

CHAPTER 4

Missionaries & Whalers

It was the arrival of the Congregational missionaries in 1822 that set-in place forces that were to ultimately reshape the future of Hawai`i. An examination of the period of the first foreign influence after Captain Cook's death, is now in order. The location of Hawai`i at the mid-point in the Pacific Ocean made it a natural site for re-provisioning ships of all countries wishing to become major players in the rapidly developing trade with Asia. British merchants were quick to see the possibilities of this new "discovery". They wasted no time convincing the ali`i to seek increased status in the owning and wearing of European clothing, furniture, and all manner of manufactured goods. Weapons of war such as cannon and muskets were in particular demand while the fight for domination of the islands continued. Kamehameha was proud of these new modern goods and the fad was enshrined.

The first trade commodity to allow the ali`i to make these purchases was sandalwood. This highly prized wood could be sold in China for enormous profit by European and American traders. This very slow growing tree was found in the upper elevations of the islands. The ali`i forced their subjects to harvest the wood and carry it down the slopes for loading. This work was so undesirable that the workers pulled up any seedlings of the tree that they found to hasten it's extinction. The chiefs were now constantly in debt as they acquired more and more European goods. The bonanza could not last and these trees drew near to extinction in less than 20 years. The main role that Americans played in this trade was that they owned many of the ships that were hauling cargo between China and Europe. This shipping boom developed a market for ship reprovisioning by the Hawaiians. This, rather than sandalwood, had a lasting effect on the long-term growth of the economy. Ships would always need fresh water, food, and a place for their sailors to get some rest and relaxation.

Against this backdrop of an expanding economy the American missionaries arrived just six months after the death of Kamehameha. Liholiho, Kamehameha II, was the new king, although in fact Kamehameha's favorite wife, Ka`ahumanu, was running things. It was largely due to her influence that the long standing kapu system came to an end. The event that broke the system was when she decided to eat with the men; one of the most strongly forbidden behaviors. The kāhuna were irate over this violation of tradition but the ali`i stood behind her.

When it was seen that the gods did not intervene and punish her, Hawaiians saw little reason to uphold the other kapu. In a very short time, the traditional system that had maintained order in the islands for almost a thousand years had been abandoned by a large percentage of the populace. According to some accounts Hawai`i was rapidly approaching anarchy when the missionaries arrived. Their timing could not have been better.

On their arrival the missionaries from New England quickly established bases on the islands of Maui, Hawai`i, and O`ahu. The lack of clothing worn by the women and the relatively lax sexual mores shocked the missionaries and they were not reticent about expressing these feelings. Many viewed the Hawaiians as savages to be saved from the fires of hell. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that their welcome was less than enthusiastic. The missionaries steadfastly maintained their traditional manner of clothing and food preferences, although these were clearly unsuited to their new environment. This only served to further alienate them from the locals. This rigidity was diametrically opposed to the laid back life style of the islanders. The one bright spot in attracting the islander's interest was the fact that many had wanted to learn to read and write since their introduction to Western cultures. The ali`i were particularly eager students. Literacy would be a great advantage in their business dealing with the Anglos. The missionaries considered the ability to read the Bible and essential element of Christianity and were eager to teach these skills to the Hawaiians. Thus, knowledge of Jesus was interspersed with basic language fundamentals. The first converts were ali`i who quickly applied pressure on their subjects to join the church. The beliefs filled a void left when the traditional religious beliefs declined. Converts were required to take formal exams to prove their knowledge of both English and Christianity before they would be accepted into the church. By 1830 fully 30% of Hawaiians were undergoing formal training to pass these exams.

While the missionaries were grateful to the ali`i for their patronage, they questioned the somewhat arbitrary power of the monarchy. As Americans, they also felt compelled to spread the concept of democracy to the islands. Rather than pushing for an outright change of the government, which would have surely failed, they had to settle for just planting the seeds and waiting for them to grow. The success of the missions did not go unnoticed. More recruits from the States were summoned and by 1838 the number of missionaries had increased to 90. They established Punahou School as a college prep institution for their children. In later years the youth of the wealthy sugar planters and businessmen attended

as well. Punahou remains a distinguished school to this day and prides itself on the number of graduates who enroll in the Ivy League.

The monopoly of the Congregationalists did not go unchallenged for long. In 1831 a group of Catholic missionaries arrived from France. They were not only not welcomed, they were locked up under the pretense that they were French spies out to weaken British influence. The American missionaries played no small role in this subterfuge. The prisoners were not released until a French frigate aggressively sailed into Honolulu Harbor and fired a few rounds from its cannons. Undoubtedly the most famous Catholic priest in Hawai`i was the Belgian, Father Damien. He arrived at the leper colony on the Kalaupapa Peninsula on the island of Moloka`i in 1873. He ministered to the lepers for 16 years until he eventually died from the disease. He is currently being considered for saint-hood by the Catholic church.

Around the same time as the missionaries another very different group of Americans became interested in Hawai`i. These were the whalers that were home based in Massachusetts. These ships started arriving in Lahaina and Honolulu in 1820. By 1824 there were 100 ships using Hawai`i as both a reprovisioning center, and a repository where they could off load their catch and continue whaling rather than return to New England whaling ports.

Another function of a stop in port was the opportunity to allow the sailors to blow off some steam after being confined to tight ship's quarters for months on end. It was this recreational aspect that put the whalers on a collision course with the missionaries. In the first place, stories of sailors fondness for rum are often not an exaggeration. The many grog shops lining the harbors of whaling ports were a true vexation to the tee-totaling clerics. They tried without success to get them closed down. The profits from the sale of alcohol caused many a believer to look the other way. Plus, a unique cabin industry sprang up in Hawai`i. When the drunken sailors would be thrown in jail it would be necessary for a consul to intercede with the ali`i to secure their release. The best of these consuls supposedly made over \$150,000 a year under the table. It was just a cost of putting into port in Hawai`i.

However, the sailors also created another far more serious problem and that was the spread of sexually transmitted diseases to the island women. It was customary for young women to swim out to the ships entering port. They would exchange their favors (as they say) for clothing, perfume, cash or whatever else was available. In later periods these activities would be relegated to port side brothels as in most port towns. The missionaries pleaded with the ali`i to keep

the women from swimming out to the ships, and after lengthy discussions the leaders agreed. This did not remove the temptation, however, as the women would meet the sailors in the bars and return with them to their ships. The ali'i then decided that the sailors could not spend the night in town and the women could not go to the ships. This edict was more than the seamen could tolerate and the skippers of several vessels protested the decision. In one of many disputes between Governor Boki and Ka`ahumanu he sided with the whalers. She remained steadfast however and the girls remained on shore. When the whalers, protestations proved unsuccessful a particularly incensed skipper aptly named "Mad Jack" Percival proclaimed that this was a declaration of war. He landed with a large number of sailors with the intention of burning down the church to teach the missionaries not to interfere in his affairs. His party was met by a large contingent of Hawaiians. As previously mentioned, many of the Hawaiians were very large men and there could be no doubt of the outcome. The missionaries had won this round but the conflict was far from resolved.

The whaling industry benefitted the economy of the Islands in a number of ways. Many young Hawaiians were hired by the ships as crew. They usually worked out well as nautical skills were an integral part of their Polynesian heritage. Extracting and refining whale oil created an industry of its own. Processing the whalebone, most famous as the framework of women's corsets, spun off as another business enterprise. But most of all the merchants who both brought the oil and provided the supplies needed by the whalers started to grow into powerful financial trading companies. Whales in the immediate vicinity of Hawai'i were quickly depleted and the whole process of whaling proved to be extremely cyclical. However, most of the whales processed in Hawai'i were caught in the frigid waters of the North Pacific and Arctic Oceans. One out of every five years would be an economic disaster and it was hard to make accurate predictions at all times. Still the industry managed to grow, and at its height in the 1850's over 500 ships per year were making regular stops in the islands. The Hawaiians had 19 whaling ships of their own at the peak of the industry.

The industry was not done in by over harvest, as many assume. The discovery of oil by Drake in Pennsylvania in the late 1850's, though barely noticed at the time, was the beginning of the gradual decline of the whaling industry and the end of American involvement in the industry. Kerosene lamps quickly reduced the demand for whale oil. One by one other whale-based products were replaced by cheaper synthetic substitutes.

Only the merchants and trading companies, who had begun to diversify years earlier, were able to remain financially viable after the crash of the whaling industry. They too might have gone under if it were not for the arrival of the industry that was to sustain Hawai`i for the next 100 years – sugar.