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The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative. By W. S. Merwin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. 331 pp. \$25.00 cloth.

Born in a dark wave the fragrance of red seaweed
 born on the land the shore grass hissing while the night slips
 through a narrow place a man is born for the narrows
 a woman is born for where the waters open
 the passage is for a god it is not for a human
 the god is a gourd full of water and vines coming from it
 there the forest rises to stand in the current of the night. . . . (p. 89)

Ko'olau, the crack *paniolo* of nineteenth-century Kaua'i, and his staunch wife Pi'ilani are at the heart of W. S. Merwin's ecstatic book-length narrative poem. When Ko'olau (short for Kalauiko'olau) contracts Hansen's Disease, the government and its agents compel him to leave his wife, his family, and his livelihood, like so many hundreds of sufferers, for exile at Kalawao on Moloka'i. Refusing to comply—refusing, really, to be separated either from each other or Kaua'i—the couple decides together to take their young son and disappear into “the folding cliffs” of their island.

The rudiments of the legend of Ko'olau the Leper are well known in Hawai'i. That he killed Louis Stolz in 1893 when Stolz tried to arrest him, that he and Pi'ilani ultimately escaped from the posse sent to track them, that they sustained themselves in upland Kaua'i until Ko'olau and their son Kaleimanu died of the Hansen's are as much a part of Island lore as they should be of textbooks. Ko'olau the Outlaw, Ko'olau the Victim, Ko'olau the Martyr, Ko'olau the Murderer, each epithet could be applied depending on who is writing, when, and what their interests might be. Making Ko'olau and Pi'ilani metaphors, however, is the realm of poetry and the brilliant gift of W. S. Merwin.

In *The Folding Cliffs* their story becomes an integral thread in Hawai'i's greater history. (Merwin reminds us that history is not just big dates and big ideas, but individual people.) From the birth of the islands out of the bottom of the ocean and the settling here of Polynesian people, through the arrival of Europeans and Americans, Kamehameha's wars, the Mahele, and the overthrow of the queen, the landmarks along Hawai'i's journey from then to now stand solemnly beside Ko'olau's exquisite skill at riding and roping and the plants and birds Pi'ilani encounters as she climbs along the ridges of Kaua'i's wilderness. The broad, overwhelming sweep and the vital everyday detail are effortlessly married in what might be called a creation chant of modern Hawai'i. Literally and figuratively—that is, both in the characters'

nature and in the lines on the pages themselves—the couple's story and Hawai'i's are perfectly balanced, leaving the carved granite letters of "Hawaiian History" dissolved into a few courageous lives.

From any angle *The Folding Cliffs* is an important work of literature, a "masterpiece" as British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes called it. Merwin's success at reviving the nearly lost medium of epic poetry alone inspires awe. The book consists of 280 flawless stanzas. And it is a rare book of poetry, even if the story is innately compelling, that can genuinely be labeled a "page turner"; there are sections in *The Folding Cliffs* when Merwin's words drive the narrative ahead with unrelenting urgency, while elsewhere they slow to reflect on "the gray wings sailing along the edges / of the lagoon like a shadow through the dry notes / of the insects shrilling the hour and the long quavers / of the toads the heron's bark the low hushing of the surf. . ." (p. 145). Literature is defined by its timelessness, its universality, and its craft. Ko'olau and Pi'ilani's story, and Hawai'i's history, possess the first two in spades; in them love, violence, triumph, tragedy, creation and extinction abound. *The Folding Cliffs* takes the first two and soaks them in the third. Here Merwin's full powers are unleashed to speak with a timbre both as resonant as the Kalalau Valley and as vivid as the sores on the soles of a little boy's feet.

W. S. Merwin's mastery over words is long-established—he won a Pulitzer and has been awarded almost every other major poetry prize and fellowship in a career that includes seventeen books of poetry, four of prose, and eighteen of translation. He was asked to become the poet laureate of the United States, which he declined. He has lived on Maui for more than twenty years and has written a number of articles and poems in that time about Hawai'i's natural history and its conservation. Merwin began compiling notes about Ko'olau, Pi'ilani, and Hawai'i's victims of Hansen's Disease—notes that resulted in *The Folding Cliffs*—soon after moving to the Islands when he read for the first time Frances N. Frazier's translation of John Sheldon's version of Pi'ilani's own account the story.

Poetry is most invaluable as the story's medium when Merwin writes of the conversation in his protagonists' own minds between the language of their ancestry and that of their American missionary school teacher, the Reverend George Rowell. They each teeter on the edge, just as the kingdom does, of the new culture overtaking the Islands. Before the insidious blotches of Hansen's begin to appear on Ko'olau's skin, he resides in what seems a golden moment during the overlap between what was and what is to come, when he can work for and respect the manner and the man of Valdemar Knudsen, the European rancher who employed him, and when he possesses a self-determination the *maka'ainana* rarely enjoyed in the past (especially, the

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author points out, in the days of the sandalwood trade). Yet, in the evening, Ko'olau can return home to the *pono* of his people and their land. Inherent in poetry are folds of meaning conventional prose can rarely express. And Merwin has the luxury of poetic license at his disposal; though the dates and the basic outline of history both biographical and writ large are accurate and carefully researched, some characters, action, and much of the dialogue in *The Folding Cliffs* are fiction. That said, he (his poetry) provides subtlety, *kaone*, and metaphor where they are absolutely indispensable to truth. He is responsible and discerning with his use of fiction; fiction is a tool for creating understanding rather than for gaining moral or political high ground or for sensationalism. Because of his art, Merwin can pass on to his readers both the finest human aspects and the wider complex nature in the relationship between a young Hawaiian woman and the older haole woman she has known from afar almost all her life, in just a very few taut lines. Poetry narrates, but it offers the very essence of what is being narrated at the same time. Certainly there is no better way to get the latter half of nineteenth-century Hawai'i down on paper.

Ko'olau only sits on the fence for a short time, however, before the Hansen's Disease pushes him over to one side. The further he climbs into the mountains and the more distance he puts between himself and his pursuers, the more he embraces age old Hawaiian traditions. Ko'olau and his family are now alone with the land and the land provides everything they need; everything, that is, except a cure for the disease. Hansen's acts on many levels in *The Folding Cliffs*. From the purely literary standpoint it is the catalyst behind much of the book's plot, moving characters together then apart; but it serves as a terrifying metaphor for the West's oozing colonialism, and is also a reminder of the many diseases that ravaged the Hawaiian people in the nineteenth century. What's more, *ma'i ho'oko'nale*, the "separating sickness," as it was called by Hawaiians, evokes AIDS as well. The ultimate devastation wrought by Merwin's invocation of the disease, however, is in his unadorned reportage of the Provisional Government's handling of its sufferers, how armed men ripped people from their homes and cut them off entirely from their families and lives. Think what you may about Hawai'i's prism-like history, Merwin says, there are no easy answers to be sure; but put aside the usual excuses for another age's ignorance and fear for a minute and look at it for exactly what it was: cruel, utterly contemptible treatment of everyday people cursed once by their bodies then a second time by the authorities.

Merwin comes down particularly hard on Stolz and the Stolz-like characters of Hawai'i's history. The conniving deputy sheriff portrayed in *The Folding Cliffs* arrived in the Islands with big dreams of wealth and position, see-

ing this place not for what it was but as rife with "opportunity." He is a racist and a particularly inept and heartless example of the white adventurer who was pouring west then. Another villain to Merwin is Charles Hyde, the Protestant preacher immortalized in Robert Louis Stevenson's "open letter." He writes, paraphrasing Stevenson's own words:

... the Reverend Doctor Hyde . . . a man quite below
the reticences of civility one of those
missionaries who in the course of their evangelical
calling had grown rich until the cab driver commented
upon the size and comfort of the minister's home. . . .
(p. 179)

It was Dr. Hyde, while sitting in his rather too sumptuous Honolulu house, who slandered Father Damien of Moloka'i and his efforts to minister to the imprisoned lepers. In the hands of many writers, accounts of these characters can reek of defensiveness or innuendo—or worse yet, shoddy journalism—in the wisdom of *The Folding Cliffs* there is a distinct and poignant sadness in the author's voice. His agony becomes almost spiritual.

After Stolz and Kalākaua and Dole and Lili'uokalani and Bishop, we are always returned (and grateful to be so) to Pi'ilani and Ko'olau and to the simple power of their story. Perhaps the loveliest passage in the entire book is when the couple, who had been childhood friends, fall in love.

... [S]he looked at other boys
all of them watching for any hint of welcome
and she thought they were all missing something that she
had always known in Ko'olau it was already so
when they both found themselves lifted up as when a wave
arches itself under a canoe and the whispering hull
pauses like a caught breath then is flung forward racing
down the blue slope that keeps curling out from in front of it
they felt themselves hurtling in a single rush with no thought
of anything else no sense of before or after
yet it seemed to them that they were not moving at all
and everyone around them could see what was happening (p. 122)

His portrait of Pi'ilani—child, woman, wife, Hawaiian—and her strength, devotion, and sense of self underpins the book as much as she did her husband Ko'olau. (Sheldon, who knew her, breathlessly described her, "a beautiful lehua blossom of the highest, a beautiful, nectar-sipping, yellow-plum-

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aged Oo bird.") Pi'ilani makes a number of harrowing pilgrimages back to the site where she buried Ko'olau's body. Newspapers in Honolulu claimed that scavengers had found his remains and were bringing back the rogue's gun to display. She had hidden his body, much the way the bodies of the *ali'i* were hidden, so no one could steal his *mana*. It is during these journeys that much of the magic of inland Kaua'i is revealed. Merwin the naturalist and conservationist appears over and over again on her trips, as does an author who deeply loves the place and the people he is writing about.

The mountain rises by itself out of the turning night
 out of the floor of the seas and is the whole of an island
 alone in the one horizon alone in the entire day
 as a word is alone in the moment it is spoken
 meaning what it means only then and meaning it only
 once with the same syllables that have arisen
 and have been formed and been uttered before again and again. . . .
 (p. 47)

Robert Becker
 Author

No Ordinary Man: William Francis Quinn, His Role in Hawaii's History. By Mary C. Kahulumana Richards. Honolulu: Hawaii Education Association, 1998. 354 pp. Index. \$26 paper.

An Unlikely Revolutionary: Matsuo Takabuki and the Making of Modern Hawaii. A memoir by Matsuo Takabuki assisted by Dennis M. Ogawa with Glen Grant and Wilma Sur. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. 237 pages. Appendixes. Chronology. Index. \$12.95 paper.

They came from practically the antipodes of the American experience. Yet in many ways their lives were similar, formed by the turbulent events of a mid-century world at war. And those events brought them to same place as principal actors in the formative years of the new state of Hawai'i.

William Francis Quinn was born in Rochester, New York, the son of C. Alvin and Betty Dorrity Quinn. He grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where his father worked as a marketing manager for a leather company and his mother