

Some British Sources of Information
on Voyages to Hawaii
1786--1820

by

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I'm going to discuss the voyages after Captain Cook, and before 1820 beginning with 1786. My interest is plants introduced to Hawaii during this period. I came to the interest in early introduced plants primarily from students' questions. In classes students kept asking, "Where did this plant come from?" "When?" "Who brought it in?" Many sources of information on this sort of thing which are widely available are quite fragmentary. Don Marin's journal is a good example (Gast, 1973). Other sources contain only portions of logs kept while a vessel was in Hawaiian waters, the Hawaiian Historical Society Reprint on John Meares Voyages for example (Meares, 1971). Still other sources did not survive or were either secreted by the authors or were never written down. The sealers, for example, kept a lot of their information secret to avoid competition (Cameron, [n.d.]). From the isolated perspective of Maui, one tends to think that answers are in Hawaii somewhere and all one has to do is to get from Maui over to Oahu and spend some time looking into it and the answer will be found. It has turned out consistently that that is not as true as I thought it was. There are a number of answers here, but more and more I came to believe that most of the answers were not here. But, I was still unwilling to believe that the answers were unavailable.

So last year I took a sabbatical and my wife and I went to London to research some of the British sources of information that might give us some clues. Unfortunately we were not successful in our botanical endeavors, but we did gather a lot of historical information. So what I would like to do is to present some of the historic information, some of the sources, and how to go about using them.

We need to start by realizing that the period from Cook onward was very important from a historical plant introduction perspective. This was the end of the age of exploration, more or less. Some explorations were still going on--Cook and Vancouver among the British ones. But it was a period when the trading era was beginning. It was very important for these traders to have sources of materials for trading and sources of food for restocking their ships as they traded from one place to another. Most of you are aware, for example, that the first vessels after Captain Cook came in 1786, and that from then on trade increased rapidly in Hawaii. Until the late 1800's Hawaii was an extremely important place in terms of restocking sailing vessels.

In addition to traders, sealers first came through Hawaii in 1798 and whalers in 1819 (Judd and Lind, 1974). Don Marin, who gets the blame and praise for so many plant introductions, arrived in 1791 (Gast, 1973). The period saw Kamehameha I unite the islands and it witnessed the overthrow of the kapu system at his death in 1819.

As I attempted to find the names of ships, I started out with the standard source, "Voyages to Hawaii before 1860" (Judd and Lind, 1974). This is the single most important source, published by the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society. It lists just under a hundred ships' names for the period before 1820. I figured at the outset that this book would probably

give me enough information to do my research. Then I began to look at other sources and discovered that there were more than a hundred ships in Hawaii during the period before 1820 (Gast, 1973; Meares, 1971; Howay, 1930-1934). By the time we were ready to go to England, I wound up with a list of 180 ships, 48 of which were British, and I concluded at that time that the 180 do not represent anywhere near the number of ships which were in Hawaii before 1820. I had the feeling that if you kept looking in more sources, you'd find references to many more ships. So the impression that few ships were in Hawaii before 1820 is probably not too accurate.

I spent some time trying to figure out why it was that ship captains would want to introduce plants from one place to another. There are a number of reasons for this. For one thing, at that time, it was the thing to do (Lemmon, 1968). People were hauling things from one place to another all over the world, especially all over the tropics, until it got to the point where one place in the tropics was botanically much like another. To a greater extent than we like to admit, it still is the "thing" to do. If you were a European ship, especially a British one, it was also the "thing" to take materials back to the Chelsea Physic Garden, Kew Garden or some similar place (Elton, 1958).

Transporting plants and animals was so important that many captains' orders said specifically that they were supposed to introduce things from one place to another. The Hawaiian Historical Society reprints on John Meares' trip (Meares, 1971) say specifically that he should take poultry, hogs, goats and sheep to the Sandwich Islands and establish the Sandwich Islands as the world's foremost trading place for resupplying ships. This was an important consideration. Two of the ship logs we read that dealt

with the War of 1812 show this especially well (Tucker, 1812-1815; Black, 1812-1815).

The Cherub and the Racoon, with which some of you might be familiar, set out from London in 1813 to capture American shipping. They operated primarily in the Atlantic but came to the Pacific also. They captured two vessels off Maui by sort of a dirty pool exercise. When they sighted a sail, they hoisted the "Free Trade" flag to find out if it was an American ship. If that ship hoisted the American flag, they dropped the "Free Trade" flag, hoisted the Union Jack and captured the other ship as a prize. When we told our British friends that this was "dirty pool," they said it was "common intelligence."

Back to the topic. This pair of ships reprovisioned in Rio de Janeiro before they came over to Hawaii. They spent about three weeks there, and during that three week period they took on between 700 and 800 oranges per day for a total of 15,000 oranges, give or take a few, and about 10,000 lbs. of bread. It is clear from these figures alone that if you thought that you were going to cross the Pacific before you had a chance to get anything new that reprovisioning would be a prime consideration. It would be to your advantage to introduce things to places like Hawaii so that such things as oranges and wheat for bread would be available.

Because introducing organisms was so important, I thought that if we looked into ships' logs we ought to be able to find all sorts of information about plant introduction. I was wrong. We did not. However, we had a glorious time reading these logs and uncovering useful historical information.

I decided to concentrate on British sources of shipping information for a number of reasons. The greatest number of ships in my period of interest was British. After 1810, British ships began to lose out to

American traders, partially as a result of an early triumph of bureaucracy over free trade. British traders had to register with the East India Company; American ships had to answer to none (Howay and Scholefield, 1914). In spite of the decline, however, British influence remained strong in Hawaii. I felt I would have the best luck with British sources. An additional reason is that the British are meticulous record keepers. Much of the British information has been kept centrally. Information in the United States is widely scattered.

Probably the single largest source of information is the Public Record Office in London. Here are deposited most of the major British documents from the Domesday Book of 1086 onward. Major documents of public interest are displayed in a very small museum which is probably the ultimate in historical record museums.

The Public Record Office is available to most people who can demonstrate a legitimate research. It is not easy to get in. It is necessary to pre-arrange a reader's card and there are the usual rules related to archives. You cannot take in a brief case, you must use pencil and paper only, and so on. But it is possible to use it, and it is possible to get a lot more information than we obtained. We were in London three months. In that time we didn't really have time to research the purely historical material; we were after the botanical information. But for those interested in history, a lot of untouched information is undoubtedly there. The Public Record contains primarily captains' and masters' logs. Generally it does not contain logs of lower officers except in the case of explorations. For example, all of Vancouver's material is there. Cook's of course, is not. It has been transferred to the British Museum.

A second source of British information is the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. The Maritime Museum for those of you who have been there is another fantastic place. The library is beautiful. It's not nearly as complete a depository of ships records, however, as the Public Record Office. The procedures for getting in are roughly the same as for the Public Record Office but they are not nearly so stringent. For example, when we went to the Public Record Office, I had a reader's card, but we had not prearranged for my wife to get one. She had to go down to the embassy with my card and her passport to get certified. Finally after considerable hassle, she was able to get her own Public Record Office reader's card. The National Maritime Museum is a much friendlier set up. We could both gain admission on my card. Both the guards who ushered us in and the librarians were very interested in helping us, unlike the typical bureaucratic set up at other government agencies. Unfortunately, the Maritime Museum doesn't have large amounts of historical information which would be useful for a project of this nature. The museum keeps the logs of lieutenants and lower ranking officers. As a result there was nothing we could track down that was useful for us. There was one thing that might be interesting to the Cook buffs, however. For some obscure reason they have the log of William Griffin who was the cooper on the Resolution (Griffin, 1776-1780). That log for some reason is not with the other Cook materials.

We looked into the possibility of researching material in the British Museum but it develops that except for things of high public interest such as the materials on the Cook expedition, almost all records are contained in the Public Record Office. That's one of the reasons we went to Britain. I thought about going to the east coast of the United States first and attempting to find east coast sources. I discovered that these sources of

information are so widely scattered that it would be impractical to research them in the time I had available. The British, being the meticulous record keepers that they are, have everything in one place.

There were some problems even then, however. The period before 1820 was not yet a time when the British were keeping records in a systematic, centralized fashion. From 1660 onward they did require that all British ships be registered with collectors of customs in the ports where they were built. They did not require, however, that these records be kept centrally. And it was only from 1786 onward that registration was required with a central source. That central source was called the Registry General of Ships and Shipping at the London customs house. A fire destroyed the custom house and all its records in 1814. As a result most of the records that are available are from 1814 onward (Registrar General of Ships and Shipping, [n.d.]. Hereafter, the Registrar General of Ships and Shipping shall be cited as RGSS. RGSS, 1786-1814; RGSS, 1814-onward).

Even if the records had not been destroyed, there would still be some problems with the time period. Registration was required from 1786, but only admiralty ships were required to turn in any logs prior to 1854. For the most part, admiralty ships were military, so in essence this limits the information that one is likely to get, either to military ships or to explorations such as those of Cook and Vancouver.

We tried to follow up another lead. I was told before I left that Lloyd's of London insured shipping from something like 1600 onward. That may easily be true, but records are not available. There is one Lloyd's registry from 1764 (Lloyd's Registry of Ships, 1764) that is too early for our period. The next one is not available until 1840, which is too

late for us (Lloyd's Registry of Ships, 1840). The later record of shipping registries though does contain a number of registrations that go back to 1785 and it is an international registry. For people interested in history and not pursuing the logs, this might be an interesting source of information if it was dug into in depth.

Several problems cropped up once we found some relevant logs to research. There is the usual problem in the Public Record Office, as everywhere, that logs are fragmented. The King George log of 1786, for example, as some of you are aware, begins off the coast of South America on the way to Hawaii (Portlock, 1786). The rest of it is not there; one must get information from other sources such as John Nichols' book (Grant, 1937). A second problem about logs is that you'd better be prepared to have your vision disappear if you intend to read them for long periods of time. John Charles showed a number of photographs of logs and other documents. If you attempted to read them from the back of the room, or even from the front, in very much detail, you could forget it. Logs were relatively easy to read when they were written by captains in sea ports. But as soon as they got to sea it was another story. In the case of the two logs that I mentioned earlier, for example, from 1813 and 1814 (Tucker, 1812-1815; Black, 1812-1815), as long as the ships were at anchor in Rio the logs were quite legible. When the ships left Rio, though, and headed south, it was obvious that the wave action was getting worse and worse. As they went around the Horn, the writing became almost indecipherable. We would read along a page and there would be a splash of ink which would obliterate half a word and we couldn't tell what the word was. It was easy to imagine what the captain was saying to himself while attempting to write his log. The last problem in terms of these logs is that from a botanical viewpoint apparently the sorts of

things that we were seeking were not the sorts of things that the captains were interested in putting down. A captain would keep a daily record of the water supply; the number of rum casks opened and the number of gallons in each cask; the number of lashes given to a seaman and occasionally the reasons for the punishment; and the names of those who were buried at sea, often as a result of having been flogged too much a week earlier. In general, the information we sought was not available. Information of a general historical nature is available though and is worth pursuing.

The last thing that I want to discuss is about ships' registries and not about logs. For those interested in pursuing shipping information for the period previous to 1820, or any early period, it is probably possible to find the registries for most of the British ships that came to Hawaii during that period. They were all registered. The only problem is that the registry contains 19 pieces of information for each ship (RGSS, [n.d.]; RGSS, 1786-1814; RGSS, 1814-onward). That wouldn't be so bad, except that there seems to have been a gross lack of imagination as to what name should be given to a ship. There were as many as six or seven ships of the same name in the same time period in the same registry book. When we found the name of a ship we wanted to know about, we'd have to go through the information and look at the various dimensions of the ship, then look back at our records, see what we had about it, and see if it fit our description. After a few sessions of this, we began to go slowly mad and gave it up as a bad job. One could spend days trying to establish that one ship was the ship in question. Probably, though, there is a gold mine of historical information there if one were able to take the time to dig it out. We found a reference to the Prince of Wales, for example, which indicates that it was a transport ship which took the prisoners from England to Australia (Historical

Records of New South Wales, 1790). The time period is correct for the 1788 visit of the ship by this name. No other historical information, though, shows that this was the same ship.

By way of summary, I would say that we did not exhaust the possible sources of information in Britain. We certainly intend to go back and do further work - especially with ships' manifests if we can find them. The sources we used to date would be quite useful to historians in cases where they have not already been tapped for historical purposes. I highly recommend the Public Record Office to anyone interested in British influence during this period.

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