

Memoirs of Henry Obookiah

“My dear countrymen, I wish to say something to you all - you have been very kind to me - I feel my obligation to you - I thank you.”

“And now, my dear friends, I must beseech you to remember that you have got to follow me.”

“Above all things, make your peace with God - you must make Christ your friend - you are in a strange land - you have no father - no mother to take care of you when you are sick - but God will be your friend if you put your trust in him. He has raised up friends here, for you and for me - I have strong faith in God - I am willing to die when the voice of my Saviour call me hence - I am willing, if God design to take me.”

“But I cannot leave you without calling upon the mercy of God to sanctify your souls and fit you for Heaven. When we meet there we shall part no more.”

“Remember, my friends, that you are poor - it is by the mercy of God that you have comfortable clothes, and that you are so kindly supported.”

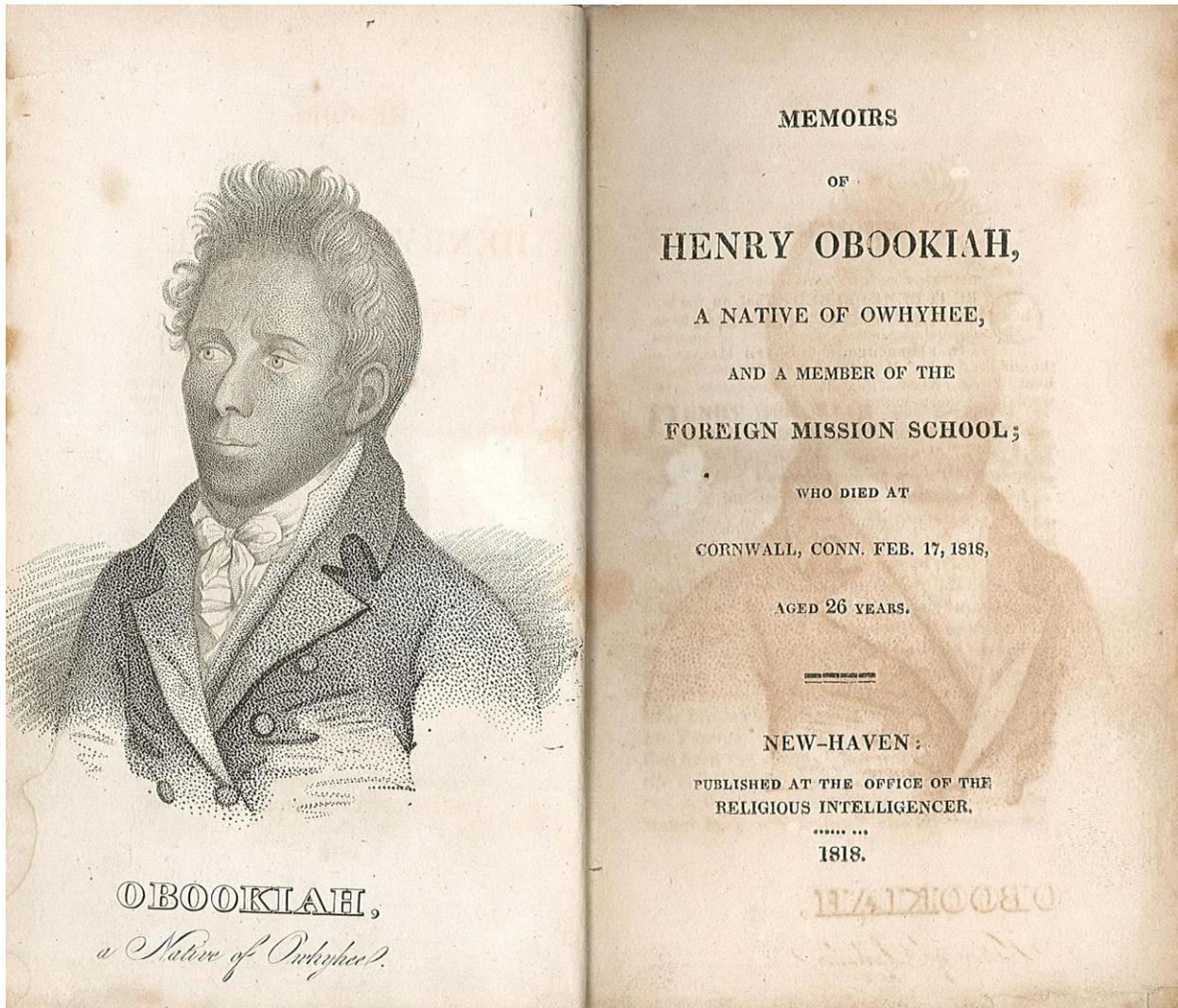
“You must love God - I want to have you make your peace with God. Can't you see how good God is to you? God has done great deal for you and for me. Remember that you have got to love God, or else you perish for ever. God has given his Son to die for you - I want to have you love God very much. I want to talk with you by and by - my strength fails - I can't now - I want to say more”. (‘Ōpūkaha’ia)

The inscription on the large flat stone resting on a quadrangular tomb of rocks marking the burial of ‘Ōpūkaha’ia at Cornwall Connecticut stated:

“In
Memory of
HENRY OBOOKIAH
a native of OWHYHEE.
His arrival in this country gave rise
to the Foreign mission school,
of which he was a worthy member.
He was once an Idolater, and was
designed for a Pagan Priest; but by
the grace of God and by the prayers
and instructions of pious friends,
he became a Christian.
He was eminent for piety and
missionary Zeal. When almost prepared
to return to his native Isle to preach the
Gospel. God took to himself. In his last
sickness, he wept and prayed for Owhyhee,
but was submissive. He died without fear
with a heavenly smile on his
countenance and glory in his soul.
Feb. 17, 1818;
Aged 26

“A few months after his death a book appeared in New England – a thin, brown-covered volume of a hundred small pages. It told, in his own words and the words of those who had known him the story of the boy’s life and death. The printer who set the type, struck off the sheets and bound them together did not know it, but that book was to launch a ship and a movement that was to transform Hawai’i.” (Albertine Loomis’ Introduction in Memoirs of Obookiah)

“Memoirs of Henry Obookiah by Edwin W Dwight is the story of a young Hawaiian man from 19th century Hawai’i who lived for only 26 years, and yet whose brief existence changed the course of a nation and the people of Hawai’i.” (Lyon)



“For the boy was ‘Ōpūkaha’ia (his American friends spelled and pronounced it Obookiah), and his life and early death and his hope of taking Christianity to his people were the inspiration for the Sandwich Islands Mission. The ship launched was the Thaddeus, which sailed with the pioneer company from Boston in October, 1819.”

“In the long run, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent eighty-four men and one hundred women to Hawaii to preach and teach, to translate and publish, to advise, and counsel - and win the hearts of the Hawaiian people. ...”

“Slender and simple as it was, this book shaped the future of Hawai‘i.” (Albertine Loomis’ Introduction in Memoirs of Obookiah)

“How could such a tiny book containing the biography of a young Hawaiian who died at the age of 26, in 1818, so compel a foreign nation to send its young people thousands of miles to a distant land to be committed to missionary service?”

“(A) young Hawaiian in a foreign land he was instrumental in befriending the very agents who became the cornerstone for the modern Protestant missions movement in America. What had started on the other side of the Atlantic, through the persuasive works of William Carey and the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, had now spread to America through a student-led movement by Samuel Mills Jr. and others, culminating in the formation of the ABCFM in 1810.”

“The brief life of Henry Obookiah was attributed to his being a catalyst for the founding of the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut. ‘The interest he [Henry Obookiah] aroused led the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, of Boston, to establish a Missionary School at Cornwall, Conn., for “the education of heathen youth’.” (Lyon)

“(T)he intended audience of the Memoirs was the Christian community of New England, and that part of the book’s purpose was to stir the hearts of New Englanders towards the cause of missions in order that they would give both financially and materially to the Foreign Mission School.”

“The final chapter of the Memoirs is divided into three sections. The first section establishes Henry Obookiah as the most promising student at the Foreign Mission School and a model of both scholarship and Christian character. The second section is short and is comprised of two letters written by Obookiah himself. The third section is an account of the sickness and death of Obookiah.” (Lyon)

“The Memoirs tell of the life of Henry Obookiah, how his family was killed by tribal warfare in Hawai‘i, and how his life was miraculously saved. The Memoirs go on to describe Obookiah departing from Hawai‘i at the age of 16 and arriving in New England.”

“The major portion of the Memoirs traces young Obookiah’s progress and chronicles the fact that he studied and boarded with a succession of Congregational ministers in New England. The effect of his studies and the living arrangements with such pious Christians had a most profound effect upon Obookiah, leading to his conversion to the Christian faith. At the opening of the final chapter of the Memoirs, young Obookiah is a model student at the Foreign Mission School and the hope of the mission to the Hawaiian Islands.” (Lyon)

‘Ōpūkahaia

“The death of Henry Obookiah, is one of those ways of God, about which are clouds and darkness.”

“We did not expect it, and we should not have ordered events thus, to glorify God, and extend his cause.”

“We thought, surely this is he who shall comfort Owhyhee. We saw so plainly the hand of God, in bringing him hither; in his instruction, his conversion, talents, and missionary zeal, that like Samuel, when he saw the eldest son of Jesse, we were prepared undoubtedly to say, ‘This is the Lord’s anointed.’”

“But all our hopes of his agency, in the Owhyhee Mission, were dashed. His work is done: Those feet will not traverse the shores of Owhyhee, that tongue will not publish salvation to those, for whom it uttered so many supplications. We behold the end of his race, and bury with his dust in the grave, all our high raised hopes of his future activity in the cause of Christ. ...”

“Who would dare to stop the song which he sings, to extinguish the rapture which he feels, to eclipse by his removal from Heaven the glory of God, which his redemption illustrates, or rob angels of their joy at his conversion, and their augmented joy at his arrival in glory.”

“Who does not rejoice rather, that God has inclined and enabled him to bear a part in so glorious an achievement, as is now consummated by his redemption.”

If the churches of New England, knowing the purpose of God concerning Obookiah, had chartered a ship and sent it to Owhyhee, on purpose to bring him to Christ, and fit him for heaven; it would have been a cheap purchase of blessedness to man, and glory to God:-- and were there no expedients now to rescue his poor countrymen, for whom he prayed, the end would justify the constant employment of such means, to bring the sons and daughters of Owhyhee, to glory. But besides his redemption, God by his Providence towards him, has illustrated his government of the moral World, and added new evidence to the truth of the declaration, ‘All that the Father hath given unto me shall come.’” (Portion of Eulogy at the Funeral of Obookiah, Rev Lyman Beecher)

‘Ōpūkaha’ia Inspired the American Protestant Mission to Hawai‘i

Ōpūkaha’ia, inspired by many young men with proven sincerity and religious fervor of the missionary movement, had wanted to spread the word of Christianity back home in Hawai‘i; his book inspired missionaries to volunteer to carry his message to the Hawaiian Islands.

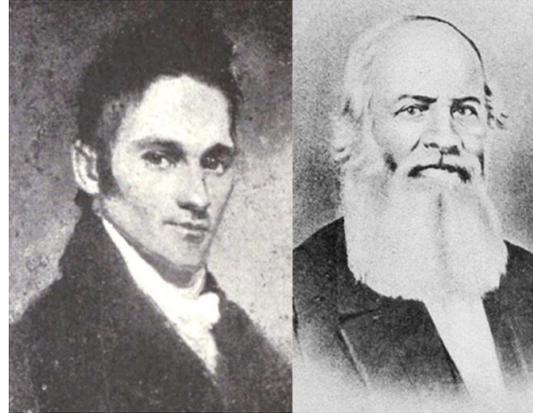
From Andover Theological Seminary, Hiram Bingham wrote in a letter dated July 18, 1819, to Reverend Samuel Worcester of the ABCFM that “the unexpected and afflictive death of Obookiah, roused my attention to the subject, & perhaps by writing and delivering some thoughts occasioned by his death I became more deeply interested than before in that cause for which he desired to live ...”

“... & from that time it seemed by no means impossible that I should be employed in the field which Henry had intended to occupy ... the possibility that this little field in the vast Pacific would be mine, was the greatest, in my own view.” (Bingham noted by Brumaghim)

The coming of Henry ‘Ōpūkaha’ia and other young Hawaiians to the US, who awakened a deep Christian sympathy in the churches, moved the ABCFM to establish a mission at the Islands. When asked “Who will return with these boys to their native land to teach the truths of salvation?”

Bingham and his classmate, Asa Thurston, were the first to respond, and offer their services to the Board. (Congregational Quarterly) They were ordained at Goshen, Connecticut on September 29, 1819; several years earlier from Goshen came the first official request for a mission to Hawai‘i; this ordination of foreign missionaries was the first held in the State of Connecticut.

In giving instructions to the first missionaries, the ABCFM, noted: “You will never forget ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia. You will never forget his fervent love, his affectionate counsels, his many prayers and tears for you, and for his and your nation. You saw him die; saw how the Christian could triumph over death and the grave; saw the radiant glory in which he left this world for heaven. You will remember it always, and you will tell it to your kindred and countrymen who are dying without hope.”



Hiram Bingham

Asa Thurston

On October 23, 1819, the Pioneer Company of missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from the northeast United States, set sail on the Thaddeus for the Hawaiian Islands.

There were seven couples sent in the Pioneer Company of missionaries to convert the Hawaiians to Christianity. These included two Ordained Preachers (note: Bingham and Thurston were ordained as missionaries at Goshen, a more complex position than preacher), Hiram Bingham and his wife Sybil and Asa Thurston and his wife Lucy; two Teachers, Mr. Samuel Whitney and his wife Mercy and Samuel Ruggles and his wife Mary; a Doctor, Thomas Holman and his wife Lucia; a Printer, Elisha Loomis and his wife Maria; a Farmer, Daniel Chamberlain, his wife and five children. They landed at Kailua-Kona, April 4, 1820.

Among the other Hawaiian students at the Foreign Mission School were Thomas Hopu, William Kanui, John Honoli‘i and George Prince ‘Humehume’ (son of Kauai’s Kaumuali‘i).

By the time the Pioneer Company arrived, Kamehameha I had died and the centuries-old kapu system had been abolished; through the actions of King Kamehameha II (Liholiho), with encouragement by former Queens Ka‘ahumanu and Keōpūolani (Liholiho’s mother), the Hawaiian people had already dismantled their heiau and had rejected their religious beliefs.

“Memoirs of Henry Obookiah is a truly significant work in relation to both the history of the nation of Hawai‘i, which later was annexed by the United States, and the profound impact that it had upon American evangelical Protestant missions. It is rare that an individual such as Henry Obookiah would be a vessel chosen to affect two nations so profoundly.” (Lyon)

Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the “Missionary Period”), about 184-men and women in twelve Companies served in Hawai‘i to carry out the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Hawaiian Islands. Collaboration between Native Hawaiians and American Protestant missionaries resulted in, among other things, the

- Introduction of Christianity;
- Development of a written Hawaiian language and establishment of schools that resulted in widespread literacy;
- Promulgation of the concept of constitutional government;
- Combination of Hawaiian with Western medicine; and
- Evolution of a new and distinctive musical tradition (with harmony and choral singing)

On August 15, 1993, ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia’s remains were returned to Hawai‘i from Cornwall and laid in a vault facing the ocean at Kahikolu Church, overlooking Kealakekua Bay.