

MEMOIRS
OF
HENRY OBOOKIAH



by EDWIN W. DWIGHT

Revised Edition, complete with new epilogue
and pictures of his return to Hawai'i

MEMOIRS
OF
HENRY OBOOKIAH,

A NATIVE OF OWHYHEE,

AND A MEMBER OF THE

FOREIGN MISSION SCHOOL;

WHO DIED AT

CORNWALL, CONNECTICUT FEBRUARY 17, 1818,

AGED 26 YEARS.

By EDWIN W. DWIGHT

WOMAN'S BOARD OF MISSIONS

FOR THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

HONOLULU, HAWAII

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Cover and Frontispiece: The engraving of Henry Obookiah used on the cover and for the frontispiece was first used in the 1818 and 1819 editions of the **Memoirs**. The original 1818 copper engraving plate is in the collection of the Cornwall Historical Society, Cornwall, Connecticut.

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*“He came to this land,
and heard of Him
on whom without hearing, he could not
believe,
and by the mouth of those, who could never
have spoken to him
in Owbyhee.”*

---Rev. Lyman Beecher
February 18, 1818

These lines are quoted from the Funeral Oration given by the Rev. Dr. Lyman Beecher at the meeting house in Cornwall, Connecticut, on February 18, 1818. Beecher, famous for his revivalist preaching, occupied the pulpit at nearby Litchfield, Connecticut, at the time of Obookiah's death. The entire oration was bound with the 1818 and 1819 editions of the *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*.

EDITOR'S PREFACE TO THE 1968 EDITION

IN THE little village of Cornwall, set in the Litchfield Hills, the northwest corner of Connecticut, there is a country graveyard. Walk up the steep bank, past the old headstones tilted in the tall grass, or, depending on the season, the deep snow, and you will come to a large, flat stone resting on a quadrangular tomb of rocks. The inscription, worn and weathered by a thousand New England storms, is still easy to read.

IN
Memory of
HENRY OBOOKLAH
a native of
OWHYHEE.

*His arrival in this country gave rise
to the Foreign mission school,
of which he was a worthy member.
He was once an Idolater, and was
designed for a Pagan Priest; but by
the grace of God and by the prayers
and instructions of pious friends,
he became a Christian.*

*He was eminent for piety and
missionary Zeal. When almost prepared
to return to his native Isle to preach the
Gospel. God took to himself. In his last
sickness, he wept and prayed for Owlyhee,
but was submissive. He died without fear
with a heavenly smile on his
countenance and glory in his soul.*

Feb. 17, 1818;

Aged 26

Who was this “Henry Obookiah” and what is he doing here in this Yankee cemetery? What brought him so far from his native place to lie in this corner of a foreign field? What is the story behind this tombstone?

This book, *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*, tells that story—and a remarkable, touching, human story it is. It begins on an island in the middle of the warm Pacific and ends in the cold, cold ground of Connecticut. It starts with a bloody battle between two tribes and finished, not many years later, with a quiet death in a country parsonage.

It is a tale of two cultures—Hawaiian and New England. It is the story of *Aloha* in a land which had not the word but had at least the spirit; the story of an island boy who never made it back to the islands—but whose life and death helped to make the islands what they are today.

Take a long look at that gravestone: it is the hinge on which the door of the history of modern Hawaii swung.

—*Edith Wolfe*

Honolulu, Hawaii
October 1, 1967 A.D.

INTRODUCTION

SOMEWHAT MORE than a century and a half ago, a fifteen-year-old boy looked out across Kealakekua Bay on the west coast of the island called Hawaii and wondered about the handsome square-rigger he saw anchored there. He had watched many another sailing ship enter and leave the bay, and always he has said to himself, “Where has it come from?”

“Where will it go?” “Will it ever come again?” On this day he added the thought” “Why don’t I try to find out?”

It was, as he put it later, only “a boy’s notion,” but it led him, first to the cabin of the *Triumph*, where he talked with the captain, and afterwards to China, New York City, to New Haven and, eventually, to Cornwall, Connecticut.

In Cornwall, on February 17, 1818, half a world away from home, he died at the age of twenty-six.

That should have been the end of his story. But it was not.

A few months after his death a book appeared in New England—a thin, brown-covered volume of a hundred small pages. It told, in his own words and the words of those who had known him the story of the boy’s life and death. The printer who set the type, struck off the sheets and bound them together did not know it, but that book was to launch a ship and a movement that was to transform Hawaii. For the boy was Opukaha’ia (his American friends spelled and pronounced it *Obookiah*), and his life and early death and his hope of taking Christianity to his people were the inspiration for the Sandwich Islands Mission. The ship launched was the *Thaddeus*, which sailed with the pioneer company from Boston in October, 1819. In the long run, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent eighty-four men and one hundred women to Hawaii to preach and teach, to translate and publish, to advise, and counsel—and win the hearts of the Hawaiian people.

In this memoir, today’s reader will find a young man in his late teens and early twenties, in some ways totally different from his mid-Twentieth Century counterparts, but basically much like them. Unhappy with his lot, brooding almost to the point of suicide over the cruel events that had robbed him of his family, dissatisfied with the career his elders had chosen for him and the rigid course of training he

must undergo to prepare for it, Opukaha'ia recognized them. Tradition says he wept as he sat on the steps of Yale's main building, If there were tears in his eyes as he sat there, it was because he saw, crossing the campus, young men who carried books. Locked in those books, he knew, was wisdom far beyond what his priest-uncle had taught him at Napoopoo. When a way was opened for him to learn to read, he seized it. As to friendships, he valued them highly, He was fortunate in the people he met—on shipboard and in a dozen New England communities—and there was something in his countenance and his character that drew people to him, and made them want to help him.

Opukaha'ia, the Hawaiian priest's apprentice, was deliberate and thoughtful in his consideration of the doctrines of Christianity, but, in the end, he accepted the new religion with his whole heart. He, who had mourned for his family, found that he had a Father in heaven and brothers throughout the earth. He, who had been a restless wanderer, found that he had as much dignity and worth as any king or chief. He whose life had been aimless found a purpose.

The *Memoirs* reveal him as happy in New England, even when the weather was harsh and the snows deep, but as thinking ever of his homeland, where he would one day twit the priests about their futile wooden gods, gain the King's permission to set up schools, and proclaim the gospel as he had received it. What a missionary Opukaha'ia would have made if he had lived to finish his studies and sail back to Hawaii!

But it was not to be. As Lyman Beecher said in his sermon preached at the funeral service for Opukaha'ia: *"We thought surely this is he who shall comfort Onbybee...We bury with his dust in the grave all our high raised hopes of his future activity in the cause of Christ."*

There in the grave it might have ended. But then came the book.

Because they felt his vibrant presence in the *Memoirs*, men and women who never knew Opukaha'ia in the flesh volunteered to carry his message after his death. In fact, of the fourteen Americans who sailed in the *Thaddens*, only Samuel Ruggles had ever met Opukaha'ia face to face. Hiram Bingham visited the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, but that wasn't until the spring of 1819, when Opukaha'ia had been dead a year. Daniel Chamberlain enrolled his two oldest sons in the school for a term, but that was only after the Obookiah of the *Memoirs* had moved him and his wife to offer themselves as missionaries. It was the talk that the book stirred among Yale undergraduates that made Samuel Whitney, a sophomore, decide to

forego further study and apply at once for a place in the mission company. Elisha Loomis, printer's apprentice in the frontier town of Canandaigua, New York, would never have heard of Opukaha'ia—indeed, might scarcely have discovered the difference between Honolulu and Hong Kong—if he had not chanced upon a copy of the *Memoirs*.

Among the church people of its day the book was a best seller. Men read it and sent generous gifts to the American Board to help finance a mission to the Sandwich Islands. Women read it and let it be known that they would go gladly to the Pacific if only young missionaries who needed “companions” would look their way. Little girls read it and “abstained from sugar” in order to save fifty cents to donate to the cause.

Slender and simple as it was, this book shaped the future of Hawaii.

There are those, of course, who say it would have been better if the book had not been written—if the missionaries had never come. Then, so the argument runs, Hawai'i might have remained an “unspoiled paradise” of picturesque wooden images, feather capes, outrigger canoes and poetic hulas. But persons who argue thus are forgetting Captain Cook.

Look again at Kealakekua Bay. Over on the northern shore, clearly visible from Napoopoo, stands the monument that marks the place of Cook's death. Only three decades before Opukaha'ia swam out to the *Triumph*, Cook's ships—*Discovery* and *Resolution*—had lain off shore there. After Cook, the world came—at first slowly, then with increasing rapidity—adventures, refugees, traders, whalers, merchants, and eventually, tourists.

Who can guess what Hawai'i would be like today if only these others had come and the missionaries had not? No one can be sure, but this much we can say with certainty: when a country opens its doors to outsiders and seeks a place among the nations of the world, it is fortunate if some of the newcomers bring education, democracy and a gospel of brotherhood.

If, then, at Kealakekua, we ponder the life of Captain James Cook, which ended here, we must likewise give grateful thought to Opukaha'ia, whose voyage began here. Though he knew not what he sought when he left home, he prized the treasure when he found it and with his dying breath asked that it be bestowed upon Hawai'i.

—*Albertine Loomis*

CHAPTER I

HISTORY
BEFORE REACHING AMERICA

HENRY OBOOKIAH was a native of Hawaii, the most important and populous of the Sandwich Islands. He was born about the year 1792. His parents ranked with the common people, but his mother was related to the family of the king. Her name was Kummo'o'olah.

The name of his father is unknown. When Obookiah was at the age of ten or twelve, both his parents were slain before his eyes, "in a war," to use his own language, "made after the old king died, to see who should be great among them." The only surviving member of the family, beside himself, was an infant brother two or three months old. This little brother he hoped to save from the destruction that befell his parents, and took him upon his back to flee from the enemy; but was overtaken, and the child cruelly destroyed. The circumstances of this interesting scene are described in a "Narrative of Heathen Youth," by Rev. Joseph Harvey, as taken from the relation of Obookiah.

"Two parties were contending for the dominion of the island. The warriors met and a dreadful slaughter ensued. The party to which the father of Obookiah belonged was overpowered. The conquerors, having driven their antagonists from the field, next turned their rage upon the villages and families of the vanquished. The alarm was given of their approach. The father, taking his wife and two children, fled to the mountains. There he concealed himself for several days with his family in a cave. But, at length, being driven by thirst to leave their retreat, they went in quest of water to a neighboring spring. Here they were surprised by a party of the enemy while in the act of quenching their thirst. The father, obeying the first impulse of nature, fled, but the cries of his wife and children soon brought him back again for their protection. But seeing the enemy near, again he fled. The enemy seeing the affection of the father for his family, having seized his wife and children, put them to torture, in order to decoy him from his retreat. The artifice succeeded. Unable to bear the piercing cries of his family, again he appeared, and fell into their hands, and, with his wife, was cut in pieces. While this was going on, Obookiah being then a lad of about twelve years, took his infant brother upon his back and attempted to

make his escape. But he was pursued, and his little brother pierced through with a Pahooa, or spear, while on his back. He himself was saved alive, because he was not young enough to give them trouble, nor old enough to excite their fears.”

Obookiah now being a prisoner in the hands of the enemy, was taken home to the house of the very man who murdered his parents. With him he remained until he was found by an uncle, who having obtained the consent of his keeper, took him into his own family and treated him as his child. This uncle was a priest, and had the rank of high priest of the island. It was his design to educate Obookiah for the same service. In pursuance of this purpose, he taught him long prayers, and trained him to the task of repeating them daily in the temple of the idol. This ceremony he sometimes commenced before sunrise in the morning, and at other times was employed in it during the whole or the greater part of the night. Parts of these prayers he often repeated to gratify the curiosity of his friends, after he came to this country. They regarded the weather, the general prosperity of the island, its defense from enemies, and especially the life and happiness of the king.

He continued with his uncle, and in this employment, until he took his departure from his native country, to go in quest of another, where he hoped to find the happiness which the death of his parents had taken from him, and which nothing now to be found in his own country could supply.

His feelings on this subject, with some account of his situation while he remained upon the island, of his departure for America, and his reception in this country, are found in a history of his past life written by himself several years before his death. As this, to all the readers of these memoirs, will doubtless be interesting, considered as the production of a heathen youth, the greater part of it will be inserted, with but few slight alterations. His own ideas, and, in general, his own language will be preserved. The history commences at the time of his parents' death.

“The same man,” says he, “which killed my father and mother took me home to his own house. His wife was an amiable woman, and very kind, and her husband also; yet, on account of his killing my parents, I did not feel contented. After I lived with this man about a year or two, I found one of my uncles, who was a priest among them; but he knew not what I was—for I was quite small when he saw me at home with

my parents.) He inquired the name of my parents—I told him. As soon as he heard the name of my parents, tears burst out and he wept bitterly. He wished me not to go back and live with that man which killed my father and mother, but live with him as long as I live. I told him I must go back and see that man whether he was willing to give me a release. This was done. I went home and told the man all what my uncle had told me. But the saying seemed to him very displeasing. As soon as he heard all what I said to him, he was very tormented with anger, as if he would look me in pieces that moment. He would not let me go, not till he die, or else he take my life away. Not long after this I went and told my uncle what the man had told me, and he would no more let me go back to the man's house, until the man come after me, then he would converse with him on this subject. After I had lived with my uncle two or three days, the man came to his house to take me home. But my uncle told him that I was as his own child—that he would not let me go back and live with him; else if he take me, he should take both of us. Yet the man did say but little, because my uncle was a priest. But he told my uncle that if I should live with him, he must take kind care of me, as he himself had done. He told him he would by all means. When all this was done, I lived with my uncle a number of years.”

It was probably during this period, and before peace was entirely restored to the Island that an event occurred in which the hand of Providence was strikingly visible in rescuing Obookiah from a second exposure to a violent and untimely death. Let the reader mark the goodness of God, and the kind designs, as in the case of Joseph, which he had to accomplish in behalf of Henry's kindred and countrymen, as well as himself, in sparing his life. He, with an aunt, the only surviving sister of his father, had fallen into the hands of the enemy. On a certain day it came to his knowledge that his aunt, and perhaps himself, was to be put to death. The first opportunity he could find he attempted to make his escape. And by creeping through a hole into a cellar, and going out on the opposite side, he got away unobserved, and wandered off at a considerable distance from the house in which he had been kept. But it was not long before his aunt was brought out by a number of the enemy, and taken to a precipice from which she was thrown and destroyed. He saw this—and now feeling himself more than ever alone, as soon as the enemy had retired he ran toward the fatal spot, resolved to throw himself over and die with this friend,

whom perhaps he now considered as the last individual of his kindred. But he was discovered by one of the chiefs or head-men of the party, who ordered two men to pursue him and bring him back. He was overtaken just before he reached the precipice, carried back to the quarters of the enemy, and mercifully saved for purposes which will appear in the subsequent history.

“At the death of my parents,” he says, “I was with them; I saw them killed with a bayonet—and with them my little brother, not more than two or three months old. So that I was left alone without father and mother in this wilderness world. Poor boy, thought I within myself, after they were gone, are there any father or mother of mine at home, that I may go find them at home? No, poor boy am I. And while I was at play with other children—after we had made an end of playing, they return to their parents—but I was returned into tears; —for I have no home, neither father nor mother. I was now brought away from my home to a strange place, and I thought of nothing more but want of father and mother, and to cry day and night.

“While I was with my uncle, for some time I began to think about leaving that country to go to some other part of the world. I did not care where I shall go to. I thought to myself that if I should get away, and go to some other country, probably I may find some comfort, more than to live there without mother and father. I thought it will be better for me to go than to stay. About his time there was a ship come from New-York—Captain Brintnall, master. As soon as it got in to the harbor, in the very place where I lived, I thought of no more but to take the best chance I had, and if the captain have no objection, to take me as one of his own servants, and to obey his word. As soon as the ship anchored I went on board. The captain soon inquired whose boy I was. Yet I know not what he says to me, for I could not speak the English language. But there was a young man who could speak English, and he told the captain that I was the minister’s nephew—(the minister of that place.) The captain wished me to stay on board the ship that night, and the next day go home. This very much satisfied me, and I consented to stay. At evening, the captain invited me to eat supper with him. And there sat another boy with us who was to be my fellow-traveler, by name Thomas Hopoo—Thomas, a name given him by the supercargo of the ship. After supper the captain made some inquiry to see if we were willing to come to America; and soon I made a motion with my head that I was willing to go. This man was very agreeable, and his kindness much delighted my heart, as if I was his own son, and

he was my own father. Thus I still continue thankful for his kindness toward me.

“The next morning the captain wished me to go on shore and see my uncle whether he was willing to let me go with him or not. I then got into a canoe and went on shore and found my uncle. He was at home. He asked me where was I been through all that night before. I told him that I was on board the ship, and staid there all the night. And I told him what my object was, and all what the captain invite me to. As soon as my uncle heard that I was going to leave him, he shut me up in a room, for he was not willing to let me go. While I was in the room, my old grandmother coming in asked me what was my notion of leaving him, and go with people whom I know not. I told her it is better for me to go than to stay there. She said if I should leave them I shall not see them anymore. I told her that I shall come back in a few months, if I live. Her eyes were filled with tears. She said that I was very foolish boy. This was all she said, and she went out from the room. As soon as she went out, I looked around, expecting to find a hole that I might escape out of the house. And as soon as I saw a little hole in the side of the house, I got through it and went on board the ship. When my uncle heard that I was on board the ship, he got into his canoe and came board the ship inquiring after me. No sooner had he made some inquiry but I was there discovered by one of our countrymen who had the care of the ship, and was brought forth, and come to my uncle’s house. He would not let me go unless I pay him a hog for his god: (for I was taken under his care to be made for a minister.)”

Here there is an interruption in the history, and it does not appear whether the exacted price was paid or not for his discharge and permission to come to America. Permission, however, was soon obtained.

“My uncle,” he says, “would not delay me no longer, and I took my leave of them and bid them farewell. My parting with them was disagreeable to them and to me, but I was willing to leave all my relations, friends, and acquaintance; expected to see them no more in this world. We set out on our journey towards the Seal-Islands, on the N.W. part of America. On these islands the captain left about twenty or thirty men for sealing-business on his way to Hawaii. We found them safe. Among these men I found a very desirable young man, by name Russel Hubbard, a son of Gen. Hubbard, of New-Haven. This

Mr. Hubbard was a member of Yale College. He was a friend of Christ. Christ as with him when I saw him, but I knew it not. 'Happy is the man that put his trust in God!' Mr. Hubbard was very kind to me on our passage, and taught me the letters in English spelling-book."

How remarkable that he should have fallen immediately into the hands of one who sought his improvement, and felt concerned for his spiritual welfare.

"We continued on these islands during six months, then took our course towards Hawaii. Two of my countrymen were with me in the ship. One of them concluded to stay at Hawaii, and the other to proceed on the voyage. The ship delayed no longer than a few days, and we set out for China on our course to America. On our way toward China, my poor friend Thomas fell overboard. He was so careless, not knowing what he was about, he went outside of the ship and drew salt-water to wash plates with (for he was a cabin's boy.) When the ship rolled he got into the water. The captain calls all hands upon the deck and ordered to have all the sails pull down in order to let about. While we were working upon our sails, my friend Thomas was out of sight. While he was in the water he pulls all off his clothes in order to be lighter. We turned out ship and went back after him. We found him almost dead. He was in the water two and a half hours. O how glad was I then to see him—for I thought he was already gone.

"We took our direct course from hence as it was before. Soon we landed at an island belonging to that part of China, and in the evening after the sundown we anchored. On the next morning we fired one of our cannon for a pilot. When we had fired once or twice, there was another ship of war belonging to the British, which stood about four or five miles apart from us. As soon as they heard our cannon they sent of their brigs. We were then taken by it for a while. They took our captain and he went on board the ship of war. He was there for a number of days. After this the Englishmen agreed to let us go. We therefore leave that place, called Mocow (Macao) and direct our course to the city of Canton. We were there until we sold out all our seal-skins and loaded our ship with other sort of goods, such as tea, cinnamon, nankeens, and silk. At the end of six months we steered a direct course to America.

"At the Cape of good Hope, or before it, our sailors on board the ship began to terrify us. They said that there was a man named

Neptune who lived in that place, and his abiding-place was in the sea. In the evening the sailors begun the act. One of them took an old great coat and put on him, and with a speaking-trumpet in his hand, and his head was covered with a sheep-skin; and he went forward of the ship and making a great noise. About this time friend Thomas and myself were on the quarter-deck, hearing some of them telling about Neptune's coming with an iron canoe and iron paddle. Friend Thomas questioned whether the iron canoe will not sink down in the water. 'No,' said some of them, 'he will make it light, for he is a god.' While we were talking, the first we heard the sound of trumpet as follows:

“ ‘Ship hail! From whence came you?’

“ ‘The captain immediately giving an answer in this manner: ‘From Canton.’

“ ‘Have you got my boys,’ said the old Neptune.

“ ‘Yes,’ answered the captain.

“ ‘How many boys have you?’ added the old Neptune.

“ ‘Two,’ said the captain, (that is myself and friend Thomas.)

“As soon as we both heard the captain says ‘two,’ we both scared almost to death, and wished that we were at home. The old Neptune wished to see us, but we dare not come near at it. He continued calling us to come to him, or else he would take both of us to be as his servants. We therefore went up immediately and shook our hands with him in friendly manner. I thought that he was quiet an old age, by seeing his long beards and his head covered with gray hairs; for his head was covered with a sheep-skin. After our conversation with him he wished for drink. So that I went and filled two pails full of salt-water, (as the sailors had told us,) and I set them before him. Then he took his speaking-trumpet and put it in my mouth for tunnel, in order to make me drink that salt-water which I brought. But while he stoops down to reach the pail of water, I took hold of the speaking-trumpet and hold it on one side of my cheek, so that I may not drink a drop of salt-water: did not anybody knew it, for it was dark. Bur friend Thomas he was so full of scare, he took down the whole pail of salt-water. On the next morning he was taken sick, and puked from the morning until the evening.

“About this time our provision was almost out. We had no bread, meat and water, save only one biscuit a day, and one pint of water only when the cook put in our tea. We were looking out for a vessel for a long time. Within a few days we come close to a schooner going to the West Indies, sailed from Boston. We fired at her in order to stop her.

She did so. We got from them as much provision as we wished, and this lasted till we arrived at New-York.”

We hope that you have enjoyed what you have read thus far and would like to continue on and read more. You can follow the link below to purchase *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*. We also hope you share this book sample with your friends.

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