

Australians are well aware of the consequences of the clash of cultures when European people came in contact with the indigenous people for the first time. Where ever these encounters took place, in any part of the world, they usually gave rise to a series of misunderstandings that to this day bedevil historians, fiction and non-fiction writers.

All the contemporary accounts of these encounters were written from a European point of view. Most of the indigenous cultures lived by an oral tradition. Usually the contemporary writers had only a poor appreciation of the indigenous point of view and were often completely at a loss to explain their customs.

Modern writers when looking at the past tend to impose their own morality, inflicting a value system that had very little in common with what went before.

The commonly accepted view of the death of James Cook in Kealakekua Bay on the Big Island of Hawaii on February 14, 1779 was yet another misunderstanding between the men on the ships and the people ashore that resulted in the unprovoked attack that saw Cook die surrounded by a frenzied group of armed natives.

Hammond Innes in his fictional account of *The Last Voyage* states unequivocally that it was the theft of the *Discovery's* cutter that " started the events that led to Cook's death."¹

According to this interpretation of events the theft of the cutter resulted in Cook's decision to send a party ashore, led by him, to seize the king until the cutter was returned. Most of the contemporary accounts agree on this point. The journals of Lt. James Burney, second lieutenant James King of the *Resolution*, Marine lieutenant Molesworth Phillips and even Captain Clerke, who was second in command and captain of the *Discovery*, are all cited by past and modern writers as evidence of what happened.

Some of the journal writers were indulging in a bit of special pleading on their own behalf. There were suggestions that Phillips and the marine guard had failed to do their duty in protecting Cook.²

But none of these sources suggested that it was anything but the theft of the cutter and Cook's decision to take the king that resulted in Cook's death.

This was the European point of view. Latterly there was criticism about Cook's behaviour while at Kealakeakua Bay. Gavin Kennedy in his interesting little book *The Death of Cook* says:

" Cook's lack of effort to understand the Hawaiians response made him vulnerable to criticism later from the missionaries. Of course, these men of virtue and principle had another axe to grind and Cook's fate gave them excellent material for a sermon."³

¹ Innes, Hammond, *The Last Voyage, Captain Cook's lost Diary*, Collins, London 1978. p. 229

² Richard Hough, *The Murder of Captain Cook*, Macmillan, London, 1979. p. 221.

³ Gavin Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, Duckworth, London 1978. p 25.

Hawaiians who have mixed feelings about Cook, to this day still talk about the attempt to take their king prisoner as being the prime motive for Cook's killing. Aloha Airlines passenger magazine in an introduction to the Big Island reports:

" Captain Cook monument. A 27 foot-tall white marble obelisk standing at the north end of Kealahou Bay marks the spot where Capt. James Cook was killed by Hawaiians on Feb. 14, 1779, in a skirmish over an attempt by Cook's men to take chief Kalani'opu'u hostage."⁴

Hawaiians did not appear to be embarrassed by what happened to Cook. Quite the reverse. They seem to resent the suggestion that it was Cook who discovered the islands and introduced civilisation to the island people.

My wife who visited the islands in April of this year reminded me of the Hawaiian antipathy towards Cook. I had found this out for myself on my visits to the Bishop Museum in Honolulu and trips to some of the outlying islands.

Mind you I can well understand why the Hawaiians might be a bit ambivalent about the whole business. They had, after all, killed one of Europe's greatest navigators. The man who was suppose to represent the best qualities of 18th century enlightenment, started the fashion in England for things Polynesian and, of course, helped place Australia and New Zealand on the map.

John Zoffany's 18th century painting of Cook's death said it all. It showed the valiant English in their regimentals defending their captain while the heathen natives fell on him with clubs and spears. The natives were clearly caught in a frenzy of an unprovoked attack.⁵

But what if Cook's killing was part of a plot? That Cook, the master mariner, was the victim of a political assassination?

Years of research have proved to me that the idea is not as outlandish as it might sound. Although it is partly speculation on my part, the suggestion of a political plot takes into account what was happening on the Big Island at the time and what happened after Cook's death. At least part of my proposition is supported by documentary evidence.

Kamehameha the Great, the man who united all the islands under one king, was born on the Big Island of Hawaii in and around 1758.⁶ This would have made him about 21 when Cook first visited the islands.

J.C Beaglehole's definitive edition of the Journals of James Cook makes the first notation of Kamehameha's presence in November 1778 when the exploration ships Resolution and Discovery were sailing around the islands. Cook wrote:

⁴ *Spirit of Aloha*, the magazine for Aloha Airlines and Island Air, March/April 2003. p. 82.

⁵ Richard Hough, *The Murder of Captain James Cook*, illustration p. 49. The original painting hangs in the National Maritime Museum collection, Greenwich, England.

⁶ *Spirit of Aloha* p. 82.

" In the afternoon of the 30th being off the NE end of the island (probably Maui), several Canoes came off to the Ships, the most of them belonged to a Chief named Terryaboo (Terreeoboo/Kalani'opu'u, king of the Big Island of Hawaii) who came in one; he made me a present of two or three small pigs and we got by barter from the other people some little fruit. After a stay of about two hours they all left us except six or eight who chused (sic) to remain, a double sailing canoe came soon after to attend upon them which we towed a stern all night."⁷

Beaglehole who made it his life's work studying Cook's journals and spent time with the native community in Hawaii notes that " all the native Hawaiian accounts agree" that Kamehameha was included in the party that stayed on board Cook's ship the Resolution.⁸

Up close Kamehameha was given an excellent opportunity to observe Cook. He got some idea of what kind of man he was and most important of all he saw that Cook was mortal like himself.

It was not until early January that the two discovery ships dropped anchor in Kealakekua Bay. Unknown to the people on board they had arrived at this attractive anchorage at a critical time. Kealakekua Bay was the pathway to the gods and the ships had arrived at a religiously significant time. Cook was greeted by the vast assembly as the return of the fertility god Lono. Cook did little to disabuse his new found admirers and took part in some of their religious ceremonies.⁹

Kamehameha was an ambitious courtier serving the island king who according to Gavin Kennedy was frail and drank too much kava. The rivalry between the priests and the courtiers to gain control of their king was fierce and unrelenting. Gavin Kennedy writes"

" The competition between secular and spiritual power, represented by the chiefs and the priests respectively, was of great importance at this time in Hawaii. The arrival of the Europeans gave an explosive twist to this age-old and universal conflict."¹⁰

The arrival of Lono in Kealakekua Bay clearly strengthened the hand of the priests. To my way of thinking Cook became an unknowing instrument in his own death by going along with the priests and seemingly acting out the part of Lono. A few years later the American missionary Bingham described Cook as a " worm" for his behaviour at Kealakekua Bay.¹¹

Whatever the rights or wrong of Cook's behaviour on the day nothing would have happened if the discovery ships had left the bay never to return. When the ships weighed anchor on February 4 and made their way out to sea the natives lined the shore prostrate in a reverential and friendly farewell.

⁷ J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook, The voyage of the Resolution and Discovery 1776-1780*, part one, Hakluyt Society, Cambridge University Press, 1967. p 476.

⁸ J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook*. p.476.

⁹ Gavin Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, pp 24-27.

¹⁰ Gavin Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, p. 24.

¹¹ Gavin Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, p. 25.

Cook did not intend to return to Kealakekua. He wanted to continue his survey of the islands. There was a strong wind blowing and on February 8 he sprung his foremast.

" Both the fishes (sic), which were put on the head of the Mast at King Georges Sound (Nootka Sound, British Columbia) are the parts now found sprung, and so very defective as to make it Absolutely necessary to replace them with others."¹²

They urgently needed to find a good anchorage in which to effect the repairs. Kealakekua Bay was the obvious choice. But Cook had reservations about returning to the place where he had been welcomed like a god. He noted:

" The Captn. was for sometime doubtful, whether to run the chance of meeting with as good a bay as Karakacooa (Kealakekua) in the islands to leeward, or to return thither; that bay was not so good as not only better might be found, but in others good water might be got; and it was also suppos'd that we had drained (immediately about) Karakooa pretty well of roots, for although hogs, bringing a Valuable consideration for Iron, are brought us at a great distance, this is not the case with roots which are not only Perishable, but trifles are only got in return for them; we might therefore not get a Supply of these things; however it was I suppose consider'd too great a risk to leave a place that is tolerably sheltered and which once left could not be regain'd, for the hopes of meeting with better, and which hopes failing would have reduced us to a strange dilemma."¹³

Cook was a great believer in providing fresh vegetables to his men. He was one of the first Royal Navy officers to recognise the value of diet in keeping his crew healthy.

The return to Kealakekua Bay was nothing like the first visit. There was no great gathering of people to welcome them. They anchored in Kealakekua Bay in 24 fathoms of water on the morning of February 11. The next day work started on upstepping the foremast. On February 12 in the forenoon the foremast was removed and sent ashore for repair. Carpenters and sail makers were busily engaged in their work. Cook helped his astronomer, Mr Bailey, establish an observatory ashore. There were some priests in the neighbourhood who were friendly and agreed to quarter some of Cook's men. Cook made no mention of his deification being a problem. His main concern was the condition of the foremast which was found rotten at its foot. Cook noted:

" Upon our first anchoring very few of the natives came to us. This in some measure hurt our Vanity, as we expected them to flock about us, & to be rejoiced at our return; We were however the less surprisd at this, when we were told that it was Taboo (kapu) for the canoes coming till Terreeoboo (the Big Island king) returned, who was to pay us a Visit soon. He accordingly came this morning & in a short time the bay was crouded (sic) with Indians."¹⁴

The atmosphere may have first appeared to be cordial but something had changed. The ship's watering party ran into trouble with the natives when trying to resupply the ship. Freshwater was scarce at Kealakekua Bay. That afternoon while Cook was on

¹² J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, p. 527.

¹³ J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, p.527.

¹⁴ J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain Cook*, p. 528.

shore he heard musket shots. When he returned to the Resolution he was told that the natives were seen trying to steal some of the ship's stores. Groups of natives were observed ashore roaming furtively obviously bent on mischief. When Cook's second in command Charles Clerke told Cook that the natives had stolen the Discovery's cutter it was the last straw.

In Beaglehole's great work, it was Clerke who picked up the story.

" Sunday 14. Fine weather with land and sea Breezes. Ever since our arrival here upon this our second visit we have observ'd in the Natives a stronger propensity to theft than we had reason to complain of during our former stay; every day produced more numerous and more audacious depredations. Today they behav'd so ill onboard the Discovery that I was oblig'd to order them all out of the Ship."¹⁵

Kamehameha was everywhere. When the ships returned to the bay he went out to Discovery. Richard Hough paints the following picture:

" Up the sloop's gangway there climbed a ferocious looking chief wearing a fine red-feathered cloak. He was the king's nephew, Kamehameha, whose appearance had so alarmed them three weeks earlier when he introduced himself with Terreeboo's three sons.

Clerke greeted him with surprise. ' Where are all the people?'

' My uncle the king is away from Kaawaloa. The priests have tabooed the bay until he returns on the morrow,' the chief explained, taking off his cloak. This sign that he wanted to trade was clear to Clerke. The price was to be nine iron daggers, paboas they called them, nothing else and no less, for the cloak."¹⁶

Clerke was not well. He had contracted TB. In ordinary circumstances he would have gone ashore himself to recover Discovery's cutter. Instead he went to the Resolution and talked to Cook. Cook decided to take a punitive party ashore and bring King Terreeoboo back to the ship until the cutter was returned. The cutter was no small item. It was the Discovery's largest tender.

There were many versions of what happened ashore. What is certain is that Terreeoboo was prepared to go back to the ship but his people were not prepared to let him go.

The ships' company watched horrified as they witnessed the attack on Cook's party with their spyglasses.

Later second lieutenant James King of the Resolution recorded in his journal his own thinking about the reason for the attack. He wrote:

" It is a great doubt, whether the attack was premeditated & we seemd generally of Opinion from Terreeboo's conduct that he did not know of the boat being stole.

¹⁵ J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, pp531-532.

¹⁶ Richard Hough, *The Murder of Captain James Cook*, p 203.

Nevertheless, it is not very clear, but that some Chiefs were glad of seeking an occasion to quarrel, for it was observ'd that on our returning the Second time, we did not receive that hearty welcome we expect'd, & their conversation shewd (sic) sufficiently that they did not approve of it."¹⁷

King's journal that was used in London for the first reports about Cook's death was not highly favoured by some of his shipmates. William Bligh, the sailing master on board on the Resolution, believed that King distorted the account especially the role of the marines during the encounter.

Nonetheless there was no doubt that Kamehameha had a hand in what was happening. There were sightings of him in the mob that attacked Cook and later when the Resolution gunners opened fire on the crowd they wounded the chief. Richard Hough wrote:

" All this was too much for the Resolution's gunners, who opened fire on the crowd, instantly scattering them screaming into the woods, and wounding several, including the homosexual Chief Kamehameha."¹⁸

I have no idea why Hough claimed that Kamehameha was homosexual. He certainly had little difficulty establishing his dynasty.

There was no denying the importance of Kamehameha's influence following the death of Cook. The island historian O.A. Bushnell makes the point in his attractive Atlas of Hawaii.

" The rise to power of the high chief Kamehameha, who became the first king of the Hawaiian Islands, coincided exactly with the opening of the era of contact with the West."¹⁹

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Kamehameha's campaign to unite the islands got started following the death of King Kalaniopuu (Terreeoboo) in 1782. The campaign involved the deployment of a large fleet of war canoes and many soldiers. There was fierce fighting and protracted negotiations. It was not until 1810 that Kamehameha became the undisputed ruler of the islands with his capital in Honolulu.

Kamehameha introduced a unique form of government to the islands by appointing governors who reported to him. He maintained a royal monopoly in the highly profitable sandalwood trade and strengthened his position by buying arms from the visiting ships.

Some sources believe that Kamehameha was responsible for the destruction of the old religion. Gavin Kennedy makes this point in a footnote:

" The old Hawaiian religion was eventually destroyed in the domestic struggle to create a single state of Hawaii and the surrounding islands. King Kamehameha

¹⁷ J.C. Beaglehole, *The Journal of Captain James Cook* p 568

¹⁸ Richard Hough, *The Murder of Captain James Cook*, p. 234.

¹⁹ O.A. Bushnell editor, *The Illustrated Atlas of Hawaii*, Island Heritage Limited, Norfolk Island, 1970, p. 19.

(Tamehameha), the first sovereign, was at Kealakekua Bay at the time of Cook's visit, participated in the affray and was wounded. He later fought for many years to unite Hawaii and defeat his opponents, and was greatly assisted in his campaigns by the acquisition of European firearms and ships. His heir, Rihoriho, completed the secularisation of Hawaii in 1819, defeating his rivals who supported the priesthood and the old religion."²⁰

According to Bushnell, Kamehameha had as many as 21 wives. Some of them survived him. Kamehameha's son Liholiho was named the heir apparent before his father died on May 18, 1819. Bushnell suggests that it wasn't Kamehameha the First who finally destroyed the powers of the priests but two of Kamhameha's sons who convinced the new King Liholiho that the old taboos should be removed. This was done by a simple act when men and women were invited to attend the same feast, breaking an ancient taboo. Bushnell describes the feast was one of the strangest episodes in Pacific history when the people were invited to give up their old religion and not offered anything in its place.²¹

Of course there were people waiting to step into the breach. The arrival of the American missionaries while initially seen as a benevolent move probably had something to do with the establishment of American commercial interests.

Kamehameha's dynasty lasted from 1795 to 1893. The first president of the republic from 1894 to 1898 was Sanford Ballard Dole, the American who introduced pineapples to the islands.

It was no Camelot but it was an island kingdom that ran its own affairs in its own way and gave the people of the islands a strong feeling of pride in their own identity. To think that Cook was an unwitting instigator of these great events is something that I think would have pleased the veteran navigator. He was, after all, the man who recognised the special quality in our Aboriginal people, the sense of tranquillity and peace, and he repeatedly showed his high regard for local knowledge by employing native people as pilots.

That fateful Valentine Day's encounter in Kealakekua Bay was not just a tragic loss. It was the start of a great adventure that for a short time allowed the Hawaiian people to find their own way.

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Word count 3,086

²⁰ Gavin Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, p. 24

²¹ O.A. Bushnell, *Atlas of Hawaii*, pp 20-21.