A Foreword

This anthology starts with a fire chant to King Kalakaua. And that’s a fitting place to start. It’s true to the nature of these islands, which began in fire. It’s true to the literature of these islands, which begins with the chanted poetry of a centuries-old tradition.

Not all literary editors have seen it this way, of course. The first popular anthology of modern times, still available and still being read, is A Hawaiian Reader, edited by A. Grove Day and Carl Stroven. Judging by the way that volume is organized, the literature of Hawai‘i begins in the log of an English sea captain. In his original introduction to this 1961 collection, James Michener said, “The present editors have been wise to save to the end of their volume the five selections dealing with the folklore of the islands, for the language of these passages is so alien to the modern world that it might have alienated the casual reader. It was advisable to start with some selection more in the modern world, like that written by Captain Cook . . .”

Among those strange and “alienating” selections relegated to the back of the book is an excerpt from Martha Beckwith’s translation of the venerable creation chant, “The Kumulipo.” Here are the opening lines:

At the time when the earth became hot
At the time when the heavens turned about
At the time when the sun was darkened
To cause the moon to shine . . .

I have a lot of respect for James Michener as one of the major story tellers of our era. But you have to wonder what he had in mind there. Why should the Genesis-like ring of such epic lines be somehow less engaging than the matter-of-fact journal entry that opens A Hawaiian Reader:
In the morning of the 18th, an island made its appearance, bearing northeast by east; and soon after we saw more land bearing north and entirely detached from the former . . .

Needless to say, both of these works are enormously important for a full understanding of Hawai‘i’s past and present. But in the years since Day and Stroven put their anthology together, a profound change has taken place. Which is not to say that “The Kumulipo” or Cook’s journals have changed. Their content remains the same. What has changed is the perception that one is superior to the other. What has changed is the perception that anything indigenous to these islands does not deserve to be at the beginning of a literary collection, or even somewhere in the middle, but belongs at the end, as an afterthought, as an “alien” presence.

What has changed is the idea—stated elsewhere in Michener’s introduction—that writers of Asian ancestry have no voice at all in such an anthology, since “these Orientals did not produce a literature of their own.” What has changed is the chorus of voices that now have a recognized place in the literature of the Hawaiian islands, a literature that reflects the complex history of a unique crossroads culture.

The collection now called Island Fire was among the earliest to convey this cross-cultural legacy. And it is still remarkable for its mix of voices and ethnicities, as well as for its variety of work. There are short stories here, novel excerpts, memoirs, poems, songs, chants, a contemporary one-act play, and a shape-shifter legend from ancient times. Student voices from local schools are heard, side by side with award-winning writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Oswald Bushnell, whose Moloka‘i is regarded by many as “the great Hawaiian novel.”
The islands are here, both in body and in spirit, with their many layers of settlement and terrain, the cities, the plantation towns, the rain forests and rural valleys, the waterways, the caves and craters of volcano country. Hawai‘i has always been a place where nature and culture continually intertwine. This book contains a world where an island itself can have a voice and sing, where a sacred rock has the power to draw fish toward shore, where sharks are ancestors, and the dead often speak to the living.

*Island Fire* had its origins as part of a larger work, the landmark anthology, *Asian-Pacific Literature*. In the twenty years since it first appeared, the two-hundred page section called “Hawai‘i” has quietly achieved a kind of classic status, as one of those pioneer collections that helped awaken a new generation of readers to the range and richness of what has been emerging here. Finally available as a single volume, the revised and expanded edition still has about it that air of discovery, still shining its own fresh light.

—James D. Houston
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