

FEATURES

Review: Book shares personal diaries of Hawaii's Queen Lili'uokalani

By [John Berger](#) • June 28, 2020

When the first group of Christian missionaries arrived in Hawaii in 1820 one of their most important contributions to Hawaii was literacy. The Hawaiian language did not exist in written form until the missionaries created it, but by the middle of the 19th century Hawaii had one of the highest per capita literacy rates in the world. More than 100 Hawaiian language newspapers flourished between 1835 to 1948, and they are a treasure trove of information about all aspects of Hawaiian life.

Literacy also enabled Hawaiians to document their lives in the letters they sent and the diaries they kept. None of those diaries is more important to historians than those of Hawaii's beloved Queen Lili'uokalani. "The Diaries of Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii" (Hui Hanai, \$40), edited and annotated by historian David W. Forbes, makes many of her diaries easily available for the first time. It is a marvelous introduction to Lili'uokalani that takes the reader far beyond the regal public figure Hawaii has honored for several generations.

The Queen's diaries cover the years between 1885 and 1900. They provide her private first-person account of her experiences — as heir apparent, as monarch, and then as wronged ruler of the Hawaiian Islands — during one of the most tragic eras in Hawaii's history.

Lili'uokalani's diaries for 1887, 1888, 1893 and 1894, and the "short version" of her diary for 1889, were among the documents that were seized by the queen's enemies in 1895 when they sought to prove that she had known that Hawaiian patriots intended to restore the legitimate Hawaiian government. Those diaries were deposited in the Territorial Archives in 1921; they are now in the State Archives.

Four diaries that were not seized in 1895 are in Bishop Museum. The "long version" of her 1889 diary is in private hands. It is being published for the first time.

Forbes' detailed annotation makes the book especially valuable as an introduction to this period in Hawaiian history. He opens with information on the diaries and their history, explains how he approached the task of editing the original texts, provides biographical information on the royal family and their friends and retainers, and adds the history of Lili'uokalani's various residences. From there he documents the diary entries in depth. Hundreds of footnotes identify the people and places she mentions, provide context by explaining the significance of various events, and include quotes showing the opinion of the English-language newspapers of the time.

Dozens of photos add another dimension to Forbes' beautiful celebration of Hawaii's last reigning queen.

That said, it is impossible to read the earliest entries without thinking about the tragedies that befell Lili'uokalani between 1885 and the end of the century.

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