

Who was Thomas K. Nakanaela?

by Nancy Morris

Born in mid nineteenth-century, Native Hawaiian Thomas Kaiaikawaha Nathaniel was the son of Kaiaikawaha Nathaniel, a road supervisor. The family lived most of the time in Waialua, O‘ahu. Thomas preferred the Hawaiian spelling of his name, Nakanaela.

As a young man, he served as a clerk in the Hawai‘i Supreme Court. He cultivated an educated, flowery writing style and put it to good use as part-time owner and editor of the Hawaiian language newspaper, *Hawaii Holomua* from 1891-92. Politically he was a staunch royalist and this led to the publication of his best-known work, *Ka Buke Mo ‘olelo o Hon. Robert William Wilcox* (1890.) The art of the biographer is most apparent in the portraits of Wilcox’s youth: as a feisty child, portending the revolutionary hero he was to become, and later, as a dashing Italian cadet romancing the belles of Turin. The history of the 1889 revolt is told mostly using lightly edited news reports, still, Wilcox comes through as a noble rebel, confident that he is on the right side of history. As a poet, Nakanaela’s best know mele is his kanikau for Princess Likelike.

Nakanaela led an active social life and was a member of King Kalākaua’s Singing Club. He was a prominent man-about-town, known in particular for an eccentric manner of dress. One of his favorite costumes was a full-on hunting suit.

His life was to darken. In 1888 Nakanaela’s daughter was stricken with Hansen’s disease and sent to Kalaupapa. She died there in 1892. One year later Nakanaela himself was diagnosed with the disease and he too was exiled to Kalaupapa. There he would become a leader and advocate for the people of the settlement. He barraged the Board of Health with petitions, one asking that patients be allowed to use ‘awa for comfort of their afflictions, another asking for continuation of the Goto baths, a

Japanese therapy that offered some temporary comfort, if not a cure. He asked that his name not be attached to the petitions, fearing that the republican Board of Health would ignore petitions from a royalist.

For some time, Nakanaela had suffered from the miseries of bad teeth. He was allowed to travel to Kalihi on O‘ahu for treatment and he brought back some tools for self-treatment. In May of 1904, he had a tooth extracted. An infection developed, resulting in his death. Reports of the day said his funeral was the best-attended ever.

Sources:

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