

# Lost Kingdom

*Hawaii's Last Queen, the Sugar Kings,  
and America's First Imperial Adventure*

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Atlantic Monthly Press  
New York

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*Published simultaneously in Canada  
Printed in the United States of America*

FIRST EDITION

ISBN: 978-0-8021-2000-7

Atlantic Monthly Press  
an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.  
841 Broadway  
New York, NY 10003

Distributed by Publishers Group West

[www.groveatlantic.com](http://www.groveatlantic.com)

11 12 13 14 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## INTRODUCTION

The story of Hawai'i begins millions of years ago, long before the green folds of its mountains were creased by cataracts foaming into the sea. Two enormous plates struck each other, creating a crack that reached the earth's liquid core. Plumes of molten rock shot up, piercing the black depths of the sea. Hissing steam burst into the air.

Hardened black rock grew mound by mound, forming a range of cone-shaped peaks which surfaced at around the same time the first mammals roamed the African plains. At first, only the tips of this underwater mountain range jutted above the ocean swells. But as lava accumulated, the range rose. A host of creatures made new homes on these harsh outcroppings: grubs, coral polyps, sea urchins, mother-of-pearl, conch shells, seaweed, ferns, and finally man and woman.

Thus began the world, as told in the *Kumulipo*, the Hawaiian chant which some scholars have compared to the Greek creation myths and Hebrew Genesis. In more than two thousand lines, it describes a world born in "deep darkness" advancing toward the light, expressing both the geological beginnings of the islands as well as the experience of a human emerging from a womb into the world.

The people who memorized this long chant were descendants of intrepid voyagers. Navigating by the stars and by observing subtle shifts in the wind, the flight paths of migrating birds, and even the changing color of the air, they accomplished an extraordinary feat. They found their way from Tahiti or the Marquesas to one of the most remote chains of islands in the world, some 2,400 miles from the nearest continent.

Setting off around the time that Constantine ruled the Roman Empire, perhaps as early as 200 A.D., they travelled thousands of miles before reaching the Hawaiian islands, paddling through the windless doldrums of the north Pacific and surviving its unpredictable squalls, gales, thunderstorms, and cyclones.

It's uncertain how many people made the trip or why they left their homes. Were they pulled to sea, drawn by the hope of new lands to settle? Or pushed onto the waves by drought, hunger, or warfare? Or maybe they were just adventurers, eager to discover what lay beyond the horizon's edge.

Whatever the reason, they prepared for a long journey. They brought gourds filled with fresh water, dried fruits, as well as dogs and pigs. They also brought cuttings of foods they hoped to plant, including tiny shoots of sugar cane—a crop that would come to shape the Hawai'i's destiny as much as the arrival of the first people who introduced it.

Once these voyagers reached the islands, they found an untouched Eden: a world with no four-legged predators, no serpents or snakes, and few biting insects. The seas teemed with fish and swaying underwater gardens. The forests rang with trills and flashed with the yellow brilliance of birds that had tumbled out of the jet stream. The islands were home to flightless birds and other defenseless creatures.

The highest peaks of this volcanic chain soared more than thirteen thousand feet and were often covered with snow. When the volcanoes erupted, they'd spew orange-red lava, which sped down the slopes of the mountains, releasing clouds of steam when they hit the cooling waters of the Pacific. Beyond the shores lay a separate underwater world of fluorescent coral reefs.

## LOST KINGDOM

Hawai'i may have looked like a gentle paradise, but the ancient Hawaiians knew its terrors. A volcanic eruption, the fury of the goddess Pele, might destroy villages of grass houses and bury carefully tended fields of sugar cane and sweet potatoes beneath ash. Jagged deserts of sharp, black lava could appear overnight, creating new land where there had once been sea.

Pele, on a whim, might send pungent swirls of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere, infusing the air and the mountain streams with its rotten-egg scent, or she might hurl flames down the slopes. The goddess was a force to be worshipped and placated with small offerings: taro root, dried fish, or mountain berries left near the edge of the crater. Sometimes larger offerings were necessary and humans were thrown into the volcano's depths to appease her.

The Polynesians who arrived in Hawai'i brought beliefs with them, including their long genealogies, memorized in the form of chants, and taboos, known as *kapu*. Like other South Sea Islanders, they believed in many gods. To worship them, they built stone temples, *heiau*, overseen by priests. They would lay offerings at fields and fish ponds, in hopes of the gods granting them good harvests. Priests, or *kāhuna*, would perform ceremonies seeking prosperity by offering up a black pig.

Some chiefs ruled with the imperiousness of Pele. They'd order lawbreakers put to death in fearsome ritualized killings that took place in a *heiau*, accompanied by beating drums and chants. Carved wooden statues of *Kū*, the god of war, bore silent witness to strangulations, followed by their practice of scorching the human skins over fire.

Afterward, these fierce people would pile coconuts and bananas next to the blackened skins of the victims—the stink of burned human flesh mingling with the sweet fragrance of fruit.

Perhaps because they lived with the unpredictability of the earth and the seas, the ancient Hawaiians adopted strict rules governing nearly every aspect of life. Their world was hierarchical and status depended on blood rank. At the top were the high chiefs, or *ali'i nui*, who were

treated like gods but, in turn, had obligations to the commoners. Below them were the lesser chiefs, known simply as the *ali'i*, followed by such honored posts as the *haku mele*, or master of song, who composed and memorized the long genealogical chants by which a family would extol its nobility. At the bottom were a small group of slaves and outcasts.

The high chiefs literally towered above the commoners: tall in stature and with majestic physical prowess, the *ali'i* almost seemed like a distinct race. They commanded absolute obeisance. Commoners who failed to heed the cry of "*E noho e!*" or "Squat down!" as chiefs walked past risked instant death. Anyone who allowed his shadow to cross over that of the very highest chief faced having his throat slashed with a shark-toothed knife.

Is it any surprise that the Hawaiian creation chant, the *Kumulipo*, expresses awe at the world's beginnings as well as a deep sense of dread and fear? The life of the ancient Hawaiian, particularly among commoners and slaves, was one of strict rules, harsh punishments, and the volatile uncertainty of life on a volcanic island. Chant seven begins,

<i>O kau ke anoano, ia'u kualono</i>	Fear falls upon me on the mountaintop
<i>He ano no ka po hane'e aku</i>	Fear of the passing night
<i>He ano no ka po hane'e mai</i>	Fear of the night approaching
<i>He ano no ka po pihapiha</i>	Fear of the pregnant night
<i>He ano no ka ha'ihai</i>	Fear of the breach of law

The lives and livelihoods of the commoners depended on the *ali'i*. Each of the eight populated islands was ruled by one or more chiefs. The ruling chief controlled the land, allocating arable sections to his followers, who, in turn, owed the chief his due, in the form of his share of their crops. In that sense, it was feudal. The chiefs also conscripted the commoners into armies and for countless years, warfare periodically erupted among rival *ali'i*, who fought over land, fishing rights, and perceived insults. But much of their time was spent in peaceful pursuits.

## LOST KINGDOM

The ancient Hawaiians were ingenious in finding ways to use stones, plants, and bounty from the sea. They had no metal and had not discovered the wheel; instead, they used stone, shells, and hardened lava for tools. For this reason, later visitors would describe them as living in the Stone Age and in a sense they were.

With great care they cultivated taro, yams, and sweet potatoes planted in wedge-shaped sections of land that stretched from the mountains to the sea at their widest. Known as *ahupua'a*, these parcels of land often followed the paths of streams, giving each family group that worked them access to fish, arable land, timber, and fresh water.

To irrigate their fields, the Hawaiians built intricate stone aqueducts, some soaring twenty feet tall. They also dug extensive fish ponds, which allowed them to stockpile food. With limited resources, they found ways to make beautiful things, such as by weaving blades of dried grass into intricately patterned mats and dyeing them subtle shades of red from dyes derived from plants. They lived in framed houses lashed together with fiber and thatched with *pili* grass and covered their floors with finely woven sleeping mats.

Because commoners worked in the fields and tended the fish ponds, the *ali'i* could devote themselves to sports. Their favorite pastime was surfing and they rode the waves on enormous, carved wood boards—some more than eighteen feet long and weighing 150 pounds. Both male and female chiefs also excelled at related sports such as canoe-leaping, in which the surfer would jump from a canoe carrying his or her board into a cresting ocean swell, and then ride the wave to the shore.

When the surf was high, entire villages rushed to the beach. Men, women, and children would paddle out to ride the rolling waves. While Tahitians and other Pacific Islanders also surfed, the Hawaiians took the sport to a higher level—standing fearlessly on their massive boards, often three times as long as those used elsewhere in Polynesia.

The Hawaiians were magnificent athletes. Some excelled at cliff-diving into the sea, from heights of many hundreds of feet. Even young women would strip naked and leap from the summit of high cliffs, diving



headlong into the foaming water and bobbing up afterward. One can only imagine their dark hair streaming down their shoulders and their faces beaming with delight.

Then came Captain Cook. Two ships, the *Discovery* and the *Resolution*, sailed into Kealakekua Bay on the island of Hawai'i in January, 1778, two years after Britain lost its American colonies. The Hawaiians first spotted Cook arriving on what they believed was a floating *heiau*, or temple.

Was he the god Lono, who was prophesied to return during this season? A chief and a priest rowed out and boarded one of the strange ships. What they saw were men with fair skin, bright eyes, sharp noses, and deep-set eyes. At first, the Hawaiians didn't recognize what the foreigners were wearing: their odd cocked hats seemed to be part of their heads and their clothing wrinkled skin. Upon reporting back, they concluded "This is indeed Lono, and this is his *heiau* come across the sea . . . !"

Cook and his men arrived at a time when the vast wealth generated from sugar plantations in the West Indies was fueling the expansion of the British Empire. Yet Cook wasn't searching for sugarcane: he came in search of the elusive Northwest Passage—a fabled sea route between Europe and Asia.

When they landed, Cook and his men found fields flush with yams and taro nourished from cleverly-constructed aqueducts. They also found sugar—a plant brought to the islands by its original Polynesian settlers, who chewed stalks of cane to release the sweet juices inside. Although estimates vary, the islands supported a large and thriving population of people who farmed the coastal lowlands and fished the abundant sea.

To Cook's surprise, the Hawaiians welcomed him and his men with lavish hospitality, offering hogs, sweet potatoes, feather capes, and cloth of *tapa*. They landed during the season when the Hawaiians worshipped the benevolent fertility god Lono and Cook was venerated as the god himself, or at least his emissary.

## LOST KINGDOM

To honor the Earl of Sandwich, who was then First Lord of Britain's Admiralty, Cook named the islands after him. For decades afterward, they were known in the English-speaking world as the Sandwich Islands. He never found the Northwest Passage, but his discovery of the islands would open up the Hawaiians—who had remained isolated from the rest of the world for thousands of years—to the expanding economies and empires of the West.

The English sailors also brought fleas, infection, and fearsome new weapons to the islands. When Hawaiians stole metal objects from the foreigners, the English sailors fired muskets to scare them off. Soon, there were other confrontations and the Hawaiians came to learn the power of what they called the "death-dealing thing which the white men used and which squirted out like the gushing forth of water." Recognizing their value, the Hawaiians avidly sought to trade for weapons by offering the English sailors hogs, chickens, and other items.

One young chief who visited Captain Cook aboard ship was Kamehameha, who was then in his mid-twenties. He approached the British vessel in a large, double canoe, paddled by about twenty-five men. A powerfully built man standing over six feet tall, he wore "a reserved, forbidding countenance" and a "keen, penetrating eye," according to the ship's surgeon. Within minutes of climbing aboard, Kamehameha was examining every part of it. The surgeon, who asked Kamehameha if he'd like him to explain how a compass worked, came to regret his offer because the chief questioned him "continually until he learned it." Two decades later, with the aid of Western advisors and guns, Kamehameha would unite the island and found Hawai'i's first ruling dynasty.

Although Cook forbade sexual intimacy between the sailors and the Hawaiians, the crews of the *Discovery* and the *Resolution* ignored his orders, as did the Hawaiian women, who swam out to the boats, offering themselves up freely in exchange for clothing, mirrors, scissors, knives, and metal hooks they could bend into fishhooks. The fevered pox of venereal disease soon spread rapidly across the islands, eventually leading to infertility and death among Hawaiians.

It wasn't long before the Hawaiians and English sailors clashed. After sailing more than 200,000 miles and exploring from Newfoundland to the Antarctic, Captain Cook met a swift and bloody end on February 14, 1779. In a dispute over a stolen boat, Cook shot one of the Hawaiians. In turn, a group of them attacked a landing party of Cook's men at the water's edge. In the melee, one Hawaiian clubbed Cook, another stabbed him in the back. He fell face-first on a shelf of black lava in knee-deep water, where they continued to pummel him until he died.

The fatal skirmish touched off a burst of violence from the British. They fired the ships' cannons into the crowd onshore and then shot six dead for throwing stones at a group of sailors who had gone ashore to find fresh water. They then set fire to 150 homes, and shot at the fleeing Hawaiians, bayoneting those who stayed behind.

Yet such bloodshed did not dissuade the Hawaiians that Cook deserved a chief's deathly due: funeral rites including skinning and disemboweling the corpse. Perhaps as a gesture intended to end the hostilities, the Hawaiians returned a grisly package to the crew of the *Discovery*. Wrapped in a feather cloak, it contained scorched limbs, a scalp with the ears still attached, and, apparently to preserve them, two hands that had been scored and salted.

The British sailors, more horrified than honored by the return of Cook's remains, lowered the Union Jack on both ships to half-mast, fired a ten-gun salute from the *Resolution* and tolled the ship's bell before committing the great explorer's remains to the deep. The ships left Kealahou Bay shortly thereafter.

Although Cook didn't make it back to Britain alive, dozens of his sailors did. While they told of the famous explorer's gruesome end, they also told tantalizing stories of an archipelago of tropical islands, bursting with fruit and erotically swaying *hula* dancers. That brought a new wave of visitors to the islands. Some were drawn by the lure of trade and opportunity. Others were searching for an unspoiled paradise.

## PREFACE

She walked down the palace steps toward a horse-drawn carriage. Four footmen in white knee breeches carried the train of her lavender silk gown. She was fifty-four years old and strands of silver ran through her black hair. Despite her many sorrows, Hawai'i's queen walked with dignity. On that January day in 1893, she was determined to right a wrong.

Lili'uokalani, the reigning monarch of the Hawaiian kingdom, belonged to an ancient line of chiefs. Long before her birth, perhaps around the time Constantine ruled the Roman empire, her ancestors had paddled double-hulled canoes from Polynesian settlements thousands of miles across the heaving swells of the Pacific. Using the stars to navigate, they settled on a remote chain of volcanic islands they called Hawai'i.

For more than fifteen hundred years they lived there unbeknownst to Westerners, passing along their understanding of the world through chants, *hula*, a form of storytelling. But on January 18, 1778, when the queen's great-great-grandfather was a high chief, two sloops from the British navy appeared on the horizon. Commanded by the explorer James Cook, the ships' sailors shattered the splendid isolation of the Hawaiians, bringing deadly diseases, liquor, and firearms.

A few decades later Christian missionaries arrived, bringing the word of a new god and the printing presses to spread it. Wood frame houses arose alongside grass huts: the once languid capital Honolulu became a riotous port town, filled with whalers, roustabouts, and sailors of every nationality. By the time Lili'uokalani reached adolescence Hawai'i had adopted a declaration of rights, a constitution, a national legislature, and a public education system and had accepted the Western concept of private property.

The world rushed into Honolulu through its harbor. Newcomers founded the kingdom's banks, its steamship lines, and many of its newspapers. Some former missionaries and their descendants became businessmen and soon began demanding greater say in the kingdom's government. Foreigners brought the wider world to Hawai'i. But they also threatened to subsume the traditional livelihood, language, and culture of native Hawaiians.

Lili'uokalani herself spanned the worlds of both ancient Hawai'i and the West. Born in a grass house, she lived as queen in an ornate palace illuminated by electric lights, installed four years before the White House's in Washington, D.C. Educated by missionaries alongside other high chiefs' children, she spoke and wrote fluent English and Hawaiian, along with a smattering of French, German, and Latin. She also had traveled across the United States and halfway around the globe to England.

She ruled over a kingdom that was independent but tiny. Just eight inhabited islands surrounded by thousands of miles of Pacific Ocean, Hawai'i was one of the most remote places on earth. When Cook arrived the native Hawaiians numbered 300,000 to 400,000. In the 1890 census, the kingdom's entire population was 89,990, less than a third of San Francisco's, which at nearly 300,000 people was the largest city on America's west coast. As the mighty nations of the day, which were surging west in search of new markets, Lili'uokalani's island kingdom was isolated and virtually defenseless. It became a stopover where traders provisioned their ships on their way between North America and Asia.

## LOST KINGDOM

As she left the palace to step into her carriage, Lili'uokalani cast off the subservience that she had learned as a sweet-faced girl from her missionary teachers. On that day, Saturday, January 14, 1893, Hawai'i's queen planned to substitute a new constitution for the one forced upon her brother several years earlier, which had turned Hawai'i's monarch into a mere figurehead. Now she aimed to reclaim power for the throne and her people.

Beneath cloudless skies she left the palace. Cannons boomed as the royal carriage rolled toward the legislature. She expected the day to be one of the most triumphant in her two-year-reign, if all went as planned.

But that very morning the USS *Boston*, a warship based in the islands with special orders to protect U.S. interests, steamed into Honolulu harbor. Aboard was the United States envoy to the islands, a tireless advocate of American expansionism. Unbeknownst to Hawai'i's queen, a small group of conspirators, backed by the envoy, was plotting to wrest her away from the throne.

With its fragrant ginger blossoms and mist-swathed mountains, the independent nation of Hawai'i was the reluctant bride in a contest among three suitors—America, Great Britain, and France. During the nineteenth century each at times had sought to expand its influence in the Pacific by controlling the islands, a key stopover in the trade route between North America and Asia.

By 1893 a mounting threat to Hawai'i's independence had also come from within: powerful white sugar planters and merchants sought relief from an economic depression by pushing to annex the islands to the United States, the primary market for Hawaiian sugar. Already, they'd almost completely transformed Hawai'i's economy. For decades, vast sugar plantations had been subsuming the patchwork of taro fields and fish ponds that had long sustained native Hawaiians. This chain of verdant volcanic islands had been harnessed into a sugar-producing powerhouse, in which a small group of white planters controlled four-fifths of the islands' arable land.

A German-American named Claus Spreckels was the most aggressive of those sugar barons. Unlike the missionary descendants turned businessmen, Spreckels was loyal to profits above God or country. He dominated Hawai'i's sugar industry and became the kingdom's chief moneylender, entangling Lili'uokalani's predecessor, her brother, King Kalākaua, in many of his schemes.

Spreckels, who was known as the Sugar King, was just one of a long line of entrepreneurs and adventurers who sought their fortunes in Hawai'i. He favored the islands' continued independence to protect its planter-friendly labor laws. On the mainland he was not involved when a zealous group of white lawyers and businessmen took the next step. They formed a secret Annexation Club a year earlier, which hoped to push Hawai'i into America's arms. These machinations set the stage for a brutal clash between a relentlessly expanding capitalist empire and a vulnerable Polynesian island kingdom.

Packed into a one-story armory in downtown Honolulu two days after the queen's attempt to introduce a new constitution, a crowd of roughly a thousand white men were electrified by Lorrin Thurston, a passionate, dark-eyed lawyer whose parents had arrived with the first company of missionaries to the islands. As a founder of the Annexation Club, he spoke in a booming voice that reached the back of the hall, asking, "Has the tropic sun cooled and thinned our blood, or have we flowing in our veins the warm, rich blood which makes men love liberty and die for it?"

Thurston sought out the American minister, who had already sent a message to the commanding officer of the USS *Boston*. A few hours later at 5 p.m. on January 16 the warship's commander ordered the landing of 162 American sailors and marines onto the nearly deserted streets of Honolulu. The queen was then at the palace, just a few blocks from the Honolulu harbor. Hearing the beat of the American military drums, she stepped onto the veranda and watched from above as the troops marched from the harbor. As they kicked up dust in the unpaved streets, she could see they were heavily weighed down with double belts of cartridges.

## LOST KINGDOM

The sun sank and the skies over Honolulu darkened. The blue-jacketed sailors approached the palace. Beneath the town's newly installed electric streetlamps, Lili'uokalani could see them pushing a revolving cannon and a fearsome Gatling gun, equipped with 14,000 rounds of ammunition that could rip through a large crowd. Following their movements in the streets she was frightened. Why had the troops landed when everything seemed at peace?

The air was heavy with the scent of gardenias. Mosquitoes were drawn to the sweat of the blue-jacketed sailors. As the troops marched past the palace grounds, accompanied by drum rolls, they hoisted their rifles to their shoulders and seemed to point them in the queen's direction.

Were their weapons drawn and ready to fire, as Lili'uokalani later recalled? Or were they merely signaling their respect for Hawai'i's queen by marching past and beating the drums in a royal salute, as one of their commanding officers later insisted?

Whatever their intention, this brash display of military power ignited a crisis that would alter the course of American history.

The landing of U.S. Marines in 1893 came after decades of tension between Hawaiians and the West. The events leading up to it are passionately debated even today among legal scholars, Hawaiian rights activists, and historians. It is the crux of the story of how Hawai'i became part of the United States and it is at the heart of the racial conflict that still tears at the state that bore America's forty-fourth president.

Until recently, American history textbooks have largely overlooked how a small group of businessmen, many of whom were descendants of early Christian missionaries to the islands, managed to overthrow a sovereign kingdom. Most tourist guidebooks simply note the historical curiosity that Hawai'i was once an independent nation, boasting the only former royal palace on American soil.

Yet a glance at the state's newspapers today makes clear that many of the families and firms behind Queen Lili'uokalani's overthrow more than a century ago still wield power in Hawai'i. Vast fortunes accrued



to some of them in the years after the overthrow. What happened to the Kingdom of Hawai'i was one of the most audacious land grabs of the Gilded Age, in which 1.8 million acres of land now worth billions of dollars was seized from native Hawaiians and claimed by American businessmen.

It was also the first major gust in a brewing storm of American imperialism, occurring just before U.S. troops took control of Cuba during the Spanish-American War, conquered the Philippines, and turned Guam and Puerto Rico into U.S. territorial possessions. As Americans gained a new belief in their manifest destiny around the globe, Hawaiians lost their country, the first sovereign nation to become a casualty of America's imperial outreach.

The queen stood watching the troops, facing an impossible dilemma. Should she remain "civil," risking her overthrow and the surrender of native Hawaiian culture and sovereignty? Or should she order the troops under her command—outnumbering the *Boston's* force by nearly four to one—to fight back?

To do so risked inciting the slaughter of a race of people that was already disappearing, decimated over the years by smallpox, syphilis, and measles. Epidemics had carried away tens of thousands of native Hawaiians, who had little resistance to the deadly viruses that swept regularly through the islands. If her people fought off the Americans, would the British, French, or possibly even the Japanese swoop in to replace them?

What should she do?