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The Story Behind the Headstone:
The Life of William Kanui

IN A 1976 ARTICLE in the *Hawaiian Journal of History* entitled “Owhyee’s Prodigal,”¹ Susan N. Bell provides an interesting account of the life of William Kanui (Tennooe) whose epitaph engraved on a headstone behind historic Kawaiaha‘o Church in Honolulu reads:

In Memory of,
WILLIAM TENNOOE KANUI,
Born about AD 1796,
On the island of Oahu,
Went to America, 1809
Educated in Cornwall, Ct.
Returned to Honolulu, 1820,
Twice visited California,
Died in Honolulu,
Janu’y 14, 1864

¹ Susan N. Bell, “Owhyee’s Prodigal,” *HJH* vol. 10 (1976) 27.

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*In the life and death of Kanui, God's
Providence and Grace were wonderfully
manifested.*

*This stone was erected by
J.H. of Boston & S.C.D. of Honolulu.*

The purpose of this article is to revisit the 67 years of Kanui's life, particularly the personal conflicts he must have experienced when torn between two very disparate cultures and religions, at a time of increasing Western influence in Hawai'i.

A consideration of lines from this epitaph, in sequence, follows and furnishes an outline for the life of a very unique individual.

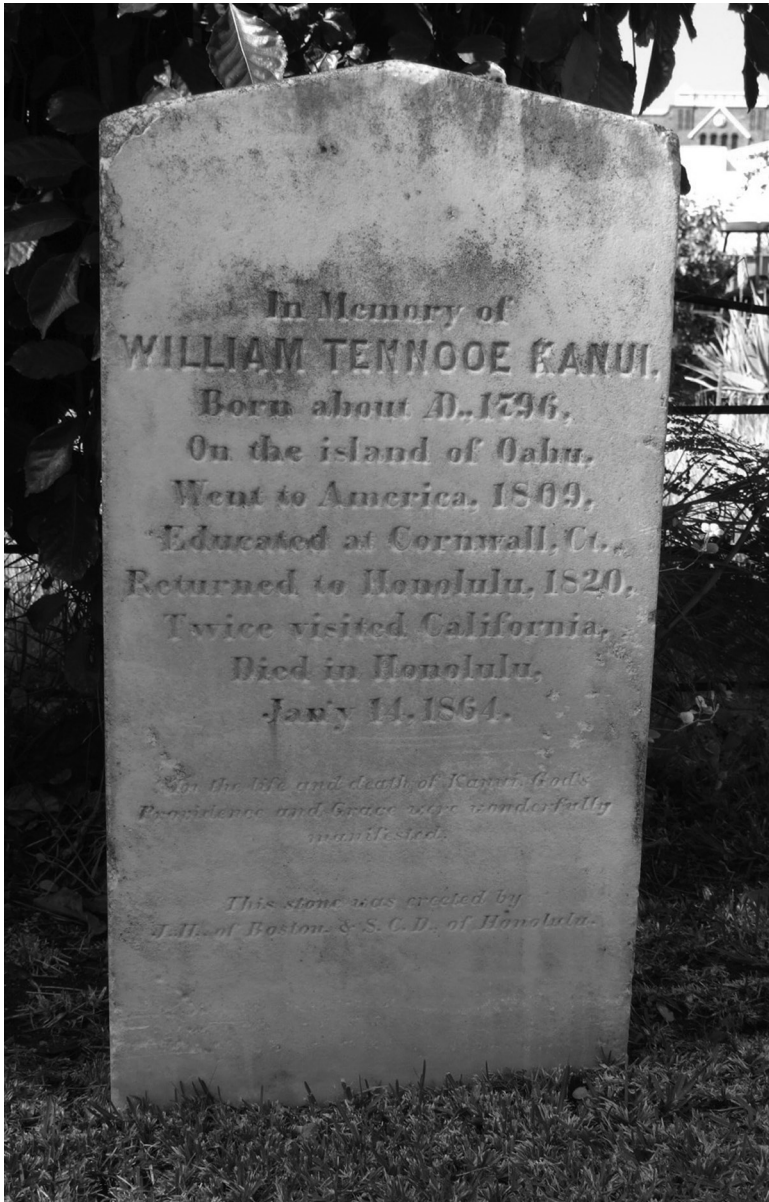
In memory of,
WILLIAM KANUI TENNOOE,

The three names in themselves are revealing. The name, "Kanui," bestowed upon him by his Hawaiian parents literally means "great," implying hope that the child would grow up to be an important member of his society. The name "Tennooe" is an Americanized spelling of his name, indicating Kanui came into contact with English-speaking *haole* prior to the adoption of a 12-letter Hawaiian alphabet developed by the American missionaries around 1826. The name "William" was tacked on by his *haole* associates early in life. It was common for ship captains to give *kanaka* crew English first names.

Born about AD 1796,
On the island of Oahu

Kanui was born a mere 17 years after the death of Captain Cook whose 3rd voyage revealed to the western world the existence of the island archipelago he named the "Sandwich Islands." The island of O'ahu was conquered by the mighty warrior Kamehameha I just one year before Kanui's birth. While Kanui was still an infant, the family relocated to the island of Kaua'i, where he spent his early childhood years.²

² Bell, "Owhyee's Prodigal," 27.



Headstone of William Tennooe Kanui located in cemetery behind Kawaiaha'o Church, Honolulu. Photograph by author.

Went to America, 1809

By 1809 many merchant ships from New England were stopping in the Sandwich Islands to restock food and water, and trade for valuable sandalwood. Captains often needed to hire on additional crew in the islands, having lost many sailors to the perils of the sea or desertion. *Kanaka* boys, many in their early teens, were ideally suited to sign aboard, and prized for their intelligence and agility in climbing the riggings and handling the sails.

The brig, *Elizabeth*, from Boston, called at Kaua'i in 1809. Kanui, then age 13, and his brother signed aboard along with a few other natives. They were at sea for over a year, traveling to the Northwest coast of America, and to ports in the Orient and Africa before arriving at Boston in 1810.

Kanui and his brother decided to spend some time in this foreign land. The boys worked as domestic servants or farm labor for a year or more, before deciding to seek a ship for passage home. Unfortunately, international affairs had put a stop to trade between New England and the Sandwich Islands.³ Disputes between England and Napoleonic France had escalated to the point that the United States was caught in a trading embargo that eventually led to the War of 1812. The overwhelming sea power of Britain was utilized to blockade the Atlantic coastline of the former colonies, and trading ships such as the *Elizabeth* faced capture or destruction at sea. The two brothers were stranded for the duration of the war.

The U.S. Navy was minuscule in comparison to the armada the English brought to the fray. President James Madison authorized owners of seaworthy trading vessels to retrofit their ships for battle and to prowl the Atlantic as "privateers" in search of "prizes" which consisted of British merchant ships and their cargoes operating between the West Indies and Britain. Kanui and his brother signed up as crew on several such privateers during the war. While specific details of Kanui's adventures have not been recorded, each sortie on a privateer involved life-threatening encounters at sea, often resulting in crew members being killed or captured by the British. For those American

³ Bell, "Owhyee's Prodigal," 27-28.

privateers who were successful in taking home “prizes” of seized cargo, or capturing an entire ship, the proceeds of sale were divided among the owners, officers, and crew according to percentages agreed to before the venture began.

In 1815 hostilities came to an end. In Boston, Kanui and his brother learned of a ship readying for Pacific trade in the port of New York. They headed south on foot along the coast. At Providence, Rhode Island, Kanui’s brother became ill and died. Discouraged and now alone, Kanui took a temporary job as a barber in New Haven, Connecticut, the site of Yale College. His decision to stop here set the course for the remainder of his life.

His epitaph continues:

Educated in Cornwall, Ct.

By 1815 many divinity school students at Yale were fascinated with the prospect of evangelizing what were considered the “heathen” in far-off lands. Henry ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia, a native of the island of Hawai‘i, had been befriended by members of the church community, and was held up as an example of the intelligence and propensity for spirituality that could be found among the Hawaiian people.

Plans were afoot to open a Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut, where “heathen” boys such as ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia and his countrymen in the area could be trained in the arts and sciences of Western education, and hopefully converted to the Christian faith. If all went according to plan, a group of these young men would be available to return to the Hawaiian Islands with the American missionaries to act as lay teachers and interpreters for the mission. Kanui was contacted by ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia and soon was brought under the wing of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM).

The Foreign Mission School opened in the spring of 1817. Kanui was among seven Hawaiians in the opening class. Three other “heathen” included two boys from Calcutta and one Native American. The curriculum included studies in English language, arts, sciences, and the Bible. For American children, raised in the existing culture of the United States, such instruction would be an amplification of values and traditions observed by their parents and inculcated from infancy. For Kanui and the other Hawaiians, the Western teachings were over-

laid on a markedly different early childhood. These boys were raised in a society that regarded the high *ali'i* as extensions of deities, and instead of a monotheistic god, their childhood experience involved a multitude of gods, rituals, and customs completely at odds with the fundamental Christian doctrines of their preceptors.

The *Missionary Herald* presented five major reasons such a school was being prepared for education and conversion of “heathen” youth. First, they would return with a familiarity of the “customs and vices and prejudices of their countrymen.” Second, they would be “free from suspicion,” noting that many in heathen lands had come into contact with so-called Christians whose “conduct is utterly inconsistent with the gospel.” Third, the converted youth would feel united to the people in the land, and “having themselves experienced the evils of paganism as well as the blessings of Christianity, they will be able to recommend the latter with peculiar force.” Fourth, “their constitution is suited to the climate.” Fifth, they “are acquainted with the language of their countrymen.”⁴

The boys were taught to read and write, but the only available textbooks were in the English language—there was not yet an appropriate alphabet, nor was there a single printed page in their native Hawaiian tongue. For two and a half years, Kanui was totally immersed in an environment whose leaders considered it vital to demean the culture and religious beliefs of his homeland.

James Morris, chairman of the executive committee for the Foreign Mission School, wrote to the ABCFM on September 2, 1817 furnishing a progress report on the students. At that time, 'Ōpūkaha'ia was the stellar Christian example, but three other Hawaiians were shown as promising prospects for eventual service to the church:

Hopoo [Hopu], having for about two years entertained a hope of Christ, has been the past summer admitted to the First Church in Cornwall, and received the ordinance of baptism. He shines uncommonly bright as a Christian, has the zeal of an apostle, and ardently longs for the time when it shall be thought his duty to return to his country men with the message of Jesus. . . .

⁴ *Missionary Herald*, July 1816, 298.

Tennooe [Kanui] and Honoree [Honoli'i] have given satisfactory evidence of having passed from death unto life, and should their example continue to correspond with this supposition, they will probably soon be admitted to confess Christ before men. Tennooe and Hopoo are about in the same stage of study. They have been attending English grammar and arithmetic this past summer. Honoree has been employed in reading and spelling together with exercises with the pen.⁵

Henry 'Ōpūkaha'ia contracted typhus fever and died in early 1818, but the momentum of enthusiasm among New England Protestants for establishment of a missionary settlement in the Sandwich Islands was unabated.⁶

Shortly after the death of 'Ōpūkaha'ia, after a year of handling the primary instructions at the school, Edwin Dwight was replaced by Herman Daggett. That summer, Daggett reported that Kanui "is persevering in his studies, writes a good hand, and displays a happy talent in composition."⁷ On the first Sabbath in September of 1818, Kanui was baptized as a member of the local Christian church. On his shoulders now rested a greater responsibility, along with greater expectations, that he would maintain an exemplary course as a Christian. Any failures from this point could result in severe sanctions from the church itself. The Congregational church of the day did not take backsliding very lightly, and the sword of public excommunication hung heavily over any members who strayed from the straight and narrow.

In the autumn of 1819, the brig *Thaddeus*, was chartered and made ready in Boston Harbor to carry the pioneer missionary company to its destination—the Sandwich Islands. Kanui was among four native Hawaiians selected to accompany the group. He, along with Hopu and Honoli'i, had progressed in their Christian studies to the point of being accepted as "pious" and baptized into the church. The fourth Hawaiian aboard was George Humehume Kaumuali'i, son of the paramount chief who ruled the islands of Kaua'i and Ni'ihau. While

⁵ James Morris, letter to ABCFM Boston, 2 Sept. 1817, ABCFM manuscript files, ABC 12.1, vol. 2, Harvard University Library, Cambridge.

⁶ Dwight, Edwin, *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah* (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1968) 78–97.

⁷ *Missionary Herald*, Nov. 1818, 513.

Members of the Foreign Mission School. Aug. 1, 1819. [P.]

Names	Native Names	Country	
Samuel Duggles*		English Americans	
James Ely*			
Thomas Holman*			
Elisha Loomis*			
Dea. H. Chamberlain			
Nathan B. Chamberlain			
Thomas Ho-poo*	Nu. he-poi-nah		Brookfield (Conn)
John Ho-no-ve*	Ho-no-ve		Hadlyme (Conn)
George Sandwick*	Nah. lo-mah-hou-nah		Cooperstown (NY)
George P. Tam-o-see	Tam-o-see		Middlesex (Do)
William Ten-noe*	Ten-noe	Brookfield (Mass)	
William Kumu-ma-oi-lah	Kumu-ma-oi-lah	Do. (Do.)	
Simon W. Ten-noe		English Students	
Adin C. Gibbs*			
Stephen Po-pi-he	Po-pi-he		Owbyhee
Joseph Potang-koo	Potang		Do.
Elija Poudinet	Kul. lo-ha-nah (Buch)		Do.
Leonard Hicks			Atoa
Thomas Passel	Tau-tchee-o (First Bird)		Wa-hoo
David S. Tau-chi-chy	Tau-chi-chy		Mowhee
John Ridge			Indian youth from Canada
John Tann			Indian youth from Pennsylvania
James Fieldy		Cherokee	
Mr. Peck Tolson			
Israel Tolson			
Isaiah Kingman			
Jacob Seth	Bau-hu-yoi-tuth		Cherokees
John Newcom*	Wau-ne-nauh-thiet		
John Chicks	Tau-poon-haut		
Peter Augustine	Ta-hon-o-tis		
Jacob H. Leo	He-ah-quick		
William Peters	To' lo		
		Choctaws	
		Malay from Sumatra	
		Stockbridge Indians	
		Ancidas	

* Professors of Religion. (Written by William Tennoe)

Roster of the Foreign Mission School dated Aug. 1, 1819, handwritten by William Tennoe. The roster was included with a September 1, 1819 letter from Herman Daggett, the school instructor, to John Nitchie, the American Bible Society agent. Daggett requests donations of bibles for the first company of missionaries scheduled to depart for Hawai'i. American Bible Society, New York, NY.

George Humehume was not yet baptized into the church, it was felt that because of the education he received, as well as transport home, he could be a positive influence for the mission.

The *Thaddeus* departed Boston in October of 1819, coming to anchor off the island of Hawai'i in March of 1820. The missionaries were greeted with startling news: the mighty Kamehameha, who had conquered and unified the islands, had died almost a year prior. His young son, Liholiho, now Kamehameha II, ruled in his place. In addition, the traditional religious system, including the worship of multitude of gods, had been challenged and was no longer supported by Liholiho and his close advisors.

At Liholiho's insistence, the missionaries could not take their entire party to the preferred destination, O'ahu. Thomas Holman, the medical doctor, and Asa Thurston, a pastor, along with their wives would stay at Kailua in Kona on the island of Hawai'i, where Liholiho had his primary residence. William Kanui and Thomas Hopu were chosen to join this small missionary station. It was hoped that the two young men would quickly curry the favor of Liholiho and his court, and serve faithfully as interpreters and educators of their own people.

Lucy Thurston gave a cheery description of the Hawaiian young men on their first day ashore at the Kailua station:

In the morning the two Hawaiian youth walked away to see the gentry; and having an eye to influence, they put on their best broadcloth suits and ruffled shirts, their conspicuous watch chains, of course, dangling from the fobs of their pants. Their hair was cut short on the sides and back of the head, but left long on top, to stand gracefully erect. Their style was the same as if again about to enter the capacious drawing rooms of Boston where they had been received with much éclat.⁸

While the missionary journals and letters merely state the fact that Kanui was left on the island of Hawai'i with Hopu, much can be inferred by this choice. Hopu was a native of Hawai'i Island, and his father still lived in the area. Honoli'i likewise was a native of Hawai'i Island. Kanui was born on O'ahu and raised on Kaua'i. Why did the missionaries place Kanui at this station and take Honoli'i with

⁸ Lucy Thurston, *Life and Times of Mrs. Lucy G. Thurston* (Ann Arbor: S.C. Andrews, 1882) 38.

them to Honolulu? It may be that Kanui's parents had died before he departed Kaua'i in 1809. Even so, considering the missionaries' plan to return George Kaumuali'i to Kaua'i, it seems odd that Kanui would not be considered to accompany the young *ali'i* to that island. Kanui's arbitrary placement at Kailua illustrates the expectation by Hiram Bingham and the missionary leaders that "members" of the group should consider their service to the church and God as their primary duty, and personal preferences should not interfere with the greater good of the missionary cause.

After the *Thaddeus* departed, Kanui was severely put to the test. For the first time in years he was back in a culture that he had loved in his childhood—the dress, or lack thereof, the chants and dances, swimming in the ocean, fishing, games of bowling with the *'ulu maika* stones—all of which were frowned upon by the missionaries as frivolous or evil. But it was Kanui's close association with Liholiho that posed the most serious temptation for the young Kanui. The ruler loved his liquor, and was often recorded as being extremely intoxicated. It was not long until Kanui began to drink with Liholiho and his court—an action that surely led to severe admonitions from the pastor, Asa Thurston.

At the same time Dr. Holman and his wife were constantly bickering with the pastor Asa Thurston about the injustice of their being abandoned in such a place, stressing his opinion that he was not bound by the mandates of the church leaders. The doctor befriended the *ali'i nui* Liholiho, eventually obtaining permission to leave Kailua and move to Lahaina on the island of Maui. Just three months after the Kailua station was established, Samuel Whitney was dispatched from Honolulu to assess the situation, particularly in respect to Dr. Holman and William Kanui. Whitney found Holman already in preparation to depart Kailua for Lahaina, regardless of pleas from Kailua pastor, Asa Thurston, that Holman remain in his assigned position. Holman would later be described by Hiram Bingham as a "railer" and disobedient to the point he would be excommunicated from the church.⁹ Samuel Whitney wrote about Tennooe's situation:

⁹ Hiram Bingham and Asa Thurston, *Joint Report on Holman Case*, report to ABCFM, 20 Oct. 1820, HMCS.



Engraving of William Tennooe taken from fundraising “PRINT of four OWYHEAN YOUTHS” (Published by N. & S.S. Jocelyn, New Haven, Con., 1822.). The original drawing is by Samuel F.B. Morse. Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society, Honolulu.

But what shall I say of William? Alas, my dear sirs, it is otherwise with him. His mild and courteous behavior at first brought him much in favor of the king, and the principle men for a short time he engaged in teaching them; but soon begun to feel that such employment was degrading to one of his standing. He left it, and w/others of his own countrymen, gave way to temptations and indulgences in intemperance and Sabbath-breaking. The first two days after my arrival, I endeavored to find him, and converse with him. On the third day I succeeded, when he frankly told me that the 2 preceding days he had been intoxicated, as he had several times before, and offered as an excuse the request of the king and others that he should drink with them. Bro. Thurston

and myself warned him of this danger, and earnestly requested him to repent . . . he promised reformation, but as yet we have seen no fruits of repentance. He came with me to this island. Bro. C. and myself have since conversed with him again. He now says he was driven to intemperance by depression of spirits caused by a difficulty he had had with Dr. Holman, when the Doct. he said complained to the king, and requested he should send him away.¹⁰

Kanui was brought to O‘ahu for a council of the church leaders to see if there was any hope of salvaging him from his backslidden state. Hiram Bingham was not a man to mollycoddle a backslider. If the devil had gotten hold of one of the Church’s own, it was incumbent upon the leadership to lay out the sins in precise detail and make sure that the sinner realized the importance of confessing and repentance. Kanui readily acknowledged his failings, but told his elders that he was weak and could not promise he would never again give in to the temptation of alcohol. Bingham’s tactic was typical of the rock hard stance of the Calvinistic church of the day. Kanui must not only realize his sinful course, he must make a public apology to the entire church at their gathering at the next Sabbath. Kanui still could not find it in his heart to gather enough courage to face the men and women of the church in public, and to confess the details of his sin aloud before them.

On Sunday, July 23, 1820, William Kanui sat in the meeting house of the Sandwich Island Mission Church in Honolulu. At the conclusion of the sermon, Bingham read before the public gathering a scathing letter to Kanui:

Dear William Tennooe

Painful as is the duty of this church to withdraw from you the hand of fellowship, & to consider you as no longer a member of this consecrated body, yet the folly and wickedness which you acknowledge you have wrought in the indulgence of your sinful lusts and your perseverance in the broad and downward road, seem unavoidably to require it. As a professed disciple of Christ you have received into covenant with his Church.—We as the covenant people of God have watched over

¹⁰ Samuel Whitney, letter to Samuel Worcester, ABCFM, 20 July 1820, HMCS.

you, we have labored to instruct you in your duty—to provide for your wants, to raise you from the darkness of heathenism and the pollution of sin, to make you happy and useful, to reclaim your wandering steps, to save you from the needless reproaches of the world, and to guide you in the paths of peace and holiness and the way of eternal life.

But you have violated your covenant vows; you have treated lightly the friendly admonitions of the church; you have grieved the hearts and shamed the faces of all the brethren; you have wounded the Redeemer in the house of his friends, and given occasions to his enemies to speak reproachfully; according to your own confession and abundant evidence, you have repeatedly been guilty of intoxication, by the wicked and intemperate use of strong drink, and you have been guilty of breaking the Sabbath, God's holy day of rest; by absenting yourself from the worship of God, and by spending the day in open commission of scandalous sins. For these sins there is, and can be no excuse. The only apology by which you pretend to palliate them, by no means acquits you and justifies your sins, but increases your condemnation. The scriptures admit of no apology for sin. The crimes of our men can never be justifying cause for the crimes of another.

You, dear William, have been kindly reproved, and faithfully admonished and repeatedly warned of your danger, and affectionately entreated to cease from sin, and repent and return to God, and to the obedience of His commands. Brothers Thurston and Whitney laboured and prayed with you at Kiaroah [Kailua] and directed you to this place to save you from total apostasy, from temptation and ruin. Here brothers Chamberlain and Whitney have again admonished you and called you to repent, and required that a public confession of your sins should accompany repentance. They have 'told it to the church' and this church has been but too deeply convinced of your sin and folly, have kindly admonished you, and called you to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance" & publicly and humbly to confess your sins and cease from them, and to renew your covenant vows, and seek divine forgiveness, and by increased humility and fidelity to engage anew in the service of the Lord, but alas, you refuse to hear them, and give too much evidence that "your heart is not right with God". You still chose the paths of wickedness, the company and practice of the vile, and with hardened impenitence and ingratitude you declare your determination to continue in the course of the same scandalous sins for which you are admonished.

Our duty is plain. The Church has but one voice on the subject. The precepts of our Saviour are clear and decisive. II Thess. 3,6 “Now we command you, brethren in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that you withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly,” and in Matt. 18, 17, “If he neglect to hear the Church let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” Also Rom. 5, 11 [*sic*] “but now I have written you not to keep company, if in man that is called a brother be a fornicator or covetous, or an idolator, or a railor, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, with such an one no not to eat.”

Wherefore, in view of your sins and impenitence and in obedience to the commands of Christ, we have lifted up our hands to cut you off from the communion and fellowship of this church, to deliver you over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, to express to you distinctly what we now declare publicly, that you are, of right, ought to be excommunicated from the Church of Christ.

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen and repent. Remember that God will require you to pay him your vows, and to obey all his commands. Remember that you have forfeited the confidence and patronage of the American Board, rewarded with ingratitude the kindness and hopes of the Christian public, by whose care you have been instructed and by whose bounty you have been fed and clothed.

Remember, too, and “be not deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor thieves, nor coveters, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners shall inherit the Kingdom of God.” I Cor. 6. 9, 10

In behalf of the church of Christ in the Sandwich Islands

H. Bingham, Associate Pastor¹¹

Thus, a mere four months after his arrival home, William Kanui was on his own—disgraced among his former Christian associates, yet indoctrinated sufficiently to carry a real fear for his eternal destiny if he continued to reject the Christian theology. His answer was to live apart from the church, serving for a time in the court of Liholiho,

¹¹ Hiram Bingham, letter to William Tennooe, 23 July 1820, ABCFM manuscript files, ABC 19.1, vol. 1, Hawaiian Islands Mission, 1819–1824, Houghton Library, Harvard.

working in a Honolulu grog shop, and signing aboard various vessels, which were arriving more and more frequently, especially due to the whaling industry that was now thriving in the Pacific Ocean.

Kanui's tombstone engraving continues:

Twice visited California

For 19 years following Kanui's dismissal from the Sandwich Island Church there was scant mention of him in the journals and letters of the missionaries.

An entry in Elisha Loomis' journal dated August 6, 1820, roughly two weeks after Kanui's excommunication reads:

About sunset we were visited by a number of the head chiefs who have lately been at Owhyee (Hawaii) . . . Brother B. [Bingham] requested them not to let Tennooe [Kanui] have any spirituous liquors, and they promised they would not. Since Tennooe's dismission, as well as before, he has lived in an almost constant state of drunkenness, and appears insensible to the awful retribution that awaits such offenses.¹²

There is one specific mention of him in the *Journal of the Sandwich Island Mission*, describing a meeting about a year or so after his expulsion from the Church:

While the brethren were present, a youth sat down in the door, completely in the native habit, but seemed to take no notice of them, and it was, with difficulty that they, at last, were able to recognize him to be William Tennooe [Kanui], the subject of so many prayers, favors, instructions and distinguished privileges. He has, for a considerable time, lived at Waini [Waianaë]. He shuns our society, and we are pained to say, gives no evidence of a disposition to return to give glory to God, and to pay to the Lord his vows.

Several letters from American friends to William, have been carried him by Hopoo and Honoree, who seem deeply to lament his fall.¹³

¹² Elisha Loomis, Journal of Elisha Loomis, 6 Aug. 1820, HMCS.

¹³ Quote from the Journal of the Sandwich Island Mission appearing in *Missionary Herald* 1822, 324, HMCS.

Interestingly, both hard liquor and the concept of guilt associated with its abuse were imported into the Hawaiian culture by foreigners arriving from Western societies.

For nearly two decades, Kanui blended into the lifestyle of his countrymen—most likely conflicted with feelings of guilt and depression enhanced by an addiction to alcohol. In 1839, when written documentation of his life appeared once again, he was a crewman on an American vessel off the coast of California. The captain sent Kanui ashore to cut firewood for the cookstove. Samuel Whitney details what happened in a letter to the ABCFM in Boston:

While there alone, in the act of cutting down a tree, he heard, as he supposed, a voice remonstrating with him for his wickedness, and long-continued abuse of the savior. He looked about to see who it was that was speaking to him; but nobody was to be seen. The axe fell from his hands, and he sat down. The expostulation continued. In great distress, he attempted to pray, but could not; unable to work, he returned to the vessel, and attempted to explain to the Captain the reason of his returning without the wood for which he had been sent. From him, however, he received nothing but reproaches and curses, which continued to the end of the voyage. Nor was the treatment of the officers and crew any better, except that a part of the latter, who were his countrymen, were disposed to be civil. With them he could converse, and having obtained a bible, he used to read it to them on the sabbath, and other times, as they could attend.¹⁴

Two decades after Kanui's excommunication, Samuel Whitney recalled in a few more details.

[Kanui] was abandoned by them [the chiefs he was serving] and obliged to gain a subsistence, sometimes as a sailor on board the native vessels, and in this land sometimes serving up a Honolulu grog. For 19 years he pursued this worthless course . . .¹⁵

¹⁴ Samuel Whitney, letter to ABCFM, 30 Oct. 1842, quoted in *Missionary Herald*, July 1843, HMCS.

¹⁵ Samuel Whitney, letter to ABCFM, 30 Oct. 1842, quoted in *Missionary Herald*, July 1843.

Years later, Hiram Bingham wrote in retrospect about this period of Kanui's life:

William Tennooe [Kanui]...was excluded from Christian fellowship, but still performed some service for the chiefs for a time, then became a wanderer for many years.¹⁶

Upon his return to Honolulu, Kanui was a changed man, fired up with zeal to promote the Christian faith among his people. Would the church receive this prodigal son with open arms? The Christian community in the Hawaiian Islands had changed considerably during the 19 years following Kanui's excommunication. In 1839, when William Kanui sought to reinstate himself with the church, there were only six American missionaries remaining in the Hawaiian Islands who had sailed with Kanui aboard the *Thaddeus*. Samuel and Mercy Whitney were at Waimea, Kaua'i, where they had been sent in 1820. Asa and Lucy Thurston had faithfully continued to work at the station at Kailua on Hawai'i Island. Hiram Bingham and his wife, Sybil, were stationed in Honolulu, where Bingham took overall charge of the affairs of the mission.

The ABCFM in Boston periodically had sent reinforcements to bolster the efforts during the years following the first company's departure. As of 1839, over 100 men and women volunteered to travel to the islands in support of their cause.¹⁷

For Hiram Bingham, the progress of the mission made him proud, although he knew it had not come easily. He and his fellow missionaries were continually doing battle with what they considered agents of Satan, who repeatedly sought to oppose the goals of the church. He had fought against the introduction of Catholicism, persuading the rulers of the islands to issue edicts forbidding the entry of the "Papists," as he called them.¹⁸ Even within the flock, Bingham was

¹⁶ Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1981) 125.

¹⁷ Bingham, *A Residence*, unpagged. The status of the early missionaries in 1839 appears in a table entitled "Missionaries of the American Board, to the Sandwich Islands" appended as four unnumbered pages following page 616.

¹⁸ Bingham, *A Residence*, 311, 312, 504.

concerned that native converts were being baptized too hastily, and their piety had not been adequately proven.¹⁹

It was this seasoned Hiram Bingham that William Kanui sought upon his return to Honolulu in 1839. If Kanui expected immediate restoration, he was to be disappointed. It would take more than a professed personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ to convince Bingham that Kanui was truly repentant. William was welcomed back, but told he would be treated as an outsider for a considerable period until he proved to the missionaries he was truly “pious.”

But Kanui was a changed man. Since his spiritual experience on the hillside in California, he probably reasoned that he did not need any human agency to validate his worth. He took inventory of his talents and abilities, and decided to put them to use in a positive manner, with or without the blessings of the church. Remarkably, he appears to have brought his alcohol addiction under control. He was mature now—45 years of age. He retained a good knowledge of reading and writing in the English language. He well knew the advantages that a native Hawaiian could have if he or she could read in the foreign tongue of the *haole* people who were rapidly molding the government and economy of the islands.

Kanui made a proposal to the ruling chiefs at Honolulu and obtained permission to establish a school to be called “William Tennoe’s English School.” Although the newly-standardized alphabet would spell his name as “Kanui,” he retained the old anglicized spelling, “Tennoe,” in the registered name of the school. He was given a small plot of land at the foot of Palolo Valley for the venture. What little remained of Kanui’s wages from his last sailing voyage went for purchase of a few textbooks and supplies from the missionary storehouse.

This was to be a subscription school, and Kanui planned to take care of his personal expenses and those of the school from the small periodic payments parents would make. The terms were 12½ to 25 cents per week. Textbooks included the *Bible* in English, *Webster’s Spelling Book* and *Adam’s Arithmetic*. There was considerable interest in the

¹⁹ Bingham, *A Residence*, 521–22.

program Kanui was offering to the common natives, and after a slow start, the student body increased to about 50.²⁰

In 1842, three years after his vision, Kanui learned that Samuel Whitney, one of the pioneer missionaries, was being transferred from serving over 20 years on Kaua'i Island, and being assigned duties back in Honolulu. It was Whitney who had come to the island of Hawai'i and found William hopelessly drunk. Kanui knocked on the door of the Whitney residence and was welcomed inside. Whitney wrote of this meeting:

Shortly after my arrival in Honolulu, in May last, he called at my house and gave me the facts already stated. It was more than two years since he had forsaken his wicked course, and nothing irregular or immoral was seen in his conduct. He spoke of his hope in the Savior with great diffidence, said at times he was afraid he had committed the unpardonable sin, but he could not think of returning to his sinful ways, without the greatest horror, and determined to follow the Savior to the end of his life.²¹

Whitney immediately met with Rev. Richard Armstrong, the pastor of the First Hawaiian Church. The official records of the church, dated May 28, 1842 contain these remarks:

The case of William Tennooe, an excommunicated member, was mentioned. It was stated that while on California some three years ago, he was in a very peculiar manner awakened and brought, it is hoped, to repentance. That having returned to the islands, he continues to walk orderly and give evidence of repentance. This being his state, it was determined that a committee of one be appointed to represent his case to Mr. Armstrong, pastor of the First Native Church with a view to his being admitted to fellowship of that church should further examination be thought worthy. Mr. Whitney was chosen as this committee.²²

While Kanui was most pleased to be back in good graces with the church, the practical aspects of trying to run a school became more

²⁰ Samuel C. Damon, *The Friend*, 15 Dec. 1846.

²¹ Samuel Whitney, letter to ABCFM, 30 Oct. 1842, quoted in *Missionary Herald*, July 1843.

²² Records of the Hawaiian Church, 28 May 1842, HMCS.

and more of a trial. Unlike the mission schools which had financial backing from donations allocated by the American Board of Commissioners, Kanui had no such financial help. In late 1846, *The Friend* published a summary of educational activities in Honolulu's schools, and included this report:

William Tennooe's English School – This is a school established by a native Hawaiian to teach the English language. It is located on the eastern part of the Waititi plain. . . . [Kanui] speaks English remarkably well, and possesses other qualifications which are calculated to render him useful among his scholars. . .

Terms: 12 ½ to 25 cents per week

Averages over 50 scholars

The school house is in an unfinished state²³

In the issue dated January 1, 1847, *The Friend* elaborated on the status of the school:

William Tennooe's English school for Hawaiians needs encouragement. The school house remains in an unfinished condition, while the teacher is discouraged because the parents are not more punctual in paying the tuition fees for the children.²⁴

Through the remainder of 1847 and 1848 Kanui struggled to keep his school open, but found the financing almost impossible. The year 1849 dawned, and with it an unforeseen opportunity for the struggling schoolteacher. Events across the ocean would call him to his second trip to the California coast. Gold had been discovered.

By this time, the government of the Kingdom of Hawai'i had become much more structured. Kamehameha III, the supreme ruler, had adopted the western title of "king." With the help of the American missionaries, a constitution had been drawn up, and various departments established to coordinate the affairs of government, now recognized as an independent nation. One such agency, the Department of Foreign Affairs, was in charge of issuing passports, and dealing

²³ Damon, *The Friend*, 15 Dec. 1846.

²⁴ Damon, *The Friend*, 1 Jan. 1847.

with the various foreign nations involved in commerce in the islands. Kamehameha III appointed a Scottish merchant, R.C. Wyllie to head the department. Kanui called on Wyllie to obtain a passport to California. He found Wyllie swamped with applications, and extremely concerned about the well-being of the natives once they arrived in the foreign land.

Wyllie took Kanui aside for a serious talk. Kanui was a cut above most of the Hawaiians who had applied for passports during the previous months. Kanui was over 50 years of age, dignified, proper in his demeanor, and very well educated. The stigma of his earlier debauched life had been erased by the fine example he was setting in the community and in his church. Wyllie asked Kanui for a favor. Kanui had been to California before. He knew first-hand the stark difference in the climate of that land compared to the benign temperatures in the islands—particularly so in the wintertime. Wyllie wrote a personal letter to Kanui:

Foreign Office
Honolulu, 14, March, 1849

Dear Sir:

It has much afflicted the King and his government that so many native subjects of his Majesty when they get to California, abandon themselves to drunkenness and gambling, whereby they become diseased and die, in poverty and wretchedness.

So far as you have time, and opportunity, without prejudice to your private affairs, I request that you will act as the friendly counselor of your countrymen.

Tell them:

- Not to drink spirits;
- Not to play cards;
- Not to quarrel or fight with drunkards;
- Not to break the laws of California;
- Not to spend money, when they get it, on trifles;

Tell them further,

- to be industrious
- to take good care of their money;
- to keep some in reserve, in case they become sick;
- to be faithful to their employers and to one another;

and whenever any man makes 2,000 dollars, advise him to come back to the islands, and get land from the King or Government.

All good industrious natives will get lands, at a reasonable price so as by industry to maintain themselves and their families comfortably. When you arrive at San Francisco, show this letter to the King's consul there, George T. Allan, Esquire, who may have some other instructions to give you.

If you have time to write to me in English, I shall be happy to hear from you, how the natives are doing at the mines.

I beg you to take care of your own health, and to believe that I am

My Dear Sir

Yours Truly

R.C. Wyllie²⁵

Kanui sailed from Oahu the next day aboard the brig *S.S.* under the command of H. Ely.²⁶ He also carried a letter of introduction to Allan from Wyllie:

March 15, 1849

My Dear Allan

Allow my to recommend to you the Schooner *S.S.* belonging to a worthy countryman of ours, Mr. Swinton, the Collector of Lahaina. He will write you herewith on the subject.

Yesterday, I gave a letter to a respectable and intelligent native, William Kanui, bearer of Passport Hon 415, which letter he is to present to you, that you may confirm it, adding any other instructions that you may think proper, with a view to remedy the moral infirmities of the natives that you and Mr. Suwerkrop have so clearly pointed out. But remember that Mr. Kanui has nothing allowed him, for any kind advise he may give to his countrymen, so that it is not to be expected that he will neglect his own affairs, on their account.

²⁵ R. C. Wyllie, Honolulu, letter to William Kanui, 14 Mar. 1849, F.O. and Ex, AH.

²⁶ *The Polynesian*, Feb. 1849, carries an advertisement, reading in part that the *S.S.* was due to sail "on the 6th of March", but Wyllie's letters to Kanui and to Allen dated March 14 indicate the ship did not sail until approximately March 15.

He would, I think, be a good man for the distribution of the Notices in Hawaiian and English that were sent you.

I remain
My Dear Allan
yours truly

Sgd. R C. Wyllie²⁷

It appears that after a few weeks in San Francisco Kanui relocated up the Sacramento River. The Rev. S.C. Damon, pastor of the Seaman's Bethel Church in Honolulu, wrote about meeting Kanui at Sutter's Fort in 1849:

In July of 1849, when visiting Sacramento, we met Kanui keeping a small eating establishment at Sutter's Fort.²⁸

In a letter written in Hawaiian dated May 21, 1854, there is a mention of a "Kanui" with a group of Hawaiians at Cherokee Flat, Butte County, California. This letter from a native named Hiram to his former teacher, Dwight Baldwin, at Lahaina names nine Hawaiians taking communion with a visiting pastor, one of whom is named Kanui. No first name is provided, but the fact that this Kanui was in a camp with Hawaiians who practiced Christianity indicates a strong possibility that he was indeed William Kanui.²⁹

An interesting summary of Kanui's California adventures is found in a letter dated June 20, 1860, from Rev. A. Williams of San Francisco quoted in *The Friend*:

WILLIAM TENNOVE—The readers of the interesting memoir of Henry Obookiah will remember among his companions in the mission school in Cornwall, Connecticut, the name of William Tennove. It is among the prominent reminiscences of the early summer of 1849 that I frequently met, at our religious meetings in this city, this Sand-

²⁷ R. C. Wyllie, Honolulu, letter to George T. Allan, San Francisco, 15 March 1849, F.O. and Ex, AH.

²⁸ Damon, *The Friend*, Feb. 1861, 13.

²⁹ Hiram, Cherokee Flat, Butte County, California, letter to Dwight Baldwin, Lahaina, 21 May 1852, Mss titled "Letters of Hawaiians in USA," HMCS.

wich Islander, then a venerable, well-looking person, so much superior in outward appearance and general bearing to the others of his race among us, as to attract my special attention. Judge of my grateful surprise when I learned from his own lips his name and his history—for this life of Obookiah had been a part of the earliest of my childhood reading. In his simple manner, too, he gave as a reason for his visit to northern California that “he had heard the young men,” meaning his people from the islands, “had begun to go astray, and he came to look after them.” After a few months I lost sight and all knowledge of him. It was reported that he had gone into the interior, but neither his friends here nor those in the islands knew anything definite about him. At the time of my visit to the islands, in the winter of 1854-5, he was quite given up as lost. It appeared, however that about the time of my visit he returned to this city from our mining regions, and brought with him, as his accumulations, six thousand dollars. This money he kept in his possession for some time, unwilling to entrust it to the custody of others. At length he fell sick, and he became afraid that he might be robbed by persons whom he regarded suspiciously, who visited him in his sickness. Thus he was induced to deposit his money in the Bank of Page, Bacon & Co. A few days only had elapsed when that bank, with others in this city, failed, and all his hard-earned gains were lost, probably beyond recovery.

Tennove, then, being obliged to exert himself for a livelihood, opened a boot-blackening stand, and continued it for some time. But sad to relate, in his religious interest he became quite reckless and continued for a long time in a back-slidden state. The Rev. Mr. Rowell, minister of the Seamen’s church in this city, lately, in the noon-day prayer meeting, gave an interesting narration of his case. From his statements it appears that the immediate instrumentality of Tennove’s recovery was his being led, in the Providence of God, to attend upon the religious services of the mariner’s church. Thus his conscience became awakened, and his religious experiences were revived. A proof of his returning religious sensibility was shown in his resolving to give up his humble employment because he could not prosecute it without violating the Sabbath. This he abandoned without any visible means of support; and for the first week was unable to find any. Saturday afternoon came and he was without means of paying the weekly rent of his room. In his distress he made his extremity a subject of prayer, and while he was praying a dray load of refuse materials was brought and thrown down near his lodgings. The thought was suggested to him to look among these articles

to see if anything valuable could be found. He searched, and from the mass gathering up such rags and old iron as he found, he carried them to a neighboring junk shop and sold them for one dollar and a half, enough to pay his rent.

He felt that the Lord gave him, in direct answer to prayer, this supply of his wants. The circumstances further prompted him to continue in the same occupation, and thus he now obtains his livelihood. Many interesting incidents have become known respecting him, which go to confirm the confidence that he is a true child of God, and that his last days will be spent in sincere and earnest attempts in holy living and all possible usefulness. He is now a candidate for admission into the Mariner's Church, and will soon be received into its communion.³⁰

While Kanui found comfort and fellowship with the Mariner's Church, a poignant letter was written by the Pastor Rev. Rowell to Samuel C. Damon in Honolulu describing Kanui's circumstances as an elderly foreigner in San Francisco. He refers to Kanui by the English translation of his name, "Great."

August 12, 1863

Dear Bro. Damon,

I sent you a note by the packet of June 23rd asking if Bro. Great [Kanui] could be made more comfortable in the islands than here. I had intended to let the matter rest until I should hear from you, but as one Mr. Gray, who is going to the islands tomorrow, kindly offers to take care of him on the voyage, & as this is a very important matter for Bro. Great, in his helplessness, which we can hardly expect to offer again, we have determined, after due inquiry, to send him now.

The case stands thus. We have cheerfully supported him out of our poverty for some years, till certain changes made it impossible to do so longer, except by placing him in the City and Co. hospital, which we have done. But this is a crowded institution, & though better cared for there, than in any place we can provide for him, he does not feel very happy, though resigned. Moreover, these cold winds and fogs are hard

³⁰ Damon, *The Friend*, Feb. 1861, 13. Note the misspelling of Tennooe's name is as it appears in the article.

on his feeble frame and the climate of the islands is much more favorable to his health.

So as this kind offer of Mr. Gray is an unexpected and as it seems to us, a providential one, I have made due inquiry of various persons long resident at the islands who all tell me that I need not fear, but he will be comfortable there; and that it is the best place for him, I have considered to send him now. He is quite willing and on the whole prefers to go, especially as his present position cuts him off from our religious meetings, which are almost his only remaining outward means of enjoyment. At Honolulu, he will be much nearer the means of Grace (as I understand) and I hope some of his friends may be willing to lead him to the meetings.

The Hawaiian consul here will write a letter to the government about him, and tells me that he does not doubt that his passage will be paid by them, and Capt. Smith consents to take him on these terms—so all things seem favorable for his going. Mr. Wood, long resident of the islands thinks he has relatives there, and so he thinks himself. Perhaps you can help him find them. Mr. W. also suggests the Bro. Great is a chief's son, as I understand him to say, that there may be some property belonging to him there. Is it not worth while to inquire?

I suppose he will go first to Queen's hospital. At all events, I hope it becomes your way to see him sometimes and comfort him with Christian conversation. He is a true Christian, a referral for heaven. What he most likes is to hear read a chapt. in the bible and to get to prayer meetings.

Did I not believe it better for him there, we would take care of him here, at almost any sacrifice, though it hardly seems our duty to do so.—But I believe it better for him to be there. We will fit him out with clothes and if he shall need help from us in the future, please let me know. We would like to hear occasionally of his condition. . . .³¹

C.E. Hitchcock, the Consul for the Hawaiian Kingdom in San Francisco wrote R.C. Wyllie of the foreign office in Honolulu about the arrangements made:

³¹ Rowell, San Francisco, letter to S.C. Damon, Honolulu, 12 Aug. 1863, HMCS.

8-11-63

Sir:

I have engaged passage on the Bark Comet for a Hawaiian subject named William Kanui, an old man in feeble health and blind.

He is the only survivor of those Hawaiians taken to the United States in 1806 and educated in Connecticut and who returned to the island with the missionaries as teachers.

He came to California in 1849 and amassed several thousand dollars which he lost by the failure of the banking house . . .

As he is too feeble to go as a consular man, Capt. Smith has agreed to take him in the second cabin, leaving it to his Majesty's government to compensate him therefor.

Sincerely hoping that this old veteran will arrive safely in his native land, I remain,

Your most obedient and humble servant

C.E. Hitchcock, HHM's Consul ³²

The engraving on Kanui's gravestone concludes:

Died in Honolulu, Janu'y 14, 1864
In the life and death of Kanui, God's
Providence and Grace were wonderfully
manifested.

This stone was erected by
J.H of Boston & S.C.D. of Honolulu

Kanui was taken to Queen's Hospital where he died about four months after returning home.³³

S. C. Damon is undoubtedly one of the parties contributing to erecting Kanui's memorial stone. "J.H. of Boston" could well be James

³² C. E. Hitchcock, San Francisco, letter to R. C. Wyllie, Honolulu, 11 Aug. 1863, Hawaiian Officials Abroad, AH.

³³ Damon, *The Friend*, Feb. 1864. This brief obituary of William Kanui indicates he died at Queen's Hospital.

Hunnewell, the purser on the missionary ship, *Thaddeus*, who remained in the islands several years before returning to New England.

Throughout his life, Kanui faced extreme challenges. He was torn between two very different cultures and religious systems. His globe-crossing ventures aboard merchant sailing ships and privateers often brought him into life-threatening situations. His exposure to the rock-hard fundamentalism expounded by the Calvinist missionaries led him to a long period of doubt and dependence on alcohol. He experienced a period of attainment of considerable wealth, only to have it wiped away in a single day. In his later years he suffered the ravages of ill health and blindness.

In spite of such daunting circumstances, Kanui consistently picked himself up, coming to the end of his days at peace with his God and fellow man. Kanui [Great] was aptly named.