

*Kanaka: The Untold Story of Hawaiian Pioneers in
British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest*

Tom Koppel

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BC HISTORY HAS CHANGED. Until quite recently, only the public and political activities of White adult males fell within its purview. Over the past two decades, however, the province's history has expanded to include the experiences of a much wider spectrum of society, and, as a result, more varied interpretations of social and political relations are becoming common. As the Forum in the Autumn 1996 edition of *BC Studies* suggests, the growing complexity of the province's history is stimulating lively debate about the ways in which class, race, gender, colonialist discourse, and other relations of power can bring these newly emerging people and experiences into better focus. Tom Koppel's *Kanaka: The Untold Story of Hawaiian Pioneers in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest* reflects this interest in ethnic diversity. Unfortunately, because the Hawaiians who appear in its pages are too often left stranded outside of descriptive or analytical contexts, the book also provides a timely reminder that both description and analysis are needed to render the experiences of the past into meaningful and significant history.

This popular history looks at the lives of the Hawaiian "pioneers" who first arrived in the Pacific Northwest in the early nineteenth century to work as labourers in the American and the British fur trade. Koppel explores their varied living and working conditions from Astoria to Fort Vancouver, and

from Forts Stikine and Simpson to Langley and Victoria. Their important contribution to whaling, sealing, and fishing on the coast is also described. When work in the fur trade and related industries declined, a number of Kanakas settled in northern Washington state. When they were prohibited from taking up land south of the forty-ninth parallel in the early 1870s, some families moved north. The second half of the book examines the areas of Hawaiian settlement in the Lower Mainland and the southern Gulf Islands.

Koppel has painstakingly traced the lives of the families, many comprised of Hawaiian-Aboriginal marriages, who took up land and made a living from both the land and the sea in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The research difficulties here should not be underestimated: in documents in which Hawaiian names seldom appear twice with the same spelling, tracing families over time and in different places requires considerable skill and patience. Koppel describes the cultural and familial context of Kanaka society up to the present day, providing abundant details about particular individuals as they became integrated into BC society.

Although the book gives an overview of the "untold story" of the Hawaiian presence in the Pacific Northwest, the story that emerges is, unfortunately, limited in scope and significance by the author's narrow approach to his subject. His uncritical reliance, in the first half of the book,

on the writings of Hudson's Bay Company officials and missionaries is probably responsible for the hollowness of the Hawaiian experience revealed in these pages. This is very much the story of Hawaiians as seen by nineteenth-century Europeans. These early Hawaiian arrivals seldom transcend their role as amusing, primitive caricatures within the colonialist discourse. Like nineteenth-century writers, Koppel seems to have little interest either in the world that the Hawaiians left or in their reasons for leaving: their motives, beliefs, fears, and joys remain as opaque to the reader as they did to their nineteenth-century observers.

Even when Koppel draws on oral history sources to explore a more Hawaiian-centred view of their history in the second half of the book, his exploration of family, economy, and culture is constrained by his failure to contextualize this population within broader frameworks of Canadian, British Columbian, or Hawaiian history. There is simply not enough historical context to allow us to understand the behaviours he describes. Descriptions of lives marked by violence, drunkenness, racial intermarriage, and high rates of mobility and mortality are presented haphazardly throughout the book. Because we have no idea how these behaviours related to other Hawaiians, Aboriginal peoples, or BC immigrants, it is difficult to understand their meaning or significance. Why did they drink so much? Why did they take up land rather than move to cities? What did the luaus mean to their society? Why did so few women emigrate to British Columbia?

The problems of interpretation created by poorly articulated historical contexts are exacerbated by the

weakness of historical analysis. Analysis and explanation are seldom offered, and, when they are, they tend towards historical determinism in lieu of any other theoretical models. Appalling working conditions, for example, which have provided the focus for considerable debate and discussion about race, class, and gender throughout BC historiography, are naturalized in a way that removes them from the realm of historical significance: Koppel argues that if Kanakas accepted these conditions, then they "must have been acceptable by the yardsicks of the time and compared to opportunities at home in Hawaii" (p. 27). Discussions about the inequality that clearly permeated the lives he describes are limited to descriptions of the "pecking order" that ranked Hawaiians above Native peoples and below Whites, and a whole literature about the meaning of race and class in British Columbia is ignored. Violence, work, leisure activities, family, and cultural traditions beg to be interpreted within specific contexts. Without these contexts it is impossible to ask questions of central importance to our understanding of history: Why did these people live as they did? What sense did they make of their own lives? What did their presence mean in British Columbia?

Although *Kanaka* contains some solid and difficult research concerning the Hawaiian presence in British Columbia, it fails to provide the clear historical lens needed to both see and understand the Hawaiian experience. As this book is grounded in neither Hawaiian nor BC society, its significance remains obscured within a context that seems to be exclusively defined by, and relevant to, oversimplified personalities.