

"A riveting saga . . . a real gem of a book."
—DOUGLAS BRINKLEY



LOST KINGDOM

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

JULIA FLYNN SILER

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of *The House of Mondavi*

READING GROUP GUIDE

SYNOPSIS

A TOUR THROUGH THE FASCINATING HISTORY OF HAWAII, LOST KINGDOM: HAWAII'S LAST QUEEN, THE SUGAR KINGS, AND AMERICA'S FIRST IMPERIAL ADVENTURE, IS A TALE OF ONE OF THE MOST BREATHTAKING LAND GRABS OF THE GILDED AGE.

The story begins around 200 A.D., when intrepid Polynesians navigated thousands of miles across the Pacific and arrived at an undisturbed archipelago. For centuries, their descendants lived with almost no contact from the Western world. In 1778, their profound isolation was shattered with the arrival of Captain Cook and his men.

Deftly weaving together a memorable cast of characters, *Lost Kingdom* brings to life the ensuing clash between a vulnerable Polynesian people and relentlessly expanding capitalist powers. Portraits of royalty, rogues, sugar barons, and missionaries combine into a sweeping tale of the Hawaiian kingdom's rise and fall.

At the center of the story is Lili'uokalani, the last queen of Hawaii. Born in 1838, she lived through the nearly complete economic transformation of the islands. Lucrative sugar plantations owned almost exclusively by white planters, dubbed the "Sugar Kings," gradually subsumed the majority of the land. Hawaii became a prize in the contest between America, Britain, and France, each of whom were seeking to expand their military and commercial influence in the Pacific.

Lost Kingdom is the tragic story of Lili'uokalani's family and their fortunes. The monarchy, under King David Kalakaua, fell victim to manipulation from the wealthy sugar-plantation owners. Upon ascending to the throne after her brother David's death, Lili'uokalani was determined to enact a constitution reinstating the monarchy's power. But she was outmaneuvered, and, in January 1893, U.S. Marines from the USS Boston marched through the streets of Honolulu to the palace. The end of Hawai'i's history as a sovereign nation had begun.

In the wake of its annexation by the United States in 1898, Hawaii became a stronghold in the Pacific, a position it maintains to this day. A provisional government, comprised of many of the descendants of the original missionaries, took control of the islands, toppling the monarchy and forever ending the island kingdom's independence. For the United States, striving to fulfill its manifest destiny, the addition of Hawaii ushered in a new century of American imperialism.

Native Hawaiians mourned the loss of their nation and even former President Grover Cleveland, by then living in retirement, spoke for those who had opposed annexation, declaring "Hawaii is ours...as I contemplate the means used to complete the outrage, I am ashamed of the whole affair."

POINTS TO PONDER

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Most 20th century textbook accounts of the overthrow of the last Queen of Hawaii largely ignored the Native Hawaiian perspective of the end of the Hawaiian Kingdom. How well do you think the author, a white mainlander, portrayed both sides of the story?
- In the wake of recent protests for racial justice around the world, what is the relevance of this history for us today? What other groups in the United States might we consider while thinking about the experiences of Native Hawaiians?
- Do you feel there is a hero/heroine or villain/villainess in this story?
- How do you feel about Lili'u? Could she have done anything to alter the course of historical events? Should she have? Do you consider her a tragic figure?
- How do you feel about King David Kalakaua? How responsible was he for the course of events?
- How do you feel about the way the United States handled the annexation of Hawaii? Grover Cleveland said, "Hawaii is ours...as I contemplate the means used to complete the outrage, I am ashamed of the whole affair." Do you agree/ disagree with him?
- How do you feel about the way the Native Hawaiians expressed their opposition to the annexation of Hawaii? Did you get a good sense from the book as to how and why they behaved as they did?

- How do you feel about Claus Spreckels? What about Dole? Are there other characters in the book that you feel played a pivotal role and you'd like to know more about them? How do you feel about the original missionaries, and then how do you feel about their descendants? Was everyone generally well-intentioned, or was self-interest paramount?
- Can you imagine an alternate history? Where would Hawaii be today if the US hadn't annexed it? Where would the US be today without Hawaii?
- Given that Lili'u censored her writings for fear that her enemies would use them against her, and that she also came from a culture that long passed down its history orally, do you think this particular history of Hawaii could be better told as 'historical fiction'?

With thanks to Literary Masters for sharing these questions. To learn more, please visit <https://literarymasters.net/>

Q&A WITH JULIA FLYNN SILER

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT HAWAII?

A few years ago, my family and I were invited to spend the weekend at a ranch near San Francisco owned by some family friends. On a tour of the property, they swung open the door of an old, dusty barn. Inside was a treasure trove of what collectors call “Hawaiiana” – fierce-looking totems, grass skirts, feathered staffs, and carved wooden bowls known as calabashes. That’s when I first started thinking about the close ties between California and Hawai’i – and started to wonder whether some of the great fortunes on the West Coast had their origins in the islands.

HOW DID YOU FOLLOW UP ON THAT HUNCH?

Soon after visiting that barn, I went to the library looking for books that might explain the commercial and cultural ties between Hawai’i and California. One, in particular, caught my eye; it was about Claus Spreckels, a nineteenth century business tycoon whose nickname was the “Sugar King.” The Spreckels were a powerful family in California’s early days – controlling railroads, steamship lines, and huge sugar beet operations. But the surprise – at least to me – was that they made much of their money by virtually dominating the economy and the politics of the Hawaiian Islands.

I’ve always loved stories about families and the Spreckels truly were a true family dynasty – with all the infighting and intrigue one would imagine. They were a nineteenth century version of the Mondavis. And as I started learning more about Hawaiian history, I came to realize that American history also could lay claim to one true royal family – the kings and queens who once ruled Hawai’i.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN ABOUT HAWAII'S ROYAL FAMILY?

There have been all sorts of books about Hawaiian royalty over the years, but so far nothing that offered an intimate glimpse into their lives or investigated the ways in which their lives became painfully entangled with those of enterprising businessmen such as Claus Spreckels. Thanks to my luck of meeting David Forbes, a historian who had spent the past four years collecting and transcribing every single letter, diary entry, and document pertaining to the last family that had ruled the Hawaiian Islands, I got an extraordinary look into the private lives of the last king and queen of Hawai'i. Many of these letters have never been published before and David very generously offered to share them with me.

The Forbes collection – which included intimate correspondence among the members of Hawai'i's last ruling dynasty – helped me understand this talented and passionate family caught between their love and loyalty for their native Hawaiian subjects and the very powerful force of nineteenth century capitalism. They were under tremendous pressure.

WHO WAS YOUR FAVORITE CHARACTER?

I was especially moved by Lili'uokalani (Lee-lee-ooo-oh-kalani, known as Lili'u) the last queen of Hawai'i, who was as much Victorian lady as fierce Hawaiian chiefess. She spoke four or five languages, did charitable works, and wrote more than a hundred songs – including what is still Hawai'i's most famous song, Aloha Oe. She was worldly – travelling to New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., and even London, after Queen Victoria invited her to join her in celebrating her Royal Jubilee.

Yet, not long after Lili'u took the throne, the San Francisco Examiner and other papers viciously attacked her, calling her “savage,”

“immoral” and “blood-thirsty,” even though she was a devout Christian educated by white missionaries. Old stereotypes die hard, and writers such as Mark Twain had helped popularize the idea of Hawaiians as being “sceptered savages” who ate dogs and indulged in orgies. Lili’u, who was brilliant and headstrong, embodied a profound cultural schism: dressing in elegant silk crinolines and diamond brooches of the late Victorian era as she battled to protect her nation’s sovereignty and her Hawaiian heritage.

I was delighted to come across letters and other documents that offered glimpses of Lili’u’s personality – her moments of scolding her sister for being flirtatious and her wifely pique at her husband for not picking up the fish she wanted, for example, as well as her diary entries which recorded the hot anger she felt at the white men who held her captive in her own palace.

WHAT WAS YOUR MOST INTERESTING RESEARCH FIND?

I remember spending an afternoon in the archives of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu and coming across a fascinating document – a page that Lili’u had torn from the Book of Psalms. She had written in pencil “Iolani Palace. Jan 16th 1895. Am imprisoned in this room (the South east corner) by the Government of the Hawaiian Republic. For the attempt of the Hawaiian people to regain what had been wrested from them by the children of the missionaries who first brought the Word of God to my people.” Finding that yellowed page, which she had presumably torn out of the Bible and written on during the first night of her imprisonment after a failed counter-coup, gave me goose-bumps. Or, as Hawaiians say, it gave me chicken skin!

HOW DOES THE FALL OF HAWAII'S KINGDOM RELATE TO TODAY'S WORLD?

As a business reporter for many years, I saw what happened to supported in large part by business interests. In fact, many of the families and firms behind Queen Lili'uokalani's overthrow more than a century ago still wield power in Hawai'i. Castle & Cooke, one of the companies founded by the first Christian missionaries to the islands, was intimately involved in her overthrow. What happened to Hawaii 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.

WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES IN WRITING ABOUT A NINETEENTH-CENTURY HAWAIIAN WOMAN?

I am not Hawaiian and I don't read or speak the Hawaiian language. And although Lili'u wrote most of her letters and diary entries in English, she was a native Hawaiian chiefess living in the nineteenth century – in other words, a very different time and place than our own.

From the beginning, people warned me off the project. When I first started, I met with someone at the University of Hawai'i who told me the story about the kolea, a migratory bird from the mainland that travelled across the sea from North America to Hawai'i to gorge on the island's luscious fruits. After growing fat, it flew back to the mainland. The point of this story was that this bird, like so many other visitors to Hawai'i, took without giving back. And the person who told me this story suggested that it would be better for a native Hawaiian to write this book. Someone else told me a cautionary tale about being prayed to death by kahuna! (a Hawaiian priest, magician, or expert.)

The story of Hawai'i is rich and I hope other writers, native Hawaiians and others, will write about it from their own perspectives. Perhaps my book will help them the way that a number of native Hawaiian scholars graciously provided me with guidance and shared ideas and resources. I also hope *Lost Kingdom* helps repay their generosity by inspiring readers to learn more about Hawaiian culture and the important work these scholars are doing.

WHAT ROLE DID CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES PLAY IN THE DRAMA?

Many of the sugar kings were descendants of the Christian missionaries who arrived in the islands to spread the gospel. As the old saying goes, they came to do good and they did well. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, some of their descendants ended up controlling the vast majority of the arable land of Hawai'i, transforming the landscape from a patchwork of taro fields and fish ponds to large sugar plantations. They also controlled the banks, railroads, steamship lines, and most industry. However, the sugar kings were far from the Simon Legree-type villains I had expected. Some loved the natural world of Hawai'i: a few spoke fluent Hawaiian and had a deep understanding of native Hawaiian culture. It would be simplistic to characterize the industrialists as all evil and the Hawaiians as all exemplary. In fact, I found that there were admirable characters and scoundrels among both native Hawaiians and haole, the native Hawaiian word for someone who is a foreigner.

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE LOST KINGDOM AS A TRAGEDY?

Yes – but with some uplifting and even comical moments. It is the story of how a vulnerable Polynesian people, who lived on one of the most remote places in the world, collided with the industrialized world. The result was disease, death, and the overthrow of a sovereign kingdom by the relatively young nation of America, which

was just then beginning to look beyond its continental borders for growth. That said the story has tragic-comic elements, as well. The collection of characters who found their way to Hawai'i in the nineteenth century, such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, and a monumentally brazen scoundrel named Walter Murray Gibson, could only have thrived in the heady tropical climate of Gilded Age Hawai'i. The uplifting part comes from Lili'u's ability to forgive her enemies at the end. That was inspiring to me.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DESCENDENTS OF HAWAIIAN ROYALTY AND TO THE SPRECKELS FAMILY?

Answering that question was one of the things I loved most about writing *Lost Kingdom*. The woman who is generally considered the closest relative of Lili'u, HRH Abigail Campbell Kawanānākoa, now lives in California and breeds quarter horses. Descendants of the Spreckels own vast swaths of Napa Valley. The romance novelist Danielle Steele owns the massive Spreckels mansion in San Francisco, which was once nicknamed the "Sugar Palace."

HOW WAS IT HAVING TO TRAVEL TO HAWAII FOR YOUR BOOK?

My friends tease me that I seem to end up doing research in beautiful places – and there's truth in that. The House of Mondavi was set in the Napa Valley and as part of my research I made a trip to Italy to visit the Mondavis' ancestral village. I spent four years working on *Lost Kingdom*, and my research took me on some wonderful adventures – a private tour of 'Iolani Palace, the only royal palace on U.S. soil, as well as what is now the Governor's mansion in Hawaii. I sang with the choir in the first church built on Oahu, which is made from coral stone, and watched performances of old-style hula and chanting. I sampled kava, a mouth-numbing drink made from the 'awa plant, out of a coconut shell, and inside the private home of the

descendants of the sugar kings of Hawaii, who showed me medals and other gifts given by the last king of Hawaii to their great-grandfather which have remained with their families in California. I also grew to appreciate the natural landscape of Hawai'i. It is one of the most isolated places on earth, with plants and creatures that live nowhere else. It's a miraculous place that's now part of the United States. Lost Kingdom explains how and why.

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