

Island Queens and Mission Wives: How Gender and Empire Remade Hawai'i's Pacific World. Jennifer Thigpen. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014. ISBN: 9781469614298

In 1820, a ship carrying the first American missionaries to Hawai'i set anchor off the islands' coast. Even before the travelers disembarked, royal Hawaiian women visited the Christians bringing gifts, and a swath of cloth. In return for their benevolence, they wanted the wives of the mission to sew western-style dresses for them. In *Island Queens and Mission Wives: How Gender and Empire Remade Hawai'i's Pacific World*, Jennifer Thigpen presents a well-researched study of the relationships between Hawaiian royal women and American missionary wives, centered on gift-giving and receiving. Thigpen argues that it is these female relationships which eventually proved pivotal to the mission's success and vital for the establishment of American influence in Hawai'i'. Thigpen's work also helps illuminate the nature of American expansion around the world.

The book is organized in five thematic, roughly chronological chapters. Thigpen begins in chapters one and two by introducing readers to Hawai'i' and New England at the turn of the 19th century. She provides evidence that Hawaiian leadership did not passively accept changes but strategically engaged with foreigners who arrived off the islands' shores. Thigpen also gives the reader insight into the ideas and history of the New England missionaries. Crucial for Thigpen's work are the missionaries' beliefs as to the proper place for mission wives. A wife's role was to be a "help-meet" to her husband, the primary evangelizer. In chapter three, Thigpen brings her readers into the Hawai'i of

1820. The death of a ruler, as well as changes in Hawaiian religious beliefs, altered the playing field for the missionaries, to their advantage they believed. However, as they looked for inroads and allies on the island, the Americans continued to misunderstand the power structure of Hawai'i', especially pertaining to Hawaiian royal women.

Thigpen's most compelling contribution follows in chapters four and five as she meticulously juxtaposes the developing relationships between mission wives and royal Hawaiian women against the failed attempts of missionary husbands to implement a "top-down" strategy of converting male rulers. As the wives and the matriarchs of Hawai'i' interacted in mutual acts of giving and receiving, Hawaiian women engaged in political diplomacy and mission wives opened up spaces for conversion. It is the women who shaped the mission's work.

It is also the women who laid a foundation for a religious and political 'middle ground'. In Thigpen's introduction, she cites the influence of Richard White's work, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. White's work proposes a theory of a 'middle ground' between cultures produced by a process of mutual accommodation arising from a need for reciprocal benefit. According to Thigpen, Hawaiian royal women not only wanted western style dresses but also desired to increase their own political influence by aligning with Americans. On the other hand, missionary wives desired to create an atmosphere and relationship conducive to evangelization.

Through their interactions, including creative misunderstandings, the two groups of women developed their own ‘middle ground.’

Island Queens and Mission Wives adds significant insight into the scholarship on Protestant women missionaries. By drawing out the relationship between the missionary wives and the Hawaiian women, Thigpen shows ways in which both groups negotiated difference and misunderstanding to find a place of mutual benefit. This work contributes to the ever-expanding research on the contributions of American women missionaries that challenge 19th century ideas of woman’s “proper place”. It also helps historians to rethink the role of American women in the process of American expansion and influence on the global stage.

Thigpen’s work is concise and focuses on the author’s intended arguments and, as such, it contains little narrative drive. However, it is well written and argued. At the end, the author, in light of the Hawaiian women’s growing support of the American missionaries, invites further research into the role these women played in the development of American colonialism in Hawai’i.

Island Queens and Mission Wives is an accessible and relevant book for all interested in gender, Hawaiian, colonial or religious studies. Scholars will find it an enlightening read.

Faith Skiles, Virginia Tech University