

## *How Surfing Became American*

THE IMPERIAL ROOTS OF MODERN SURF CULTURE

WHEN NATHANIEL B. EMERSON, the outgoing president of the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, stood before an assembly of the organization in July 1892, he was full of praise for his missionary predecessors who had worked tirelessly to uplift the "infant race" populating "that fragment" of the Polynesian islands he now called home. Having overseen the "birth of a [Christian] nation," it had devolved upon this earlier generation of missionaries, Emerson maintained, "to swathe the tender limbs of the newborn, to counsel as to the nutriment suited to its earliest needs, to direct its first tottering footsteps, to give it the alphabet of learning, to initiate for it such intellectual, moral[,] and religious tuition as becomes a candidate for admission into the fraternity of nations." This was, to be sure, "a task beset with difficulties, imposing large responsibilities, and demanding great earnestness, devotion, and practical wisdom." But, Emerson assured his audience, "success" had been "attained."<sup>1</sup> Christian civilization had taken root in the Hawaiian archipelago.

Emerson was speaking before the congregated guests not to celebrate this heavenly victory, however. His immediate concern was of a much more worldly nature. He took to the podium that July day to defend his missionary predecessors—many of them the fathers and mothers of those assembled in the room—from charges that they had engineered the demise of a number of "noble" Hawaiian sports. The "children of nature" whom the proselytizers saw as their charges had developed a number of pastimes "worthy of perpetuation," Emerson believed. The fitness of "surf riding" and other activities to "develope [*sic*] and invigorate the frame and to impart and maintain a virile courage and endurance" was one, the outgoing president insisted, that "should be cultivated in every race."<sup>2</sup> Emerson was certainly right about

surfing's invigorating qualities. But, to Hawaiians, it was about much more. From the selection of a tree out of which a board might be shaped to the interactions of the wave riders and spectators, surfing, which involved all strata of society—young and old, commoners and royalty, men and women—represented a ritualized set of practices at the core of what it meant to be Hawaiian. How shamefully misguided, therefore, that certain critics had seen fit to blame the missionaries for the decline of surfing and other sports, Emerson continued. He, for one, would have none of it. His predecessors “exercised no direct or appreciable influence” in “the death and retirement of Hawaii’s ancient sports and games,” he assured the audience. On the contrary, “they were utterly powerless to arrest the tendency towards the substitution of imported and foreign games for the worthy sports and exercises indigenous to the soil and race.”<sup>3</sup> The Hawaiian people, that is, had collectively chosen to no longer indulge their traditional pursuits. It was their choice. Prohibitions had not been imposed on them.

But Emerson’s tutorial—in essence, that Hawaiians simply lost interest in a number of cultural activities as the annual Makahiki festival was discontinued, the kapu system was abolished, foreign games were introduced, and people’s focus increasingly turned to war making—is much too exculpatory and self-serving.<sup>4</sup> He and his missionary predecessors bore no responsibility for the destruction of traditional Hawaiian culture, he suggested. They were not invaders or exploiters. The fault lay with the Hawaiians themselves. The missionaries of the early nineteenth century, according to this narrative, were a “dispensation of light” that had “wing[ed] its way as a new *Lono* [a Hawaiian deity] across the waters.” They filled a “vacuum in Hawaii’s social and religious institutions” following the death of Kamehameha in 1819, and the people embraced the Western arrivals with “enthusiasm.”<sup>5</sup> The seeds of Christianity were planted, and, as they sprouted, “the old life, its worship, festivals, public games, and festivities with all the abuses that gathered about them” began to dissipate.

Surfing was among the casualties, Emerson said regretfully. Or so it appeared. “The sport of surf riding possessed a grand fascination,” he noted, “and for a time it seemed as if it had the vitality to hold its own as a national pastime. There are those living, perhaps some present [in the audience], who remember the time when almost the entire population of a village would at certain hours resort to the sea-side to indulge in, or to witness, this magnificent accomplishment. We cannot but mourn its decline.” So great had been the retreat from this noble tradition that, Emerson continued, “to-day it is

hard to find a surf-board outside of our museums and private collections.”<sup>6</sup> While Emerson’s accounting was perhaps an exaggeration, it is nevertheless true that the number of practitioners of the sport had fallen tremendously by the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Yet Emerson’s lamentation for surfing’s diminished popularity seems misguided. The problem had not been wave riding per se, he suggested. Rather, it was that surfing had “felt the touch of the new civilization.” For those perplexed by the meaning of this message, Emerson offered clarification. “[A]s the zest of this sport was enhanced by the fact that both sexes engaged in it, when this practice was found to be discountenanced by the new majority, it was felt that the interest in it had largely departed—and this game too went the way of its fellows.”<sup>7</sup> Emerson, in essence, wanted it both ways. Surfing was a healthy pastime, but it was one whose scantily clad practitioners, both male and female, horrified many proponents of “the new civilization,” particularly in that wave riding served not only as a pleasurable endeavor in its own right but also as a form of sexual courtship.<sup>8</sup> For those being tutored in the modest ways of the missionaries’ Christian deity, surfing was certain to meet with divine disapproval. Its practitioners were much too licentious. Wave riders thus faced a stark choice: immediate gratification—though with eternal damnation—or the immeasurable bounties of a heavenly future. Put that way, surfing would not have appeared to stand a chance.

Except that it did. While the number of Hawaiian surfers dropped precipitously as the nineteenth century unfolded, wave riding, as historian Isaiah Helekunihi Walker reminds us, did in fact continue.<sup>9</sup> It is true that surfing was witnessed by haoles much less frequently as the decades passed.<sup>10</sup> Given the economic changes that upended Hawaiian customs and the physical decimation of the Hawaiian people following the 1778 arrival of Captain James Cook, this is understandable. After all, the sandalwood, whaling, and sugar industries fundamentally reshaped Hawaiian society and leisure practices—there was far less time for surfing—while a population in the islands that David Stannard conservatively estimated as 800,000 prior to contact had been reduced, largely through the introduction of foreign pathogens for which Hawaiians enjoyed no immunity, to approximately 135,000 by 1823.<sup>11</sup> By the 1890s, the number of Hawaiians stood at fewer than 40,000.<sup>12</sup> Even if one were to accept that Stannard’s pre-contact estimate is too high, as Andrew Bushnell has argued, this still represents a staggering loss of life.<sup>13</sup> Under such circumstances it seems obvious that the number of surfers would have decreased. Those that continued to ride the waves were survivors of not

only the biological onslaught introduced by white contact but also a radically different labor system and the concerted efforts of at least some white missionaries to demonize a pastime they associated with barbarism and sexual indecency.

In this the Hawaiian people shared experiences similar to those of American Indians. This is hardly surprising. Most of the Protestant missionaries who arrived in Hawai'i in 1820 came from the United States, a polity occupying a considerable landmass whose indigenous population required decades of military pacification. Accompanying this imperial expansion was, more often than not, Christian proselytization. Indian peoples were assumed by the white invaders to be racial inferiors. The Americans thus set out to racially uplift the savages in their midst. This meant an effort to eradicate those cultural traditions that were a presumed mark of indigenous barbarism and replace them with Christianity. When Indian people were not simply killed outright, the invaders, nearly always projecting an image of unquestioned benevolence, sought to eliminate the use of native languages, the practices of native spirituality, and many of the basic structures of native society. Frivolity was frowned upon while industriousness was expected. These pious white Christians were, they insisted, only doing God's work. It was true that the settler population found itself greatly enriched as Indian peoples were dispossessed of most of their native lands.<sup>14</sup> But this was just a coincidence. Or so the story goes.

In Hawai'i it was much the same. Hiram Bingham, probably the most prominent leader of the missionary movement in the first half of the nineteenth century, was, as someone reared in New England, a product of that American worldview. Indeed, his detailed account of his experiences with the Hawaiian people closely mirrors the North American imperial literature of the era. Recalling his memorable "first intercourse with the natives," for example, Bingham, sounding much like those who first made contact with the Indian peoples of North America, found that

the appearance of destitution, degradation, and barbarism, among the chattering, and almost naked[,] savages, whose heads and feet, and much of their sunburnt swarthy skins, were bare, was appalling. Some of our number, with gushing tears, turned away from the spectacle. Others with firmer nerve continued their gaze, but were ready to exclaim, "Can these be human beings! How dark and comfortless their state of mind and heart! How imminent the danger to the immortal soul, shrouded in this deep pagan gloom! Can such beings be civilized? Can they be Christianized? Can we throw ourselves



upon these rude shores, and take up our abode, for life, among such a people, for the purpose of training them for heaven?"

These were questions of the gravest import. The answer to all of them, Bingham happily assured his readers, was an emphatic yes.<sup>15</sup>

When Bingham contemplated the "idolaters of reprobate mind" he encountered during his Polynesian crusade, he perceived a fertile crop of Hawaiians begging for religious conversion.<sup>16</sup> But this would be about much more than Sunday worship. It would mean accepting the norms of white civilization, including modest (albeit impractical) dress, the abolition of gambling, and Christian notions of sexual propriety. All of these handicapped surfing, a sport best enjoyed free of sartorial encumbrance on which both Hawaiian men and women wagered.<sup>17</sup> So, too, did the missionaries' emphasis on constant work as a means of self-improvement. Recreational pursuits such as wave riding—the "most popular of all . . . pastimes with all ranks and ages," according to a nineteenth-century historian of the islands—suffered.<sup>18</sup> So would Hawaiians subscribe to these Christian precepts? Bingham and his contemporaries found, in time, a surprisingly receptive audience. They were undoubtedly aided by the ongoing decimation of the Hawaiian people. "Natives," wrote Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa, "perceived that missionaries might give them eternal life and, more immediately, save them from the impact of the foreign diseases that were sweeping the Pacific."<sup>19</sup> Acceptance of the Christian deity, in other words, promised rewards in both this life and the next. There was a practical benefit to conversion. Not surprisingly, many did accept the Christian faith. But the disavowal of cultural practices such as wave riding was an entirely different matter.

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The Protestant missionaries of nineteenth-century Hawai'i never directly prohibited surfing. Such a prohibition was not necessary. In the missionaries' effort to impose an entirely new worldview on the Hawaiian people, it was made abundantly clear that surfing and other traditional pastimes would only hinder the heathens' moral progress. And moral progress *was* imperative, they believed. Arriving on the Big Island in 1820, Lucia Ruggles Holman, the wife of missionary-physician Thomas Holman, was promptly greeted and welcomed by the Hawaiian royal family, which offered her and her compan-

ions “cocoanuts, bananas, plantains, breadfruit, sweet-potatoes, taro[,] and 2 hogs.”<sup>20</sup> Still, notes historian Patricia Grimshaw, the young woman found herself horrified by “volcanic Kailua, where the chief attraction for Hawaiians, the surf, held no joy for the Americans.”<sup>21</sup> The local people, Holman wrote to her sister, were deplorable “beyond description,” having “sunk to the lowest depths of sin and depravity.” They “appear to glory in what should be their greatest shame,” she insisted. “There is no sin, the commission of which, disgraces them—indeed, there is nothing that disgraces them but work.” Hawai‘i seemed to lack any redeeming qualities. Even the fruits and vegetables “taste heathenish,” complained the young missionary. Perhaps, Holman said hopefully, the “pleasant sunshine of the Gospel” could turn things around.<sup>22</sup>

It was a tall order. Sheldon Dibble, writing two decades after Holman, was repulsed by the “oppression, destitution, and ignorance” that greeted he and his fellow Christian soldiers. The Hawaiians’ “degrading practices, their social condition[,] and their catalogue of crimes” left him appalled. This included their sporting activities. The “evils” that resulted from “[p]laying on the surfboard” and other amusements were too legion to sufficiently describe. “Some lost their lives thereby, some were severely wounded, maimed and crippled; some were reduced to poverty, both by losses in gambling and by neglecting to cultivate the land; and the instances were not few in which they were reduced to utter starvation. But the greatest evil of all,” Dibble suggested, “resulted from the constant intermingling, without any restraint, of persons of both sexes and of all ages, at all times of the day and at all hours of the night.”<sup>23</sup>

These were decidedly colonialist views. The white missionaries of Hawai‘i, like the armies of self-styled saviors that people imperial history, saw their charges in racially inferior terms, ascribing to them a barbarity that rings almost otherworldly to twenty-first-century ears. And wave riding was most certainly an element of that savagery. Surfing, wrote haoles in the Hawaiian-language newspapers they employed to achieve their social aims, was “immoral.” It was “the reason,” claimed an article in *Ke Kumuhawaii*, “people become indolent and [was] the root of lasciviousness.”<sup>24</sup> It made Hawaiian men “lazy,” insisted another, as they “would spend all their time surfing.”<sup>25</sup> And the same was said to be true more broadly. The residents of La‘ie did not like attending the missionaries’ religious services because they “would rather surf,” one report indicated in 1835.<sup>26</sup> Another equated surfing with sin, in-

structing readers to “remember the words of the Lord when he said, ‘Go and sin no more.’”<sup>27</sup> As Richard Armstrong’s *Ka Nonanona* revealed, the message could be distilled to three words: “[s]urfing is wrong.”<sup>28</sup>

No, it was not necessary for the missionaries to prohibit surfing. It was tightly enough “hemmed in by ‘blue laws’ against gambling and nudity, both of which had been nearly as important to the sport as riding itself,” concluded historian Matt Warshaw.<sup>29</sup> When this assault on Hawaiian customs is combined with the Protestant emphasis on industriousness and the physical devastation of the Hawaiian population, it is little wonder that surfing entered a period of decline. As early as the second half of the 1830s, the transformation was already apparent. William S. W. Ruschenberger, a surgeon on a round-the-world voyage, commented at that time on the “change [that] has taken place in certain customs, which must have influenced the physical development of the islanders. I allude to the variety of athletic exercises, such as swimming, with or without the surf-board, dancing, wrestling, throwing the javalin [*sic*], &c., all of which games, being in opposition to the severe tenets of Calvinism, have been suppressed, without the substitution of other pursuits to fill up the time.” Ruschenberger was dubious of the missionaries’ denials of responsibility. “Would these games have been suppressed had the missionaries never arrived at the islands?” he asked.

It is fair to presume that they would have continued in use. Can the missionaries be fairly charged with suppressing these games? I believe they deny having done so. But they write and publicly express their opinions, and state these sports to be expressly against the laws of God, and by a succession of reasoning, which may be readily traced, impress upon the minds of the chiefs and others, the idea that all who practice them, secure to themselves the displeasure of offended heaven. Then the chiefs, from a spontaneous benevolence, at once interrupt customs so hazardous to their vassals.<sup>30</sup>

While a significant number of Hawaiians continued to resist the assault on their cultural traditions, as scholars from Noenoe Silva to Isaiah Helekunihi Walker have ably demonstrated, the missionaries, by convincing some Hawaiians that surfing contributed to their moral turpitude, were able to achieve many of their desired objectives without the need to issue a blanket prohibition on wave riding.<sup>31</sup>

In light of this ideological offensive, it seems disingenuous for a number of missionaries to have absolved themselves of any responsibility for surfing’s decline. To be sure, there were visiting whites, including missionaries, who

celebrated the sport and hoped it would survive what Nathaniel Emerson, in his 1892 speech to the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, innocuously called "the new civilization."<sup>32</sup> The German-born journalist Charles Nordhoff, for instance, extolled the wave riders of Hilo in 1873, maintaining that those Americans fortunate enough to be there on a "rough day" with "heavy surf" would be witness to "one of the finest sights in the world."<sup>33</sup> Among the islands' missionaries, there was none more enthusiastic than the Reverend Henry T. Cheever. Writing in 1851, Cheever unequivocally praised the "surf-players" he would see enjoying the waves along the Hawaiian coast. Their pastime, he opined, "is so attractive and full of wild excitement to Hawaiians, and withal so healthful, that I cannot but hope it will be many years before civilization shall look it out of countenance, or make it disreputable to indulge in this manly, though it be dangerous, exercise. Many a man from abroad who has witnessed this exhilarating play, has no doubt inly wished that he were free and able to share in it himself." Admitting publicly what he suspected others thought privately, Cheever confessed: "[f]or my part, I should like nothing better, if I could do it, than to get balanced on a board just before a great rushing wave, and so be hurried in half or quarter of a mile landward with the speed of a race-horse, all the time enveloped in foam and spray, but without letting the roller break and tumble over my head." As "[b]oth men and women, girls and boys," together found time to indulge in this enviable "diversion," however, Cheever was perhaps naïve in suggesting that civilization had not already "look[ed] it out of countenance" or otherwise "ma[d]e it disreputable."<sup>34</sup>

Certainly the missionary leader Hiram Bingham seemed to recognize as much, though without offering the hope for the sport's survival displayed by Reverend Cheever. "The adoption of our costume greatly diminishes [the Hawaiians'] practice of swimming and sporting in the surf," Bingham observed in his 1848 tome, "for it is less convenient to wear it in the water than the native girdle, and less decorous and safe to lay it entirely off on every occasion they find for a plunge or swim or surf-board race. Less time, moreover, is found for amusement by those who earn or make cloth-garments for themselves like the more civilized nations." Bingham acknowledged the declining number of Hawaiians participating in what he identified as "the favorite amusement of all classes," though he appeared adamant that the missionaries had nothing for which to apologize. "The decline or discontinuance of the use of the surf-board, as civilization advances," he wrote, "may be accounted for by the increase of modesty, industry[,] or religion, without supposing, as

some have affected to believe, that missionaries caused oppressive enactments against it. These considerations are in part applicable to many other amusements. Indeed, the purchase of foreign vessels, at this time, required attention to the collecting and delivering of 450,000 lbs. of sandal-wood, which those who were waiting for it might naturally suppose would, for a time, supersede their amusements.”<sup>35</sup> Given the central importance placed by missionary ideology on the sanctity of labor, it was only natural, that is, that the Hawaiian people—a people who, in Bingham’s telling, unreservedly embraced Christian civilization—would emphasize industriousness over the “many . . . amusements” that were central to Hawaiian cultural life.<sup>36</sup>

As in North America, a fair number of those advocating the racial uplift of the indigenous Hawaiian population found themselves materially rewarded as they came to dominate the economic life of the islands. During the nineteenth century, land was divided and passed into haole hands.<sup>37</sup> With the physical decimation of the native population, tens of thousands of laborers were imported from the Philippines, Japan, and elsewhere in the Asia Pacific. Commodity agriculture—especially sugar—proved increasingly important, and the descendants of a number of missionaries came to control its trade. In time, the haole elite sought political power to match its dominance of the export-oriented economy. This meant undermining the sovereignty of the native kingdom. When Queen Lili‘uokalani attempted in 1893 to restore the authority of the Hawaiian monarchy following the 1887 imposition of a constitution favored by powerful haole interests, her government, after the U.S. minister in the islands sent in a contingent of American troops, grudgingly “yield[ed] to the superior force of the United States of America” and the haole leaders that the American minister, John L. Stevens, was supporting. Lili‘uokalani did so, she wrote at the time, “under . . . protest” and “until such time as the Government of the United States shall, upon the facts being presented to it, undo the action of its representative and reinstate me in the authority which I claim as the constitutional Sovereign of the Hawaiian Islands.”<sup>38</sup>

That day would never arrive. In 1898, five years after the haole-led coup d’état that ultimately brought about the Republic of Hawai‘i—a coup that even the United States president, Grover Cleveland, recognized as unlawful—Washington annexed the islands in the face of overwhelming opposition by the Hawaiian people.<sup>39</sup> The annexation was clearly unconstitutional. Customary international law required land to be annexed through a treaty. This presented a problem for the United States, however, because its constitution

mandated that treaties be ratified by a two-thirds majority vote in the Senate. Such a majority was not possible. Congress thus bypassed this constitutional requirement by passing a joint resolution in favor of annexation. (Resolutions require only a simple majority.) The failure to secure a treaty, argues J. Kehaulani Kauanui, rendered the entire enterprise illegal.<sup>40</sup> Such legal shortcomings did not prevent the United States from working to consolidate its territorial land grab in the decades that followed, however. And as Hawai'i became American, so, too, did surfing.

#### ALEXANDER HUME FORD AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE PACIFIC EMPIRE

However much the number of surfers had fallen by the end of the nineteenth century, surfing began to once more flourish as the twentieth century unfolded. As with its decline, this was due, at least in part, to the immediate concerns of the American imperial project. Just as contact had physically decimated the native population while the missionary onslaught had sought the cultural transformation of those who survived, following Hawai'i's annexation by the United States in 1898, a number of Americans sought to profit from the islands' tropical climate by further opening up the territory to tourists as what one promotional booklet called "a marvelous out-of-door wonderland, a picnic ground from the earth."<sup>41</sup> Their objectives were obvious. For years tourism's economic potential had been apparent. In 1888, for instance, a Honolulu newspaper, noting the considerable sums expended by visitors, argued that inducing "people to come and see us is wise policy and promotive of our own material interests."<sup>42</sup> As the twentieth century dawned, surfing would prove instrumental in marketing the "out-of-door wonderland" image.<sup>43</sup> Robert C. Allen, who served for thirty-five years after World War II as the islands' most tireless and effective booster, identified the sport as the first of four "entities" that provided an isolated Hawai'i "with publicity far beyond any paid advertising could possibly have generated."<sup>44</sup> But even decades before Allen assumed his postwar leadership role, a middle-aged South Carolina-born journalist had seized upon the idea of using surfing to sell the archipelago as an exotic, though safely *American*, tropical retreat.

Alexander Hume Ford was an unlikely champion of the sport. Orphaned at an early age, Ford spent much of his early professional life as a writer in

New York and Chicago. After stints as a dramaturge and staff journalist, he became a roving freelance reporter. At roughly the same time that the United States was annexing Hawai‘i, Ford was tramping across Siberia and eastern Europe as a foreign correspondent for a handful of American magazines. Before long, however, his career began to decline. Then, in 1907, at the age of thirty-nine, Ford arrived in Honolulu.<sup>45</sup> “It was the thrill of the surfboard that brought me to Hawaii,” he later wrote. As a schoolboy he saw a picture in his geography book of “Hawaiian men and women . . . poised upon the crest of monster rollers,” and, he said, he “longed” to join them.<sup>46</sup> Almost immediately upon his arrival he took to the waves. The reason was simple: “There is a thrill like none other in all the world as you stand upon [a wave’s] crest,” he gushed in the pages of *Collier’s*.<sup>47</sup> Ford was in fact rather late in his discovery; others had already uncovered and touted the “pure joy” and “spiritual intoxication” to be found in the waves off Waikiki.<sup>48</sup> But Ford pushed it further than most. After nearly three months of daily four-hour sessions, the journalist could claim to “ride standing.”<sup>49</sup> He quickly emerged as surfing’s leading evangelist, corralling Hawaiian “beachboys” and visiting Americans alike into his cause—most notably among the latter, the celebrated author Jack London, whom Ford introduced to surfing in 1907. “Learn to ride a surfboard,” Ford advised the readers of *St. Nicholas* magazine. “[I]t is the king of sports.”<sup>50</sup>

The extant literature, both print and filmic, has too often treated the South Carolina transplant as just some apolitical eccentric who found surfing and got stoked; at the same time, it has considerably exaggerated his contribution to surfing’s early-twentieth-century resurgence. Joseph Fun-derburg, for instance, maintained that Ford was “the mastermind who was responsible for the revival of surfing and one of the builders of the new Hawaii.” Joel Smith believed it “tempting to think there might not have been a revival at all” if not for Ford. And for Ben Marcus, Ford was one of three haoles—Marcus included the mixed-blood Hawaiian waterman George Freeth in that category—“who led the rebirth” of the sport.<sup>51</sup> But contrary to these and other accounts, and as Isaiah Helekunihi Walker importantly reminds us, surfing was not an extinct pastime resurrected by the recently arrived haole.<sup>52</sup> It had in fact already been experiencing a renaissance among a new generation of mostly Hawaiian men.<sup>53</sup> Walker speculated that this was because “the surf offered escape and autonomy for Kanaka Maoli [Hawaiians] in an unsettling time.”<sup>54</sup> The United States had recently annexed Hawai‘i in the face of overwhelming Hawaiian opposition, and the islands’





FIGURE 1. Alexander Hume Ford saw in surfing a means to further his vision of a “white man’s state.” Ford (right) with Jack London (center) and Charmian London (under umbrella) in 1915 on the beach in Waikiki. Credit: Charmian Kittredge London, *Our Hawaii* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917).

powerful haole elite was rendering the native population increasingly marginal as the annexationists consolidated their wealth, power, and privilege. Whatever the reason a number of young Hawaiians took to the ocean at the turn of the century, there is no doubt that Hawaiian surfers were already riding the waves of Waikiki when Ford (followed weeks later by Jack London, who admiringly referred to these Hawaiians as “black Mercury[s]” and “natural king[s],” members of the “kingly species” who have “mastered matter and the brutes and lorded it over creation”) first entered the waters off O‘ahu in 1907.<sup>55</sup>

If much of the literature has perhaps ascribed to Ford greater credit for surfing’s revival than his contribution in fact merits—credit that Ford himself helped to foster—it has given almost no attention to the colonialist presumptions that drove the American transplant’s missionary zeal.<sup>56</sup> These presumptions operated on at least two levels. On one, Ford adopted, as historian Gary Okihiro noted, the “familiar colonial trope of ‘going native’ and, for the sake of natives, enacting cultural and environmental rescue and preservation.” This was a “racialized burden” he and other haoles carried in ensuring the triumph of civilization in the island chain.<sup>57</sup> On the second—and this has gone almost entirely overlooked in the surfing literature—Ford became a major proponent of not only consolidating America’s imperial

grasp of Hawai‘i but of doing so in the interests of whites. Ford, as a South Carolinian, was a product of the Jim Crow South. There is no evidence that he viewed favorably the sort of racist violence popularized by the Ku Klux Klan, but it is incontestable that he embraced the racist suppositions of the post–Civil War era.

Ford’s reporting was peppered with encomiums to the spread of white civilization, and it is hard not to imagine him viewing the Pacific islands as a laboratory in which could be realized his ideal white American society. Ford, to be sure, was hardly alone in embracing this mission.<sup>58</sup> A short book published by the American officials who overthrew the monarchy was clear about its authors’ desire “to increase [the islands’] civilized population by accessions from without” and to “attract . . . desirable settlers.”<sup>59</sup> Yet Ford rose above most of his contemporaries in being more vocal, persistent, and tireless than others. Indeed, by 1917 *Sunset* magazine was pronouncing him “Hawaii’s best booster and the busiest man in the mid-Pacific.”<sup>60</sup> And, crucially, Ford possessed the ideological convictions necessary for such a colonialist project. In his turn-of-the-century dispatches, Ford had already been praising the opening of Asia to American and British industrial influence, a region where, he predicted, “will be expended much restless energy of the Anglo-Saxon race”—so long, that is, as the “Anglo-Saxon push” did not “give way before the wily Slav” or “the agile, hardy Jap.”<sup>61</sup> But even such nods to transatlantic racial solidarity would soon be ditched for a capitalist enthusiasm that was distinctly American in character. In a 1901 piece in *New England Magazine*, for instance, Ford proudly celebrated the displacement of European might by the power of American manufacturing and mechanized agriculture. From the country’s “new colonial dependencies” (“our far off Philippines,” for example) to Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe, the “American idea is making a triumphant sweep the world over.” The “vast and seemingly limitless resources” of the United States “make her prominently the land of promise for all time,” Ford proclaimed. And “when to this is added the intelligent, almost divinely inspired population we possess,” he wondered, “can such a country produce any other than a race of master workmen?”<sup>62</sup>

In Hawai‘i Ford saw both promise and peril. Shortly before his arrival in 1907 he had rediscovered the “actual practical possibility” of “Christian socialism” at the American Colony in Jerusalem. The Holy Land inspired the South Carolinian. He revered the selflessness, fraternity, and perseverance of the Americans in the Middle East, and he marveled at their willingness

and ability to demonstrate American beneficence.<sup>63</sup> The United States, Ford believed, was an inherent force for good. This had implications for Hawai‘i, which Ford wished to see populated by waves of white Americans who might marshal the territory into statehood. Peopling the islands with his fair-skinned compatriots would become, for the restless mainlander, a personal crusade of the utmost moral necessity. The onetime South Carolinian not only took to the nation’s press but even set out across the United States itself in an effort to encourage such settlement.

Ford came to his view of the islands early. As a passenger transiting through O‘ahu on his way to Asia a few years before his 1907 relocation, Ford was on the ground long enough to conclude that the Hawaiian people were “happy” but “childlike” and lazy. “[T]he native Hawaiian shirks work if he can on any day of the week,” he maintained.<sup>64</sup> Ford especially viewed with concern the many Asians who had made the islands their home. Having accompanied a delegation of two-dozen congressmen on an official visit in 1907, Ford was adamant that the territory “be redeemed from the Oriental, fortified and Americanized as it should be.” This he saw as a form of humanitarianism. In Ford’s mind, “attracting white American settlers” was synonymous with “aid[ing] the islanders.” Colonization thus became a selfless “campaign for the welfare and protection of the islands.”<sup>65</sup> Opponents of this American project were, in such an ideological framework, naturally enemies of humanity. Even in these early moments, then, Ford’s disdain for Hawaiian nationalists, and his belief that they ought merely to stand by as American civilization proceeded unabated, was evident.<sup>66</sup> He was anything but generous, for instance, in speaking of the deposed queen Lili‘uokalani, “leader of the ‘outs’” and a hypocrite who surrounded herself with “Haoli-haters (despisers of the whites).”<sup>67</sup> If he could muster only one positive comment about the former monarch, it was a hint of pleasure at her capitulation: she seemed finally to recognize that “she is for all time but a citizen of the land over which she once ruled.”<sup>68</sup>

Ford also criticized the Hawaiian representation in Congress, lamenting the fact that “[i]t is not possible at present for Hawaii to send a white delegate to Washington.” Passage of the Hawaiian Organic Act of 1900, which restored the voting rights of many indigenous islanders, had seen to that. The best that Ford could say of Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana‘ole, the territory’s representative in Congress (as well as a surfer and recent heir to the Hawaiian throne), was that as “a native he does not stand in the way” of white progress. This was attributable, Ford suggested, to the “particularly fortunate” fact

that Kuhio was accompanied in Washington by a Merchants Association–paid secretary, George B. McClellan, “an American-born worker who, as the equal of any in the national capital, is respected by all his coworkers with whom he labors shoulder to shoulder for the Americanization of our island territory.”<sup>69</sup> Ford’s concern was not solely with Hawaiian nationalists, however. He especially feared the racial threat presented by the influx of Asians. “The most recent official reports from Hawaii,” Ford wrote in *Collier’s* in 1909, “indicate that over fifty-one percent of its population is Japanese and that the little brown people there are outracing, births over deaths, all other nationalities in the islands combined. Perhaps seventy-five per cent of the population of Hawaii is of Oriental extraction.” It seemed terrifying that, barring a change in demographic trends, “another generation may see Hawaii a State of the United States, with yellow Senators sitting in our Capital [*sic*] at Washington.” Of course, Ford reassured his readers, the “hope of the people is otherwise, and a campaign, with limitless capital behind it, is now in progress to repeople the islands with white men.”<sup>70</sup>

Ford was tireless in championing that cause. This was, of course, a cause that was hardly unique to Hawai‘i. It found expression in Sun Belt development more broadly. Ford’s boosterism in many ways echoed that of his American counterparts in the Southwest, such as those generations of individuals who sought to create in sun-drenched Southern California a model white society centered on leisure and pleasure.<sup>71</sup> Yet Hawai‘i had its own special set of challenges. Convincing “the white population so badly needed” to “pour in” was, Ford recognized, an arduous task. Already the sugar industry had “populated the islands with one hundred and fifty thousand Orientals” as “field hands,” he pointed out. If the “consensus of opinion” was that “sugar was the millionaire’s crop,” then “pineapples, coffee, rubber[,] and perhaps sisal” were “the crops that could best be raised by homesteaders.” The problem faced by the 1907 congressional delegation Ford accompanied—and, by implication, the United States more broadly—was “how to help the coffee industry so that the thousands of homesteads offered to American citizens for settlement in Hawaii may be taken up and utilized to a profit by the white man.”<sup>72</sup>

The islands, after all, were no easy sell. The Hawai‘i of the early twentieth century was not the Hawai‘i of the post–World War II era. The promotion of tourism thus came to play a useful role in encouraging the arrival of that “white population so badly needed” in the American territory. The logic was impeccable. “[A]s California and Oregon and Washington have learned,” a

representative of the Marshfield [Oregon] Chamber of Commerce told his hosts during an official visit to Honolulu in 1911, "the tourist of today is the taxpayer and resident of tomorrow."<sup>73</sup> Or, as the Hawai'i Tourist Bureau stressed while "induc[ing] travelers to visit us," "we cannot emphasize too strongly the fact that Hawaii is not only a wonderland to visit but[,] far more important, an ideal country in which to establish a residence."<sup>74</sup> Tourism, in other words, would be an important first step in enticing white settlement.

And surfing, with which Ford became obsessed, might go some distance in encouraging this effort. Having learned to "ride standing" just months earlier, in 1908 the former South Carolinian founded the Outrigger Canoe Club on the beaches of Waikiki. The club, which quickly began to "flourish," soon emerged as an important social venue for the islands' haole elite, with its membership rolls populated by judges, political leaders, and many of Hawai'i's leading businessmen.<sup>75</sup> Ford was its first elected president; the annexationist Sanford B. Dole was its second.<sup>76</sup> There is a good deal of uncertainty about precisely how the Outrigger came about.<sup>77</sup> There is less doubt, however, about why it was created. The "main object" of the club was "to give an added and permanent attraction to Hawaii and make Waikiki always the Home of the Surfer, with perhaps an annual Surfboard and Outrigger Canoe Carnival which will do much to spread abroad the attractions of Hawaii, the only islands in the world where men and boys ride upright upon the crests of the waves."<sup>78</sup> Or, as Ford wrote in 1910, the club began when "several malihinis, or newcomers, . . . recognized the picturesque charm to the tourist of surf-board riding, an art that was rapidly dying out owing to the fact that Waikiki beach was becoming closed to the small boy of limited means."<sup>79</sup> Given the steady construction of beachfront hotels and residences, the Outrigger would ensure coastal access to people of "limited means." This ability of locals to reach the water would encourage the practice of surfing, which in turn, Ford believed, would attract free-spending tourists to Hawai'i. And he was right. The tourists did show up, though Ford would later come to rue his success. Surfing, he wrote in 1931, had been "one of the greatest assets toward bringing the confounded tourists to our over hospitable shores," where they were becoming a "nuisance" and a "calamity," though an "inevitable" one.<sup>80</sup> But this frustration was years away. In 1908 the future looked bright.

There was, moreover, an additional and more immediate reason for the Outrigger's founding. With the planned visit to Hawai'i of Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet in the summer of 1908, the club, it was believed,

could provide an excellent showcase for what was uniquely Hawaiian. This meant the Pacific islands' most popular water sports. "What better way to demonstrate the charm and culture of old Hawai'i than for the Navy men to experience first hand [*sic*] the regal sports of surfing and outrigger canoeing!" one history of the club proclaimed. The Outrigger thus organized two major efforts in anticipation of the visit. It "placed dozens of surfboards and some forty outrigger canoes at the disposal of the Navy men," and it sponsored a "water carnival" for the visiting personnel—an event that was, by all accounts, a tremendous success. The carnival featured a "surfboard contest" between approximately twenty surfers, the most impressive of whom seemed to be Harold Hustace, whose wave-riding skills prompted cheers from the beach.<sup>81</sup> There was also an organized regatta that, together with the "most thrilling event," the surfing competition, drew an estimated four to five thousand spectators. This was a remarkable turnout; one press report called it "probably the largest crowd that has ever gathered at the swimming beach."<sup>82</sup> The success of the planned activities undoubtedly pleased two of the Outrigger's charter members, territorial secretary (and Theodore Roosevelt appointee) A. L. C. "Jack" Atkinson and Hawaii Promotion Committee member Hart P. Wood. Both men had assumed leading roles in the fledgling club, allowing their offices to host its first organizational meetings. In the wake of the July events, the future looked promising. Yet these developments were notable not only for the details of what transpired but also for what they collectively represented: an early confluence of the histories of surfing, tourism, and the military.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Ford believed surfing to be favorably linked to American military power. The water sports pursued at the Outrigger Canoe Club, he later ghostwrote for the U.S. secretary of the interior, had made "the boys of Honolulu grow up into great[,] strong[,] athletic[,] and daring men" who proved "most valuable" to the United States in the First World War.<sup>84</sup>

From the beginning, the promotion of surfing was closely bound to issues of race. Despite Ford's occasional nod to "the native" in some of his early writing, he appeared determined to render the pastime white. There was, of course, a certain irony in this desire, as the countless hours Ford and his colleagues spent surfing off Waikiki inevitably left them with varying shades of suntanned skin. Surfing, in this way, transgressed perhaps the most fundamental signifier of racial identity: color. Assertions of whiteness thus became less a matter of pigmentation than of faith, one in which whiteness was posited rather than marked. This had implications for the organization of



Hawaiian surf culture. Haole surfers in the years following annexation were not the imperialist missionaries of the nineteenth century. They were not seeking to simply supplant native culture with their own. On the contrary, they appropriated one of the most beloved pastimes of indigenous Hawaiians, and, in “going native,” they were often left with darkened skin. Yet these haoles still insisted on the maintenance of racial boundaries. The Outrigger Canoe Club, which formed the center of the white surfing community, maintained such boundaries both in its organization and in its membership. As late as 1930, Ford was pushing for the Outrigger to be overseen by “a white caretaker,” while an “Oriental group”—from whom, much to Ford’s consternation, “the old spirit of work ha[d] left”—attended to the club’s more menial duties.<sup>85</sup> And for years the Outrigger effectively discouraged the Hawaiian people from its membership rolls. “The Outrigger Canoe Club is practically an organization for the haole (white person),” Ford nonchalantly remarked of its *de facto* segregation.<sup>86</sup>

He exhibited less nonchalance in celebrating the aquatic ascendance of his white compatriots. White mastery of surfing, Ford claimed, was grounded in the dynamics of race. “[I]t is the white children only who have successfully mastered the Hawaiian sports,” he wrote in 1908. The Chinese in Hawai‘i had not done so. Nor had the Portuguese. “The Japanese seemed never able to acquire the difficult knack.” It was only “the small white boy” who “very quickly became more adept than the native himself.”<sup>87</sup> The proof, he suggested, was in the competitions. Hawaiian surfers of course disagreed. Precluded from joining Ford’s club, frustrated by the encroachment of haole surfers in the waters off Waikiki, and “disgusted” with the racism of Outrigger members, Hawaiians officially formed the Hui Nalu (Club of the Waves), which had been loosely organized since 1905, as a surfing and swimming association in 1911.<sup>88</sup> The Hui Nalu contained numerous well-known surfers, from champion swimmer Duke Kahanamoku and his brothers to Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana‘ole, the prince who served after 1902 as the territory’s delegate to Congress. It also contained some women, though not in the numbers suggested by their historical prominence in wave-riding accounts.

Surfing competitions became a means through which Hawaiians and the haole elite contested each others’ superiority. Ford, for his part, was unambiguous in his boasting. “[A]t the recent surfing carnivals in honor of the visits of the American battleship and later of the cruiser fleets,” Ford wrote for a national audience in 1909, “practically every prize offered for those most expert in Hawaiian water sports were won by white boys and girls, who have



only recently mastered the art that was for so long believed to be possible of acquirement only by the native-born, dark-skinned Hawaiian.”<sup>89</sup> He seemed especially proud that “a white boy now fourteen years of age” had won “the medal given to the most expert surfboarder” for the third time. “The white man and boy are doing much in Hawaii to develop the art of surf-riding. Games and feats never dreamed of by the native are being tried,” he boasted.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, by 1912, “the native” had disappeared from Waikiki altogether, Ford remarkably claimed. It was “white men and boys” who “kept [surfing] alive.”<sup>91</sup> As even those with the most casual knowledge of twentieth-century surfing history will recognize, Ford was patently wrong about the disappearance of Hawaiian surfers. But his statement is instructive. The Outrigger founder was, in essence, attempting to create his own reality. Not only did Hawaiian surfers still exist but, by nearly all accounts, they excelled over whites. Matt Warshaw called Ford’s boasts “ridiculous,” noting that Hawaiians “usually didn’t bother to enter surfing competitions” or were not invited.<sup>92</sup> And when they did, Isaiah Walker wrote, they emerged “victorious.”<sup>93</sup>

Yet Ford’s objectives were less empirical than political. When he found surfing and the incomparable thrill it represented, Ford found a lure for drawing white immigrants to Hawai‘i. He took to the national press to sing the sport’s praises, writing articles for *Collier’s*, *St. Nicholas*, *Travel*, and *Paradise of the Pacific*.<sup>94</sup> He worked with the film production company Pathé to create a surfing motion picture.<sup>95</sup> He even founded his own monthly publication, the *Mid-Pacific Magazine*, which ran for twenty-five years. *Mid-Pacific’s* inaugural issue in January 1911 was dominated by images of surfing on its front and back covers, and its first article, replete with numerous photographs, was entitled “Riding the Surfboard.”

It might seem startling that that first article appeared under the byline of the Hawaiian surfer and swimmer Duke Kahanamoku.<sup>96</sup> But that inaugural issue also contained a stark reminder of Ford’s racist and colonialist vision—an acknowledgment, as it were, of the extent to which surfing and the American empire had become entwined. Ford included a posthumous article by the congressman Abraham L. Brick extolling “our outpost in the Pacific.” Strategically and commercially, Brick wrote, the Hawaiian Islands “are destined to become *the* isles of the ocean,” and it was incumbent upon Americans to ensure that they “eventually come into the union a white man’s state.”<sup>97</sup>

This colonization of the islands consumed Ford, and, as noted earlier, he worked relentlessly to promote white settlement. By 1908, a year after his arrival on O‘ahu, Ford had been appointed secretary of the Transportation

January, 1911

Index at back

Price 15 Cents

# The MID-PACIFIC MAGAZINE

CONDUCTED BY ALEXANDER HUME FORD

LIBRARY  
COLLEGE OF HAWAII



Vol. I

HONOLULU, T. H.

No. 1

**SURFING and COASTING NUMBER**

FIGURE 2. Ford used his *Mid-Pacific Magazine* to promote Hawai'i as the center of a U.S.-led Pacific stretching from Asia and Australia to the Americas. Surfing, as prominently featured on the cover of its inaugural issue, could, he believed, help lure those white settlers he thought necessary to cement American rule in the islands. Credit: Courtesy of the Hawaiian Collection, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

Committee by the territorial governor, Walter F. Frear. It was a wise choice, as Ford would in no time be recognized as Hawai'i's greatest booster. As secretary of the committee, he was charged with traveling to the mainland to advance the Pacific territory's interests. His views of his mission, as well as the fervor with which he embraced them, were made abundantly clear during his journeys. Writing to Frear in January 1909, Ford displayed no ambiguity about the future he envisioned for the islands. "We used to send train loads of people out to look at lands in the good old days & established some very successful colonies," he noted from Chicago in excitedly reporting the Homeseekers Association's interest in Hawai'i.<sup>98</sup> Why should the twentieth century be any different?

Months later Ford penned a sequence of enthusiastic articles for *Van Norden Magazine* intended to entice white migration. "Hawaii is to-day the land of opportunity for the quick, active, courageous white man, and everyone from President Taft down wishes to see it conquered for and by Anglo-Saxon Americans," he proclaimed.<sup>99</sup> In a piece entitled "Hawaii Calls for the Small Farmer," Ford insisted that the "richest land in all the world . . . must be Americanized." With the erection of "monster fortifications" for the U.S. military and the Panama Canal under construction—a canal that would only enhance the "strategic and commercial importance" of the Pacific islands—it was the duty of every "loyal citizen" who "understands something about the fundamentals of farming" to cooperate in America's colonial endeavor. Ford approvingly quoted Charles W. Fairbanks, the second-term vice president to Theodore Roosevelt: "I would like to see this American territory occupied by those whose blood is the blood that ran through the veins of our ancestors." He then proceeded to lay out how profitable Hawai'i could be for the small farmer and invited him to accomplish the "patriotic result" of white dominance under eventual Hawaiian statehood.<sup>100</sup> "Here is the business center where Occident and Orient meet," Ford had written a couple of months earlier. "[I]t is for the white man in America to say whether or not the opportunities, but beginning to open up, shall ripen and fall into his hands, or into those of the alien."<sup>101</sup>

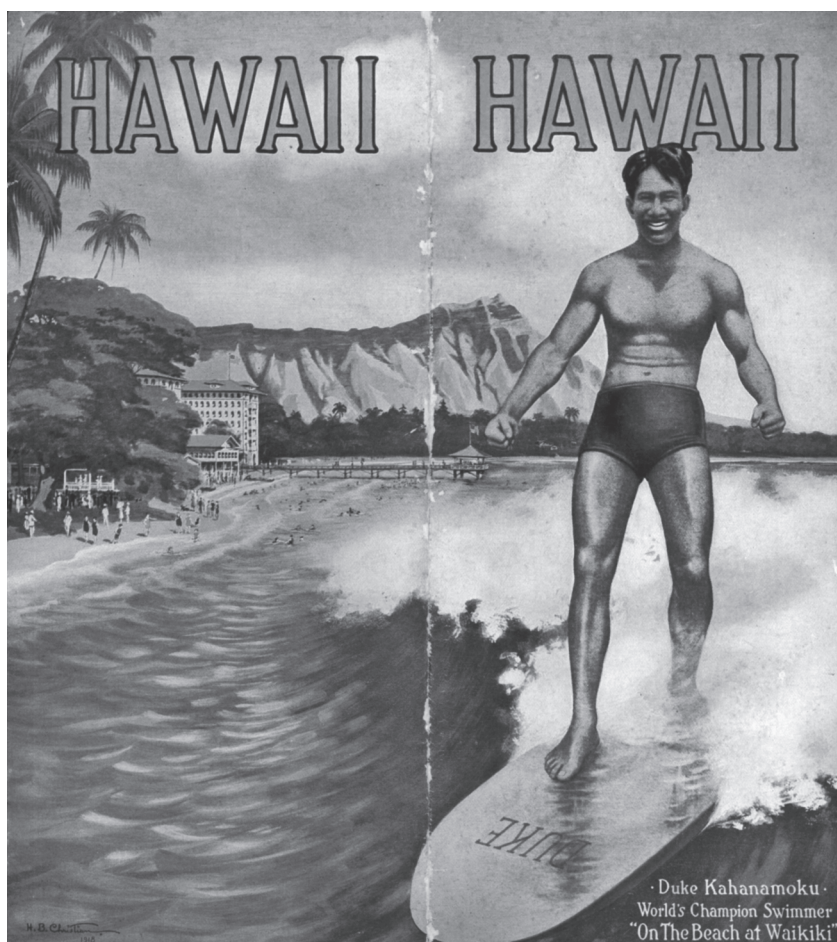
Forget Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 lamentation for the closing of the frontier. As far as Ford was concerned, the frontier had presented itself again. In the wake of his courtship of the Homeseekers Association in Chicago and with white immigrants slowly trickling in to the islands, Ford recognized that his cause would benefit from additional visual enticements. "I wish Hawaii had some slides it could send for use in lectures in Chicago and

working up interest in Hawaii for the white man,” he wrote to Governor Frear. Yet even without the slides, the “white man” appeared sold on the vision—or so at least Ford claimed. There was enthusiasm “[e]verywhere along the coast,” he reported of his travels, with people along the western seaboard, just like “the transportation companies,” wanting “to come in & help.”<sup>102</sup> But Ford was onto something. Visual representations of Hawai‘i—images that spoke to the exotic splendor unique to the island chain—could go some distance in selling the Hawaiian dream. And nothing spoke more fully to what was uniquely Hawaiian than the indigenous sport of surfing.

Ford had already laid an important foundation in this regard with his opening of the Outrigger Canoe Club in 1908.<sup>103</sup> His inauguration of *Mid-Pacific Magazine* in 1911 should also be understood in this context. It was not for nothing that in 1910 one newspaper account identified Ford as an “arch promoter of surf riding exhibitions and other things for the good of Hawaii.”<sup>104</sup> To be sure, he was not the first booster to employ surfing in marketing the islands. An 1898 pamphlet on Hawai‘i produced by the Canadian-Pacific Railway and the Canadian-Australian S.S. Line featured a photograph of a “native . . . with surf board.” The “recent acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands by the United States,” the pamphlet enticed would-be visitors, meant the opening “to the pleasure and health-seeking tourist [of] a delightful semi-tropical country of virgin beauty and unrivalled attractiveness—a new world to Americans and Europeans, in which the resources of modern civilization contribute materially to an easy and pleasurable exploration.”<sup>105</sup> Surfing also appeared the following year in the *History of the Hawaiian Islands and Hints to Travelers Visiting the Hawaiian Islands* published by the Hawaiian Gazette Company.<sup>106</sup> By 1915, surfing had made the cover of Ferdinand Schnack’s *Aloha Guide*, the “standard handbook” of Honolulu and the islands “endorsed” by the Chamber of Commerce and the Hawaii Promotion Committee.<sup>107</sup> In *Aloha from Honolulu*, another 1915 piece of promotional literature, surfing—the “most popular of Hawaiian pastimes”—claimed a full-page photograph.<sup>108</sup> Postcards abounded, and the archives are replete with materials from the first few decades of the twentieth century that feature wave riding as one of the islands’ principal draws.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, probably no individual at the time more fully developed Hawaiian tourism—and used surfing as a marketing tool—than did Alexander Hume Ford.

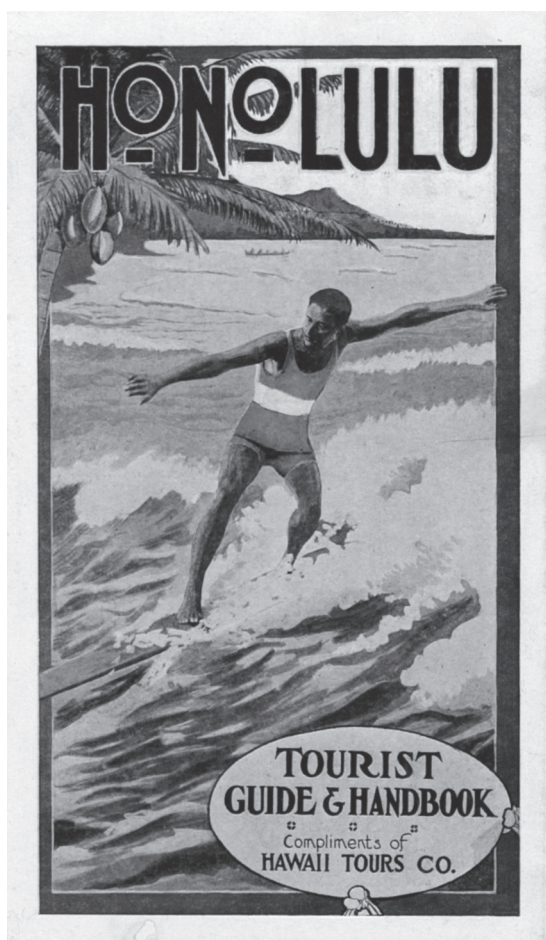
Perhaps the most ambitious effort in this regard was Ford’s creation in 1911 of the Hands-Around-the-Pacific Club, which was rechristened the Pan





FIGURES 3A AND 3B. With its exoticism and implication of masculine derring-do, it is not hard to imagine how surfing could serve as a popular draw in selling Hawaiian tourism and settlement, such as in these early-twentieth-century promotional pamphlets. The surfer in the pamphlet on the left is Duke Kahanamoku. Credit: Courtesy of the Hawaiian Collection, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai‘i at Manoa.

Pacific Union in 1917. Endowing his new movement with immediate respectability, the club’s initial honorary officers included the prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand, the governor of Hawai‘i, and the governor-general of the Philippines.<sup>110</sup> Under whatever name it used, the organization was “essentially an outgrowth of the tourist-promotion activities” in which Ford was deeply enmeshed in the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, the club’s formation followed Ford’s unsuccessful 1907 at-



tempt to create, with joint Hawaiian and Australian leadership, a Pan-Pacific Tourist and Information Bureau, and it coincided with his participation in 1911 as a founding board member of the Pan-Pacific Congress, a Honolulu-based multilateral organization created to promote Pacific-area tourism, immigration, and development. Surfing was instrumental to these endeavors. When the congress sponsored the Mid-Pacific Carnival in 1913, its official poster, in a stark departure from the religious conservatism of the nineteenth century, proudly featured a scantily clad Hawaiian poised on the nose of a surfboard. The following year's poster continued with the surfing theme while tapping into the burgeoning culture of celebrity; it presented Duke Kahanamoku, the "champion swimmer of the world," casually sliding



FIGURE 4. The Pan-Pacific Congress, which Ford helped launch, was a Honolulu-based multilateral organization that sought to promote tourism, immigration, and development. For the organizers of its Mid-Pacific Carnivals, there was no more attractive means of promoting the magic of Hawai'i and the progressive vision of the organization than through illustrations of men riding waves. Credit: Postcard for the Mid-Pacific Carnival, February 19–24, 1917, Folder: 9-4-60 Haw. Promotion-Comm. Pan Pac. Congress, Box 662, Central Classified Files, 1907–1951, Office of the Territories, Record Group 126, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.



down the face of a Hawaiian wave. And surfing would again be used in subsequent years.

Ford's ambitions were grand. Having already worked to promote white domination of Hawai'i, his more global activities seemed to reflect his belief that whites had global obligations. Like Albert P. Taylor, who directed the Hawaii Promotion Committee and sought to create a Pacific American Union to ensure the "maintenance of American supremacy in the Pacific," Ford viewed his responsibilities in global terms.<sup>112</sup> His was, he assumed, an inherently benevolent vision. "I have learned that where race prejudice has been overcome, race preference remains, and it will never be otherwise, and should not be," Ford reminisced in his later years. "Race preference will not preclude interracial friendship, interracial understanding. I have found everywhere in Asia that the Nordic is always a powerful, dynamic machine, ever leading, ever envied, ever misunderstood, ever unwelcome, but always bringing to the static Asiatic better things and better government than he has ever known. The Nordic has, in my Nordic opinion, a tremendous mission of leadership to fulfill, an obligation to the entire world, which he cannot escape."<sup>113</sup> Ford, as one such Nordic specimen, did not seek to escape his racial obligations.

#### THE HAWAIIAN GLOBALIZATION OF SURFING

At roughly the same time that Ford was enacting his vision of white global leadership, surfing began, with Ford's assistance, to slowly creep beyond the warm Hawaiian shores. Just as it was Hawaiians who spearheaded surfing's turn-of-the-century resurgence—a resurgence that has since been attributed to Alexander Hume Ford—it was Hawaiians who served as the most notable diplomats for their ancestral sport. Two young men who had distinguished themselves at Waikiki, George Freeth and Duke Kahanamoku, were particularly important in this respect, setting in motion the transformation of surfing from a uniquely Hawaiian cultural activity into a pastime enjoyed by millions of people on every continent. Of these two early emissaries, Freeth remains the least well known. This is surprising, as it was Freeth, a mixed-blood Hawaiian regarded as perhaps the most skilled wave rider of his generation, who firmly planted the seeds of what would become California's renowned surf culture.<sup>114</sup> In 1907, he left Hawai'i for the Golden State with letters in hand from Ford, Jack London, and the Hawaii Promotion

Committee. His objective, wrote the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, was to “give exhibitions of Hawaiian water sports to the people of that section.”<sup>115</sup> Within months of his arrival, the media bestowed upon Freeth a national reputation through the work of London, the celebrated author who took to the pages of *Woman’s Home Companion* that fall to excitedly relate his experiences months earlier in Waikiki. There, London watched Freeth “tearing in on the back of [a wave], standing upright on his board, carelessly poised, a young god bronzed with sunburn.”<sup>116</sup> London appreciated not only the young Hawaiian’s wave-riding skills but also his generosity in providing the celebrated author with a number of pointers when he himself took to the surf. Freeth’s reputation only grew when London’s article was reprinted the following year in England’s *Pall Mall Magazine* and then, in 1911, as a chapter in London’s travelogue *The Cruise of the Snark*.

The aquatic skills that had so enamored London, Ford, and the Hawaii Promotion Committee were the same skills Freeth brought with him to California, where he found work for two of the major developers of the period, Abbot Kinney and Henry Huntington. Kinney was the force behind the faux Italian development of Venice, just south of Santa Monica, while Huntington poured his energies into creating what he envisioned as “the great resort of [the] region” in nearby Redondo Beach.<sup>117</sup> Both Kinney and Huntington paid Freeth—dubbed “the Hawaiian Wonder” while under Huntington’s employ—to give surfing exhibitions to the thousands of curious residents flocking aboard Huntington’s Pacific Electric Railway to the sandy shores of Santa Monica Bay.<sup>118</sup> There, one contemporaneous account reported, “[m]any people daily gather to watch the Hawaiians in the surf . . . showing their skill in aquatic exercises.”<sup>119</sup> Such dexterity in the waves, demonstrating how the ocean was a space that could be enjoyed rather than simply feared (as had until then been the case), marked the beginning of Southern California’s beach culture.

Duke Kahanamoku, who graced the 1914 Mid-Pacific Carnival poster mentioned earlier, is by far the better known of surfing’s early ambassadors. A five-time Olympic swimming medalist, the inspiration for the Duke’s chain of restaurants in Hawai‘i and California, and a man who has been immortalized in statuary from Australia to the American Midwest, Kahanamoku took surfing Down Under, offering beachside demonstrations in Sydney in 1914 and 1915 (as well as in New Zealand weeks later) that helped set in motion the creation of what is probably the world’s most vibrant national surf culture.<sup>120</sup> Though subjected early to “wisecracks” by white American main-

landers about being “a Red Indian without feathers,” Kahanamoku demonstrated the seriousness with which he would have to be taken when, in August 1911, he shaved multiple seconds off the existing records in the 50-, 100-, and 220-yard swimming races.<sup>121</sup> He would go on to win a handful of medals, including three golds, at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, the 1924 Olympics in Paris, and the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, in the process upending many of the white-supremacist beliefs of the era.<sup>122</sup>

Still, as with Freeth, surfing remained Kahanamoku’s greatest passion. His 1914 and 1915 demonstrations in Australia, while not in fact the first instances of board riding in that country, nevertheless marked what Grady Timmons called “the real beginning of the sport Down Under.”<sup>123</sup> When Kahanamoku first took to the Australian waves in late December 1914, the *Sun* newspaper could not help but be taken by the “thrilling spectacle.” To the *Sydney Morning Herald*, it was a “magnificent display.” The *Sunday Times* was perhaps most effusive. “Nothing more remarkable in the way of a natorial exhibition has ever been seen locally,” the paper declared without equivocation.<sup>124</sup> People flocked to the beach to witness Kahanamoku’s “wonderful water feats.” The crowd that gathered for one exhibition “was the biggest that has ever congregated at Dee Why since the inland aborigines came down to spear fish in the lagoon and dance corroborees round their shell-fish naps on Long Reef”; the estimated four thousand spectators gave Kahanamoku an ovation.<sup>125</sup> While by no means solely responsible for the rise of Australian surfing, the Hawaiian went some distance in popularizing it. His wave-riding skills were in fact quickly exploited as a marketing spectacle: an advertisement for two carnivals sponsored by the Queensland Amateur Swimming Association proudly featured Kahanamoku poised on his board.<sup>126</sup>

Kahanamoku’s surf riding was met with similar enthusiasm in New Zealand. At New Brighton, a coastal community outside the South Island city of Christchurch, the Hawaiian was welcomed by a “great gathering of people, the pier and beach being lined with spectators, and the champion got a great reception.” Unfortunately for those present, Kahanamoku had to limit his exhibition to bodysurfing instead of “standing on the board,” as “the calm day had flattened the sea.”<sup>127</sup> Conditions in Wellington were more advantageous. There, recorded the *New Zealand Times*, an “unprecedented crowd” appeared at Lyall Bay “in anticipation of seeing the world’s champion swimmer . . . perform some of his famous feats on the surf-board. It was estimated that over 5000 were present, and the beach was black with

people.” The Wellingtonians were not disappointed, “loudly applaud[ing]” Kahanamoku’s unusual aquatic “feat.”<sup>128</sup> Another display a week later left the “hundreds of onlookers” who had gathered to watch Kahanamoku “astounded . . . with his exhibition of surf-board riding.”<sup>129</sup> “There are numbers of high-class surf-shooters in Honolulu, and some white people among them,” Kahanamoku told an Australian journalist, “but, as with every other game, a few can do better than the great majority. It was with the few I delighted to be.”<sup>130</sup> In Australia and New Zealand, he in fact stood alone.

The young Hawaiian, who also gave surfing demonstrations on both American coasts and would go on to tout surfing’s exhilaration and health-giving qualities to America’s youth, received considerable press coverage during his wave-riding displays.<sup>131</sup> More than anything, however, Kahanamoku, like his contemporary George Freeth, allowed his body to serve as his media. While operating within the racial constraints of a brown-skinned athlete in a white-dominated world, Kahanamoku demonstrated what it meant to be a surfer at a time when a common vernacular for the pastime did not exist.<sup>132</sup> Some media would speak of “surf-board swimming.” Others would refer to “surf bathing” or “surf shooting.” Whatever the term, Kahanamoku and Freeth demonstrated, through their skills in the water, that their ancestral pastime not only had survived the missionary onslaught of the nineteenth century but, spearheaded by these same supposed racial inferiors, would again thrive in the twentieth.

Though not at first. It would not be until after World War II that surfing really began to enjoy explosive international growth. Given the crippling nature of the Great Depression, the slow global expansion of the sport during the interwar period is hardly surprising. Still, in Hawai‘i, people continued to find joy in the waves. This was true during World War I, when the letterhead of the Hawaii Promotion Committee, which was dominated by an image of surfers at Waikiki, happily pronounced that the islands were “Out of the War Zone,” and it remained true in the years that followed.

By the latter half of the 1920s, wrote Jane Desmond, “surfing was an established part of tourist iconography and tourist itineraries,” and the covers of national magazines began to feature smiling surfers screaming down waves.<sup>133</sup> Visitors who witnessed these water-bound athletes along the Hawaiian shores exclaimed it “hard to find a more graceful or exhilarating sight.”<sup>134</sup> Even British artists and small-town New England newspapers saw fit to address this “most fascinating” and “picturesque phase of the island life.”<sup>135</sup>



HAWAII  
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9 DAYS FROM STATE STREET  
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HEADQUARTERS OFFICE  
HONOLULU, T.H.  
A. P. TAYLOR  
SECRETARY-DIRECTOR

PACIFIC COAST AGENCY  
FRED. J. HALTON  
AGENT  
ROOM 787, WOODBROOK BLDG.  
SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

HONOLULU, HAWAIIAN ISLANDS, U. S. A., January 9, 1917.

Honorable Franklin C. Lane,  
Secretary Department of Interior,  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

I am sending you under separate cover copy of the Pacific Commercial Advertiser of Sunday, January 7th. containing the story of a plan for the formation of a Pacific America Union, based on the organization of the Pan American Union, the latter having its own building at Washington, in which work having particular reference to the upbuilding of Commerce and travel relations between the United States and the republics of Central and South America is done.

The plan of the Pacific America Union embraces Hawaii, the Philippines, American Samoa, Guam and Alaska, and is designed to build up great commercial, social and travel interest in the units of Pacific America than at present exists. I have been at work on this plan for the past five or six months and did not make it public until assured by confident authorities that it was logical, feasible and practicable.

I have asked Prince Kahaniana'ole, Delegate from Hawaii at Washington, to take the initiative with the plan before Congress if found practicable in this session of Congress. You, as a member of the Congressional party which visited Hawaii will appreciate the value of such a plan, and I trust you will have opportunity to read the story of the plan as it appears in the Advertiser.

May I express the hope that I shall hear from you on this subject, and with Aloha, I remain

Very truly yours,

*A. P. Taylor*  
SECRETARY

Game Fisherman's Paradise. :: Golf Every Day in Year. :: Ocean Swimming. :: Come over any time. :: The Water's Fine from January 1 to December 31.  
REPRESENTATIVE IN HAWAIIAN ISLANDS OF THOS. COOK & SON

FIGURE 5. How central was surfing to the marketing of Hawaii? The letterhead used by the Hawaii Promotion Committee during the World War I era is illustrative. Credit: A. P. Taylor to Franklin C. Lane, January 9, 1917, Folder: 9-4-60 Haw. Promotion-Comm. Pan Pac. Congress, Box 662, Central Classified Files, 1907-1951, Office of the Territories, Record Group 126, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.



By the mid- to late 1930s, tens of thousands of people were traveling to Hawai‘i every year.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, the territory was increasingly viewed by Washington as a refuge from the Second World War. “I am sure you must be having exceptional success with the tourist business in Hawaii when so many other places are closed at the present time. [ . . . ] May [the war] never come to ou[r] beloved Hawaii,” one official told the executive secretary of the Hawaii Tourist Bureau in late 1939.<sup>137</sup> The personal views of the official—the acting director of the Interior Department’s Division of Territories and Island Possessions—were likely representative of many mainlanders at the time. “In this tragic and war-torn world I would like to come back to Hawaii immediately and hole in somewhere on the Kona coast away from wars and rumors of wars,” she confided. But it was not just about escape, argues Jane Desmond. The “uncertain modernity of the 1930s” and the emergent “nostalgia for a pre-industrial past” made Hawai‘i appealing to “elite white mainlanders [who] could experience” a “more authentic life.” After all, the promotional literature suggested, the “paradisical Hawaiian . . . knew how to relax, how to live in gracious harmony with the environment, [and] seemed to have an abundance of pleasure in a time of scarcity.” Americans responded to this “alternative vision.”<sup>138</sup> Tourists “keep coming . . . in numbers,” the Hawaii Tourist Bureau announced just days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>139</sup> Once there, they were encouraged to rent a surfboard, ride the waves in an outrigger canoe, or take a surfing lesson.<sup>140</sup>

Yet the Japanese attack quickly put an end to such visions of pleasant isolation. If the Japanese assault outraged the United States, it was also a reminder that Hawai‘i was not necessarily the pacific refuge that many Americans believed it to be. What had been tourist sanctuaries prior to America’s entry into the war quickly became militarized institutions serving the American war machine. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel on the shores of Waikiki, for instance, began functioning as “a haven for U.S. Navy submarine personnel between forays on enemy shipping”—it was leased to the navy for five years as a rest and recreation center for the Pacific Fleet—while “entanglements of barbed wire” lined the beach.<sup>141</sup> Tourism and war quickly became conjoined—or reconnected, as the case may be—as the islands served the “wartime needs of hundreds of thousands of fighting men seeking relaxation between Pacific battles.”<sup>142</sup> And Hawai‘i was not alone. California, which in the prewar years was a distant surfing outpost, underwent a similar militarization.

Wave riders in the Golden State numbered in the mere dozens—Matt Warshaw estimated about two hundred—during the 1930s.<sup>143</sup> In part this was for structural reasons. The stretch of coast from San Diego to Santa Barbara that is today peppered with multimillion-dollar homes, parking lots, and fast-food restaurants was, prior to the Second World War, a sparsely populated strip of often difficult-to-access beaches. Most Americans did not own automobiles, and lifeguards were relatively scarce. And for people of color, the coast was virtually off-limits. Whether through prejudicial municipal codes, segregated housing patterns, or threats of white violence, the beach was—unlike in Hawai‘i—a space reserved almost exclusively for whites. Those white surfers who did venture to the water would spend their days in some combination of surfing, fishing, and diving, especially for the abalone and lobster that were abundant along the Pacific coast. Yet it would not be long before California, and especially Southern California, began to undergo major change. With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the West Coast became an important region for American wartime preparedness. Industry began cranking out military hardware as Japanese Americans found themselves tossed into isolated concentration camps. Uncle Sam wanted young men in uniform, and rationing and scarcity became the home-front norm. The long coastal strip, meanwhile, was transformed from a welcoming space into a site of potential attack. Indeed, a number of beaches along the California coast that are today popular surf spots—Malibu, San Onofre, and others—were deemed off-limits to the public for security reasons. To try to surf in such places was to flirt with treason. Wave riding could suddenly be illegal.<sup>144</sup>

Within a few years, however, the restrictions imposed by World War II would be replaced by the flowering of modern surf culture. The end of the war in 1945 heralded momentous developments. Most obviously, materials and technologies developed during the war enabled advances in surfboard design. While solid wood boards that required nearly superhuman strength to carry were increasingly being replaced by hollow boards in the 1930s, war technologies were enabling even newer designs that drew on balsa, marine plywood, fiberglass, polyester resin, and polyurethane foam.<sup>145</sup> These lighter boards opened up the sport to countless newcomers. So, too, did the development of wetsuits—another beneficiary of wartime technology, and one that was reciprocated when O’Neill began manufacturing “custom-tailored thermal barrier diving and surfing suits for [the] U.S. Navy.”<sup>146</sup> The American



security establishment benefited from surfing in other ways, too. Agents of the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime intelligence agency that preceded the CIA, used paddleboards, which they rode as surfboards, as reconnaissance vehicles.<sup>147</sup> And it was announced in 1953 that an “underwater surfboard” had been developed with “potential value as a compact submarine for the [U.S.] Navy’s daring frogmen who swim in close to the enemy’s shores and ships.”<sup>148</sup>

But perhaps the most obvious explanation for surf culture’s explosive postwar growth was economic. With the massive expansion of the middle class in the 1950s there emerged a large demographic of American consumers who sought pleasure and leisure at the beach. Nearly all of them were white. For a number of these new beachgoers, especially after *Gidget* hit the big screen in 1959, surfing became a favorite, if still subcultural, pastime. The beaches of California—not to mention Hawai‘i, Australia, South Africa, and elsewhere across the planet—soon resembled an endless sea of bronzed skin. It was, depending on one’s perspective, either a propitious beginning or a dismal end.