



Once There Was Fire: A Novel of Old Hawaii

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Discover the epic story of old Hawaii James Michener never told

The Hawaiian people lived in an isolated Garden of Eden and fought over it for centuries. Then one day, strangers came from beyond the horizon on floating islands. At first, the Hawaiians thought they were gods. Having no metal of their own, they marveled at the visitors' iron daggers, axes, muskets, and cannons. One man, Kamehameha, was the first among the Hawaiians to understand that the strangers' arrival had transformed everything for his people. He would go on to use these new weapons to defeat his rivals, unite the Hawaiian Islands, and found a new kingdom at the crossroads of the Pacific Ocean.

Once There Was Fire brings a little-understood, historically remote era to life through the words and actions of its memorable characters: Kamehameha, his strong-willed and rebellious consort, Ka‘ahumanu, his favorite brother, Keli‘imaika‘i, and Kamehameha’s sons, nephews, comrades in arms, haole advisers, and bitter enemies. The novel invites readers to see Hawaii of the mid-18th and early 19th centuries as the old Hawaiians themselves might have seen and experienced it on the cusp of their passage from splendid isolation to the wider world.

Once There Was Fire: A Novel of Old Hawaii Details

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From Reader Review Once There Was Fire: A Novel of Old Hawaii for online ebook

Gary says

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that this is the best biography of Kamehameha the Great you could find. Granted, this is not a historiographer's biography; even the subtitle is up-front on identifying this book as a "novel." Stephen Shender invents dialogue, massages drama, and fills in the blanks between big events related in more "official" biographies to smooth the narrative.

But let's face it. Most "old Hawaiian" history comes to us by means of oral tradition. And following the story in this book is like sitting around campfire listening to someone passing on the tradition to us. The actual conceit of the novel is that it consists of the memories of Kamehameha's nephew Namakeha, who as an old man decides to set his testimony down for the record. Who's to say that anyone passing on his memories--or a culture's memories--isn't bound to embellish them some and "fill in the blanks" with invented dialogue, etc.?

The reason I say I'm "going out on a limb" in offering my praise is that I assume Mr. Shender has gotten all his basic facts right. I am not a Kamehameha scholar myself, though I have studied some basic Hawaiian history. The novel certainly seems well-researched, and I myself was only able to catch Mr. Shender in one error (from Kawaihae Bay he has the sun setting behind Mt. Kohala, when the mountain is actually situated east of the bay). I'm assuming that error is not indicative of more widespread errors I didn't have the expertise to detect. Secondly, as I am a mere haole--as Mr. Shender himself is--I can only assume that he got all his details of native Hawaiian language, culture, and customs correct. That would have to be vetted by someone else.

That being said, Kamehameha's story is quite a compelling one. Old Hawaiian culture could be a violent one--even involving at times human sacrifice--and with the intrigues and power-plays characterizing the relationships between the various chieftains, it reads at times like "Game of Thrones." With all the shifting alliances, both between clans and within them (hard sometimes to distinguish the two, since there was so much inter-clan marriage), there is constant human drama.

I would certainly recommend this book to anyone interested in Hawaiian history.

Anthony says

July 7, 2018

A review by Anthony T. Riggio of the book Once There Was Fire: A novel of Old Hawaii written by Stephen Shender

I purchased this book from Amazon in the Kindle edition. I have always wondered about the people of Hawaii just before the White man arrived. I had read James Michner's epic entitled "Hawaii" but there few details of the impact Captain Cook's arrival had on the aboriginal people that had been living there for at least a thousand years. While this was a novel it is chock full of historical reference to make this feel and sound as though it was a careful dramatization of historical events. I am sure the main characters were real

e.g., the first “Moi” (or Chief) of unified Hawaii, to wit, Kamehameha. The rest I can not be sure of as I have never studied native Hawaiian history. The Author claims many of the names were born out of his imagination but the story of the leadership of Kamehameha was, I believe, accurate.

The story was quasi biblical, in that Kamehameha was hidden away as a very young child and raised as a foster child by a commoner family. They were given strict instructions to never allow harm to come to him. There were forces that wanted to insure Kamehameha never being elevated to a ruling position based on prophesies by the priest at the time of his natural birth.

Kamehameha is brought back into the royal court of elders and chiefs at about 15 years of age. He was big for his age (6' 6" tall) and very strong. Because of his height and strength, he became a warrior and eventually he fulfilled the prophesies made at his birth, i.e., he conquered all of the leaders of the islands that formed Hawaii and developed a highly unified system of government and interacted with the increasing European and American seafarers and developed a trade wherein the Hawaiians accumulated both metal tools and weapons which facilitated Kamehameha's ability to unify all of the Hawaiians under his leadership.

Unfortunately his heir was somewhat hapless and the Hawaiians fell back to a fragmented leadership and eventually were swallowed up by modern European and American cultural mores. It is, in many respect a sad story mirrored by the assimilation of native Americans in the continental United States.

The author, I believe, did a masterful job in portraying the Hawaiian culture yet his liberal use of Hawaiian names made the story sometimes difficult to digest.

I gave this book four stars because it was an excellent, yet predictable story of a diminished culture. I recommend this book to all readers interested in Hawaii.

C. Coleman says

I have stressed over the review of this book for a week. Clearly, there was a great amount of research done and in general, it's a great story. I wanted to know more about the Hawaiians before us haolies messed things up. That said, I found it almost impossible to read due to an endless stream of names that read more like a census report. It got bogged down in much of that minutia. IMHO, a third of the book could have been edited out. Even though the 'episodes' seemed endless, I found it hard to relate to most of the characters. I attribute that to the 'telling' of much of it rather than 'showing' involving me in the place and experience. I wish I could rate it higher because it is a good story, but that wouldn't be fair to potential readers.

L.A. Keller says

This novel spans more than 100 years in Hawaiian history from 1748 to 1859. I am ashamed to say I had no knowledge of the Hawaiian culture or history prior to reading this book. It was interesting to learn that the island chieftains were warring in a ceaseless battle to rule.

I was also surprised by the open ‘marriages’ and impressed by the culture’s easy acceptance of it. That is, of course, until foreigners forced their own cultural beliefs on the natives. I was also surprised at the mention of human sacrifice.

All in all this was a very well written and informative book. Despite the difficult to pronounce names and the volume of them, I really enjoyed it and found the stories fascinating.

Natacha Lalande says

To be totally honest, i got lost so many times reading it especially because of the number of similar and foreign names the characters have. At some point i even forgot who was the main character's name. But the story is great and this should not stop you from reading it.

I'm excited to also present you my spotlight for this novel along with an interview with the author about himself and the novel.

<https://natachabooksreview.wordpress....>

<https://natachabooksreview.wordpress....>

Christine Boswell says

Excellent book! I loved it.

Leonide Martin says

After 700 years of isolation, Hawaii was on the brink of contact with the Western world as this story begins. It is told first person by Namakeha, nephew of Kamehameha I, the great king who united the islands in 1810. Framed as Namakeha's memoirs written at the urging of his royal Hawaiian wife Esther (who later became queen), the historical recount begins with Kamehameha's birth on the Big Island and follows the young noble's path to become a great leader. The Hawaiians of the mid-1700s were divided into chiefdoms, with a reigning king for each island who required allegiance and tribute. Frequent challenges to the king led to incessant warfare with his own chiefs, and against rulers of other islands. The warrior cult was highly honored; Kamehameha became one of the most feared and revered warriors.

An introduction narrated by Namakeha sets the stage for both Hawaiian culture and his writing the memoir. His consistent, mostly dispassionate voice expounds details of social structure, beliefs and rules (kapus), abilities in warfare and sailing, economics and agriculture, and relations between the sexes and classes in an interesting manner. Only at one point did the numerous details of battles become tiring. The tone of the narrative shifts between personal interactions and experiences, and sweeping events shaping society. Characters are developed enough for readers to care about them, or to find fascination in their deceptiveness and plotting. Political and military strategies build up suspense, and interactions between Hawaiians and haoles (foreigners) make for captivating reading. Kamehameha's quick grasp of the superiority offered by muskets and cannons, and his determined quest to equip and train his warriors in their use, was key to his success in becoming mo'i (over-king) of all the islands.

The inevitable decline in traditional Hawaiian ways is described in the last section, dealing with the aftermath of Kamehameha's death. Interestingly, the king's main wife, Ka'ahumanu, led the way breaking kapus and changing the status of women. A dramatic ending pits the narrator's brother, striving to maintain

old ways, against the new king Liholiho allied with Ka'ahumanu to bring about change. An afterward provides historical perspective with bibliography.

This well-crafted novel uses numerous Hawaiian names and phrases to give flavor. It is authentic historical fiction with sound research that honors the culture. Readers who enjoy substance along with story will find much to appreciate in this book.

Kay Hadashi says

I read the paperback edition of Stephen Shender's "Once There Was Fire". First, a comment about the quality of the book: it was very well and professionally presented as a paperback.

Now, about the writing. The story of Hawaii just before European contact is told through the eyes of a fictitious character, bringing in numerous real people, battles, and daily lives of the Hawaiians. It was very well researched, turning dry history lessons into compelling scenes. If you want to learn about Hawaiian history, this is an excellent place for it. If you want an exciting read on the level of Michenor's "Hawaii", this serves its purpose. Born and raised in Hawaii, in fact not far from a few of the scenes, this book was special to me.

Thanks for writing "OTWF", Stephen!

Kristine says

Once There Was Fire: A Novel of Old Hawaii by Stephen Shender is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in late December.

Though it wasn't immediately apparent, the author researched Hawaiian myth and history and created a spurious character who writes of his family and culture before the year 1840. Fictional sentiments aside, it comes off like a Lancelot tale and The Odyssey all rolled into one.

Carole P. Roman says

Fictionalized history of King Kamehameha and the eventual clash when the Europeans land in Hawaii. Respectful and lovingly recounted, Shender retells the mystery of Kamehameha's birth, all while expertly explaining customs and culture of the region. Born under the shadow of an ominous omen, Kamehameha is spirited away hours after his birth to be brought up by farmers rather than murdered by a rival king. He returns to his family at six and takes his rightful place, learning how to be a leader and eventually fulfills his destiny. Though, sometimes the names were difficult to keep the family and all the players in place, Shender's storytelling abilities are spot on. Entertaining and informative.

James (JD) Dittes says

Visitors think of Hawaii as a place of surf, sand, and flowing lava, but Stephen Shender's new book is a keen reminder that 'once there was fire'--the fire of culture that had grown for 1400 years prior to its first encounter with Europeans, and one which reached its apogee in the reign of King Kamehameha (I) the Great (1758-1819). The central figure in *Once There Was Fire*, Kamehameha, would unify the islands under his rule, but he would also sow the seeds that brought native culture there to the brink of destruction.

The first half of the book describes Kamehameha's youth. A "golden child" of sorts, he is initially hidden from the *ali'i* or chief of the island in response to a prophesy that he--not the chief's lineage--would unify the Hawaiian Islands. Another portentous event, Kamehameha's overturning of a stone, also bodes him well. It is in this section that Shender describes the chiefly rivalries and disunity among the nobles of the Big Island, Hawaii, as well as the various *kapus* or traditions, which regulated relations between women and men, and between commoners and the chiefly/priestly class.

The book really takes off, though, with the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1798, a time when Kamehameha has risen to the role of priest under his uncle, Kalaniopu'u. The Hawaiians are amazed by tools and items made of iron, but Kamehameha recognizes the superior English technology. While his countrymen are dazzled by nails and pots, Kamehameha is laying plans to get his hands on muskets and cannon. Once he does--with the help of a stolen ship and a couple of kidnapped English sailors--conquest will be his.

The book rightfully focuses on the lives of native Hawaiians, resisting any temptation to shift to European perspectives once the *haole* arrive. Shender has used the voice of a Hawaiian noble to tell the tale, which helps him to stay focused on the Hawaiian court. A final chapter, set in the days after Kamehameha's death, shows European/Christian values moving in and overthrowing long-held Hawaiian traditions.

At 524 pages, this book won't be read on the plane ride to Honolulu, but it is a great book for those whose visit to the islands will take in native culture and who wish for some background. Readers fascinated by other great Native Americans like Crazy Horse or Chochise will want to make room in their libraries for Kamehameha.

One more warning for readers: nearly every character in the book has a name that (1) starts with the letter, K, and (2) has more than five syllables. It's not Shender's fault--it's historical--but it did slow down my reading and cause me to go back several times.

I fit into the latter category. I have never been to Hawaii, but every year I teach about the incredible feathered cape of Kamehameha's son, who took on the name, Kamehameha III. When I spotted this title on NetGalley, I couldn't resist the chance to learn more. It was a great choice for me. I learned a lot.

Lindsey says

DNF. I wanted to like this book so badly but I finally had to put it down about halfway through. It's supposed to be a novel based on the history of the Hawaiian people and the king who united all of the islands but the "novel" part was lost. It definitely read like a very, very dry history. There were a lot of confusing, similarly-named characters to keep up with and the story went on for way too long. About half of the content could have been edited out and it would have been twice as enjoyable. I couldn't even get past the point in the book

when Kamehameha becomes King. And despite the claim that this book is ABOUT Kamehameha, his portion of the book does not even begin until several hundred pages in. Overall I found the book to be - and I hate to say it - boring. Unfortunately this book was not for me.

I received an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Linda K says

I believe there will always be controversy on the History of the Hawaiian people. Mainly as most of us know a lot of the History was passed on verbally and never written. Which is ironic considering a lot of written history have been in question for decades, with its many versions the Holy Bible for example, or a time when someone's word was as good as a business contract of today. In respect to Mr. Namakeha his bloodline alone in my opinion gives his story "Mo'olelo" legitimacy. He speaks only of a time and place of his family as it was told to him. He has his own opinions but manages to keep them separate from the Mo'olelo and states from the very beginning accuracy may not be consistent but the main idea of life and beliefs of the people then, is what matters. As with all other cultures from around the world, their beliefs and way of life may seem odd or straight out barbaric but it doesn't make it any less true. My belief of Kamehameha's "reuniting the islands" is the only reason this is a 4 star review. My opinion on that, is for another book.

Linda says

The fact that it took me almost two months to finish this book says something about both its length and how much it caught my interest. Obviously it is based largely on fact; no novelist worth his or her salt would invent so many similar, l-o-n-g names, mostly starting with K, to confuse the reader. Sometimes it was hard to distinguish between the "heroes" and the "villains."

Typographical or grammatical errors: 1. the / then; 2. where as / whereas; 3. were / where; 4. where abouts / whereabouts; 5. afterward / afterword.

Small words missing from text: *and, the, a, was, a, of, to, in, to, in, of, the, as.*
