

Henry Obookiah Hawaii's Nathan Hale

by Edith Wolfe

(Reprinted in Honolulu, Hawaii by the Women's Board of Missions for the Pacific Islands, in February, 1994, the 176th anniversary of the death of Henry Obookiah - "Opukahaia," first Hawaiian Christian) - coinciding with "Hawaii's First Annual Christian Heritage Week, February 12-22, 1994", proclaimed by the Governor. Opukahaia died on February 17, 1818 in Connecticut. His mortal remains were reinterred in Hawaii, overlooking the spot from where he sailed, to commemorate the 176th anniversary since his death.

Every Connecticut schoolboy knows the name of Nathan Hale, young hero of the American Revolution who died in 1776 at the age of 21. Every Connecticut and every Hawaii school boy and girl, as well as their parents and teachers, ought also to know the name of another young hero of a very different kind of revolution: Henry Obookiah, the Hawaiian who died in Connecticut in 1818 at the age of 26.

Before we get to his death, however, let's go back to his birth. Opukahaia, as his name is spelled in Hawaiian, was born not long after our Revolutionary war ended. He first saw the brilliant light of Hawaii's sun in 1792, and grew up on the Kona Coast of the Island of Hawaii, near Kealekekua Bay.

Opukahaia probably had never heard of George Washington and may not even have known about the war for American Independence, but certainly he knew of another leader who, like the "Father of Our Country" was "first in war and first in peace" in the islands: King Kamehameha I. He was termed, even by non-Hawaiians, a "venerable chief," who long and ably governed his people and gathered them into a single kingdom - although not without bloodshed.

It was, in fact, during one of King Kamehameha's wars that Opukahaia, as a boy of ten, saw his mother and father slain before his eyes, and felt his younger brother whom he carried on his back as he fled the enemy, slip lifeless from his shoulders as a spear found its mark. By a caprice of

his captor, Opukahaia himself was spared and taken captive by the man who was the murderer. With him the boy lived for some months before he went to stay with another foster father, his uncle, a “Kahuna” – high priest of the Hawaiian religion – who, during the years Opukahaia lived with him, trained his nephew in the elaborate chants and rituals of the “heiau” – Hawaiian altar.

So there in Kona Opukahaia might have lived out his days, mourning the loss of his parents, making a life for himself as an apprentice to his uncle, but Providence had a different plan and a different place for him. It happened that in the year 1808, when he was 16. Opukahaia looked out one day beyond the pounding surf and saw riding at anchor in Kealekekua Bay a ship. He decided to swim out to it. “Only a boy’s notion,” he called it later, **but it was a notion that was to change a whole nation.** When Opukahaia dived into the blue waters of the Pacific, he took a long leap, from obscurity into history.

The name of that ship – if you like signs and symbols – was not the *Mary Ann* or the *Boston Belle* or the *New Bedford Star* or some such homely title – it was the *Triumph*. Through an interpreter, the Master of the *Triumph*, Caleb Brintnal, invited the dripping island boy to join the crew and sail with them on their voyage. With eager arms and legs Opukahaia swam to shore and ran to tell his uncle and his grandmother of the Captain’s offer and beg them to let him accept the chance. Their answer, of course, was no (the answer most adults give to young people who want to leave home too young to go too far). “Why do you wish to leave us to go among strangers?” His grandmother put her fears into words, “If you go, we will never see your face again.” Despite their opposition, in the end Opukahaia managed to strike a strange bargain with his kahuna uncle: “He will not let me go,” wrote Opukahaia later, “Unless I give him a pig for his god.”

So the boy who traded himself for a hog, set sail from Kealekekua Bay in 1808. (About 30 years earlier, Captain James Cooke, the great British explorer, in a tragic encounter with the Hawaiians, had died on the shore of that same Bay.)* On the spot where Cooke’s life had ended, Opukahaia’s new life began. Captain Brintnal did not know it,

*Captain Cooke’s monument can be seen on this shore.

Opukahaia's weeping grandmother and reluctant uncle did not know it; his shipmate, Thomas Hoopu, who sailed with him did not know it, and certainly Opukahaia himself was all unaware, but, looking back now, we can say with certainty that **the whole history of Hawaii was sailing with him on the *Triumph* when he left his native land.**

The *Triumph* was Opukahaia's first schoolroom, the ship's Master his first schoolmaster. By the time the vessel reached New York, Opukahaia had picked up a new name, "Henry Obookiah," and some words of a new tongue – English, with a Yankee twang.

At the end of the voyage of several months, Captain Brintnal paid off the crew, and at the end of the Line saw the two Hawaiians, Henry and Thomas. Bylaw and custom, the Captain's responsibility ended when he counted out the wages to his sailors, but Captain Brintnal was, apparently, a man who went beyond law to kindness. Because the Hawaiian lads had no place to go, he simply took them home with him. Home was New Haven, Connecticut.

There in New Haven (another symbol for you), Henry Obookiah went down to Yale College where, tradition tells us, he sat on the steps and watched the students go by. Under their arms these young men, hardly older than himself (he was now 17), carried a word hidden in his new name: "Book." Hidden in these books, Obookiah knew, was knowledge that he lacked. How long he sat there watching, we do not know; how many people passed him by unnoticed, we do not know either. All we do know is that someone finally stopped and spoke to him. Edwin Dwight, his name was, a Yale student. Seeing Obookiah's forlorn countenance, tradition says, he asked him, "Why do you weep?" More likely the question was more simply put than that: "What's the matter?" "Can I help you?" To that question Obookiah answered that he wept (or he was sad) because "no one gives me learning." Then Dwight asked another question: "Do you wish to learn?" and Obookiah answered, "I do." Then, notice please, what Dwight said next. Or notice, first, what he did *not* say:

He didn't say, "You don't look bright enough to be a Yale man to me – have you tried some other school?" He didn't say, "What is your I.Q.?"

“What are your college board scores?” nor, “How much money do you have?”

Nor did he say, “The Registrar’s office is down the street, open from 10 to 2. Maybe somebody there can help you.” Nor, “Our Church has a Social Action Committee which meets every second Thursday, and, if the agenda isn’t too full this month, I’ll mention your case to them”

And he certainly didn’t shrug his shoulders and say, “Look, you have your troubles, and I have mine. You do your thing. I’ll do mine.”

Dwight simply said to Obookiah: “Come with me.”

Thus began Obookiah’s long journey from illiteracy to learning. During the years that followed, Dwight and many others tutored Obookiah and his fellows. So brilliant was his mind and so remarkable his progress that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions began a special “Foreign Mission School” in Cornwall, Connecticut for Henry and the students – an “East-West Centre” of its day.

To earn his board and keep, Henry and the others did chores for Yankee farmers in Connecticut and Massachusetts, venturing one summer as far as New Hampshire to help with the haying and the milking. He was fortunate in the kind of people whom he came to know and spoke often of their being “like a father” to him. One of these was no less an eminent divine than the President of Yale, Dr. Timothy Dwight, known as one of the most learned men of New England. Remembering Dr. Dwight, though, years later, it was not his great mind but his kind heart which impressed the Hawaiian boy. Of the Dwight family, he recalled that “I could not always understand what they said in prayer, but I doubt not these good people prayed for me.”

So the years of work and study, of friendship and family good will went on. They had the spirit of “Aloha,” those “cold New Englanders” even if they did not use the word. It was not strange, therefore, that, living as he did among these people, he became a Christian. “By the prayers and instructions of pious friends” he accepted as Lord, the Christ of whom they taught. He who had chanted prayers at the Hawaiian heiau now stood and prayed before a different kind of altar.

He lifted up his voice not to the Shark god, but to, "Our Father, which art in heaven..." He was the first Hawaiian Christian.

After that experience, Obookiah was determined to go back to the islands to carry his new faith and his new learning to his own people. "I will go to the King," he said, "and ask permission to set up schools." Thomas Hoopu and perhaps the others would go with him. The plan burned in his heart and head: he would go back!

And then, suddenly, sadly, it was all over. In February, 1818, there in cold New England, the fire was snuffed out. Obookiah caught typhus fever and, in those pre-penicillin days, that was a death sentence. He lay on his bed in the Congregational parsonage in Cornwall and, nursed by the minister and his wife, with his fellow Hawaiians round him, he spoke of his hopes, which were flickering out. "O, how I want to see Hawaii," he said to them. "But I think I never shall." Then he added, "God will do right. He knows what is best."

At one point he said to them – or perhaps it was really to himself, "I've lost my time. I've lost my time." His grandmother's prophecy was coming true: "If you go, we will never see your face again." She was right, after all. His voyage to America was a one way, one-time journey. He would never make it back to the land of the rainbows.

When his last moments came, he was composed and cheerful. To those gathered there in his room he spoke the parting salutation of his native tongue, "Aloha oe," he said. And he was gone.

Next day they walked through the snow to the Cornwall Village cemetery carrying his wasted body and his wistful hopes and buried them, with Dr. Lyman Beecher's words to express the thoughts of them all: "We had thought surely it would have been he who would have redeemed Hawaii. We bury with his dust in the grave all our high-raised hopes..." The end. Finish. "Pau" is the Hawaiian word for it. "Make," Dead. Stone cold under a cold stone. That was the end of him.

So they must have thought as they left the cemetery with a chill in their bones and an ache in their breasts. The end. The end? No, not really. After that good Friday, there was to be an Easter!

At that funeral, among the mourners, was his early friend, young Edwin Dwight, who had encountered him first on the steps of Yale. Back to New Haven Dwight went, where he picked up his pen and the pages of Obookiah's journal and some of his letters and wove them into a little book – barely 100 pages in length – that told the story of the island boy, from the time of his parents' death in Kona to his own death in Connecticut. Dwight's book, titled simply, "The Memoirs of Henry Obookiah" came out not many months after the funeral, and copies of the slim volume went from hand to hand among the Christians of Cornwall and the surrounding countryside.

As people read the story of Obookiah's life and death, his quiet courage and his radiant faith, and especially as they read of his hopes to return to his homeland, they began to say, "If Obookiah cannot go back, we will go in his place." Up went the hands of those who were willing to go: into pockets and purses went the hands of those who, though they could not go, were willing to give.

By the fall of the next year, 1819, the American Board had chartered a ship, the brig *Thaddeus*, and assembled a company of young Christians who made up the first Sandwich Island Mission. There were 23 of them; two ministers, teachers, a doctor, a farmer and a printer/schoolmaster and their wives – plus five children and four classmates of Obookiah, including Thomas Hoopu. In all our history, there has rarely been so small a ship and so small a group with so great a cargo to carry! Before they left Boston, the missionaries were instructed by the Board to: "...open your hearts wide and set your marks high. You are to aim at nothing short of covering those islands with schools and churches and pleasant dwellings...to make men of every class wise and good and happy..." Their long and dangerous voyage took them 160 days – 40 times longer than it took the astronauts in their time to reach the moon! They were homesick: they were seasick, but they were something else as well: patient, persistent, practical, pious – and determined. As they sailed on the *Thaddeus* towards Obookiah's homeland, their journals indicate that they often spoke of Henry and wished that he could have been sailing with them. Among the store of books they had, was a well-read copy of the "Memoirs." They were aware that theirs was an historic ship and Obookiah's was the face – and the faith – that had launched that ship.

The missionary story of what happened after the *Thaddeus* came to anchor in Hawaiian waters, and the astounding knowledge that greeted the Pioneer Company when, after five months aboard, they finally stepped on land – that is another whole volume – aye, many volumes, for which we have neither time nor space in this article. We hope it is one you will take time to read, or, better yet, come to know in person when you visit Hawaii yourself. But if you live in New England, and the islands seem far away, at least take time one day to go over to Cornwall, Connecticut and make your way to the Village Cemetery. Walk up the little hill to Obookiah's grave, set apart a bit from the others, and pause a few minutes at that "corner of a far-off field that is forever Hawaii." Read the epitaph his New England friends had carved in stone for him, this "young hero of the spirit" who died far from home. In two dozen lines they summed up his brief lifetime. Take a long look at that gravestone, friend. **It is the hinge on which the history of Hawaii turned.**

IN
Memory of
HENRY OBOOKIAH
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 Owhyhee, but was submissive. He died without fear, with a heavenly smile on his countenance and glory in his soul.

The following is a selection of passages of Scripture made by Obookiah while he lived at Canaan, Connecticut, the first letters of which spell his name. It is a specimen of his ingenuity as well as his acquaintance with the Scriptures:

Obookiah

Ho! Everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. – Isaiah 55, 1.

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. – John 3, 3.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord! Lord! Shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. – Matthew 7, 21.

Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my Gospel. – 2 Timothy 2, 8.

Young men likewise exhort to be sober-minded. – Titus 2, 6.

O Magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. – Psalms 34, 3.

But speak thou the things that become sound doctrine. – Titus 2, 1.

Only let your conversation be such as becometh the Gospel of Christ. Philippians 1, 27.

O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men. – Psalms 107, 15.

Keeper thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life. – Proverbs 4, 23.

I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day: the night

cometh in which no man can work. – John 9, 4.

And they went out and preached everywhere that men should repent. –
Mark 6, 2.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. – Matthew 11, 15.

KAHIKOLU CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

DEDICATION SERVICE

The Henry Opukaha'ia 176th Anniversary Memorial

Thursday, February 17, 1994
3:30 p.m.

ALOHA KE AKUA

The Hymn

**“Aloha Au Kou Aupuni”
“I love Thy Kingdom, Lord”**

By Timothy Dwight, 1800

1. I love Thy Kingdom, Lord, The house of Thine abode,
The Church our blest Redeemer saved, With His own precious
blood.
2. I love Thy Church, O God: Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye, And graven on Thy hand.
3. For her my tears shall fall, For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given, Till toils and cares shall end.

4. Beyond my highest joy, I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, Her hymns of love and
praise.
5. Sure as Thy truth shall last, To Zion shall be given
The brightest glories earth can yield, And brighter bliss of
heaven. Amen.