

Ross H. Gast, *Contentious Consul: A Biography of John Coffin Jones, First United States Consular Agent at Hawaii*. Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1976. Pp. 201, index. \$10.00.

The second decade of the nineteenth century was a turning point in Hawaiian history. In the Spring of 1820, the first company of American Protestant missionaries arrived and set out to transform the islanders' religion, social structure, and culture. Of equal importance to the future development of Hawai'i, was the discovery in the same year of the north Pacific whaling grounds; henceforth Honolulu and Lahaina harbors were crowded every autumn and spring with whaling vessels seeking provisions--and whaling crews seeking recreation. The US government recognized the increasing importance of the islands to America: in 1821 John Coffin Jones was appointed US Commercial Agent in Hawai'i. With the introduction of these three forces--the mission, the sailors, and Jones-Hawaiian life was inexorably changed.

Ross H. Gast's *Contentious Consul* is the first full-length study of Jones and his role in Hawai'i. The biography is appropriately titled, for Jones was nothing if not contentious. He infuriated the American missionaries by keeping several mistresses and by challenging the mission's religious creed. He was no more considerate of the Hawaiians while he flagrantly disobeyed their laws. Even the merchants for whom he supposedly worked were angered by his behavior; more than once Jones was the defendant in a civil law suit.

Jones, of course, was not without his positive accomplishments. As Gast points out, the Consul defended the rights of discharged sailors who had been cheated by their masters, and he was instrumental in the development of American trade with the Spanish Main (California). In addition, his reports to the US State Department on Russian activities in the Pacific Northwest may have influenced John Q. Adams' draft of the Monroe Doctrine pertaining to that region. And if Jones performed his official duties with some irregularities, Gast asserts that the State Department was partly to blame for this situation; the US Government did not take the Island Kingdom seriously and thus only occasionally communicated with its representative there.

Despite these insights into Jones' career, Gast missed an opportunity to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the New England mind in Hawai'i. In his introduction, he tantalizingly suggests that one theme of the biography would be the contrast between Jones and his major mission opponent, Hiram Bingham. These men differed in social status, religion, and personality, and their lives reflected issues that polarized New England in the early nineteenth century; this debate had some of its clearest expression in the Sandwich Islands precisely because these two men resided there. Regrettably, Gast fails to probe this issue in any meaningful way.

The author also errs in interpretation. Gast argues, for example, that Jones' "greatest service to Hawaii . . . was his stubborn opposition to religious oppression . . . which contributed significantly" to the creation of an open religious community (p. 10). By Gast's own admission, however, Jones' interest in religious freedom "for the most part" was dictated by self interest; any positive result arising from his opposition was therefore incidental. Moreover, from what we learn of Jones' character, it is clear that he would have acted differently had he been in a position to profit from the Congregational mission's dominance.

Finally, there is a major stylistic problem with the book. Although Gast has methodically recorded the facts of Jones' life, he has not captured its verve; indeed, the attempt to include every scrap of available biographical evidence often obscures the main character completely.

Contributing to this problem is the conspicuous lack of a clear story line. There will be some rewards for those who plow through *The Contentious Consul*, but these will not be readily garnered.

Char Miller
History Department
The Johns Hopkins University