F, Feb. 1861.
- <sup>33</sup> Dwight, p. 91.
- <sup>34</sup> Letter of August 11, 1863, San Francisco Consul, C. E. Hitchcock, to Minister of Foreign Affairs, AH, Hawaiian Officials Abroad.
- <sup>35</sup> An inscription at the base of Kanui's headstone states: "This stone was erected by J. H. of Boston and S. C. D. of Honolulu."
- <sup>36</sup> Bingham, p. 125; also p. 616.