

OCTOBER 8, 1998

Hawaii's History, By Chapter and Verse

BOOK REVIEW

THE FOLDING CLIFFS: A Narrative, by
W. S. Merwin. Knopf, 331 pp., \$25.

By Michael Kramer

IT'S A DANGEROUS proposition in a post-politically correct America for a poet of European descent to write about a non-white culture, especially in an old-fashioned form like the epic poem. But in "The Folding Cliffs," the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet W. S. Merwin, who lives on the island of Maui, traverses 19th-Century Hawaiian history with respectful wonder. He covers much of the same material that James Michener did in his novel "Hawaii," adding to the grand story of the state a poet's flair for linguistic sensitivity and subtle insight.

Reading Merwin's book-length poem, which weighs in at 300-plus pages and consists of 281 individual, sonnet-like poems arranged in seven sections, can feel arduous at times. The rewards for the reader, however, are substantial; "The Folding Cliffs" offers expansive views on moral, linguistic, cultural and existential themes. And to get to these larger subjects, the poet tells a good story, one that is moving and, as far as we know, true.

At the center of Merwin's story is a Hawaiian woman, Pi'ilani, born in 1864. With increased Western settlements from the early 1800s on, the Hawaiian islands were plagued by a leprosy epidemic. Most native victims of the disease complied with the colonial policy known as forced removal (victims were sent to isolated islands, away from their families). But Pi'ilani and her husband, Ko'olau, resisted, taking to the cliffs on the island of Kauai when Ko'olau began to suffer from a fatal case of leprosy.

The exact details of what happened to Pi'ilani are fragmentary — she dictated her story to a Christian journalist named John Sheldon (who may have added his own slant), which remains the only known written account of her life — but Merwin tells her story with remarkable imagination and clarity. He capitalizes on the controversies about the story's veracity to explore the intricacies of multiple perspective (poems are told from Pi'ilani's point of view, from the perspectives of various Europeans and other Hawaiian natives and by the poet himself as omniscient narrator).

Who gets to choose the "true" version of Pi'ilani's story? Who owns it? Who has a right to decide its details, its tone, its themes? Merwin tells her tale confidently, but he doesn't ignore these questions. "What does he know now about what I remember," Pi'ilani asks of Hofgaard, a white shopkeeper, but she could just as easily be referring to Merwin himself. "Maybe he only wanted to see for himself / whether I was the one in the book he had been reading."

"The Folding Cliffs" can be seen as an addition to what academics call post-colonial literature, works that re-examine the intertwined histories of indigenous cultures and their colonizers. Merwin isn't as daring with form as quintessential postcolonial writers like

Salman Rushdie. But he expands from the specifics of Pi'ilani's story to paint a broad and complex picture of 19th-Century Hawaiian life, from the land-greed of the plantation owners to the conflicts between Hawaiian ideals and the newcomers' systems of government.

Poetry is an ideal form for leaping from the particular to the grand, from the pedestrian to the profound, and Merwin uses this quality to draw larger implications from the story of Pi'ilani and her husband. He details what Pi'ilani and Ko'olau ate while they were in hiding (the indigenous taro root, fruit stolen from an orchard), but he also addresses larger issues: the ravages of colonialism, the resiliency of native Hawaiian culture, the power of human love and the cultural, almost-metaphysical aspects of leprosy, which Hawaiians called "the separating sickness."

In one bold passage, Merwin uses an effective mix of horror and irony to describe the breakdown of Hawaiian culture as a result of disease and European exploitation:

*and the survivors believed
the animals had betrayed them
and they took the guns
and cloth and treatment they
were given and set out into
the three centuries of screams
and dismemberment the
piled scalps parades of zeros
gross fortunes far away and
the bleeding across the continent
from the constant
skinning familiarly
known as the fur trade that
finally arrived at the sea
which by then was called the
Pacific*

Merwin's sweeping narrative and ambitious themes make his poem long, but not long-winded. As a multitude of characters float through the main and mini-plots, Merwin maintains a propulsive narrative tempo, epic but well-crafted. He minimizes punctuation to unify his poem's many storytellers into one flowing voice. There are few capitalizations, no periods and dashes instead of quotation marks to indicate when a character is speaking. This gives his fractured source material continuity. Merwin also uses enjambment, the ending of a poetic line in mid-sentence, and a sort of reverse enjambment, the beginning of a sentence mid-line, to add a tumbling, rushing pulse to his poem:

*I have been there
several times once Kua
went with me into the valley
and came out with me and I
have gone in with others . . .*

The subtitle of "The Folding Cliffs" is "A Narrative." And while Merwin's epic often strikes a balance between plot and poetry, between narrative and verse, it is an accomplishment of extended concentration rather than a series of dazzling poetic moments. Still, even a reader of the shortest attention span can get absorbed in the sheer breadth of Merwin's tale. Good stories last. And "The Folding Cliffs" is a good story, a throwback to an older, longer, more narrative-driven form. ■

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