Photographers of Old Hawaii As Seen Through Recent Books

Hawaii and Hawaiians are notoriously photogenic. The history of photography in the Islands extends well over a century and includes a great number of photographers whose work can be found in several large collections.

This treasury has only begun to be studied and used. The two largest published collections are by Joseph Feher, *Hawaii: A Pictorial History*, and by Edward B. Scott, *The Saga of the Sandwich Islands*. They used photographs primarily for their historical, documentary value, rather than as works of art. Feher subordinated them to the demands of his layout, cropping them, isolating details in them, and printing them in the light brown of his illustrative drawings. Scott treated the photographs more respectfully, but attached to them a truly unfortunate text.

Nevertheless, because of the extensive research included in the two books, they have been so mined by later authors and editors that it is difficult to find published photographs which did not first appear in them. *Hawaii:1776-1976, The Bicentennial Years* (edited by Bennett Hymer, etc., Mutual Publishing, 1976) seems little more than a careless version, cut-rate in everything but price. Reducing our images of the past contracts our ideas about it.

Inspired by Ethnic Studies classes, *Kaulana Na Pua, An Hawaiian Album, 1890-1930* (ed. James Kimo Campbell, etc., pueo press, 1976) is not a history of Hawaii, but "a collection of portraits of Hawaiian people which is meant to draw parallels in people's minds with pictures of rural people in other places at roughly the same time." The editor asks rhetorically, "But looking at these people, can you see anything that is so very different..."
from black sharecroppers, or 'Okies' and 'Arkies'...or native Americans...?"
Looking at the portrait of the hula master on page 43, I can't agree with this one concept. If one doesn't enter into the high culture of a race that has one — and the Hawaiian has, one runs the danger of merely slumming among folk whose skin is brown.

The book, with its genuine affection, marks a stage: local photographs are used consciously to evoke emotions. "This collection is meant to be nostalgic..." The editor is sometimes impatient with his materials: "...wherever possible we've tried to keep the insights of photographers who may not always have seen the qualities we were looking for..." So cropping, soft focus, and faded printing are used to produce the desired effects. As a result, the book tells me more about the attitude of these modern editors toward the past, than about the past itself. But in that sense, the book is truly expressive.

Joan Abramson's Photographers of Old Hawaii (Island Heritage, 1976) is, to my knowledge, the first book devoted to local photography for its own sake. Although she writes modestly, if curiously, that "this book cannot long remain the definitive work,..." she has done her work well. She has chosen 16 photographers of different types — art, commercial, scientific, news, and home; written appreciatively and, when warranted, admiringly of them, and provided a selection of their works. She quotes extensively from newspapers, unpublished documents, and interviews she has conducted. She provides much technical information and, at times, perceptive and knowledgeable aesthetic estimates. Her book has been exceptionally well proofread (though Honokai on page 167 should be Honukai).

The author knows so much about her subject that I wish she had given us more, especially in such a pioneering work which is certain to inspire others to further research. A brief historical outline would have enabled the reader to understand better the context of each photographer selected. The reader could also have learned something about those omitted, such as the outstanding art photographer Alonzo Gartley and the most interesting Joseph Dwight Strong. An in-law of Robert Louis Stevenson, Strong worked for Kalakaua and accompanied the Ka'imiwai expedition to Samoa.

A bibliography, the most complete list of photographers compiled up to
now, and the locations of unpublished documents would be great research aids (for instance, the Ray Jerome Baker notes and the Tai Sing Loo memoir, which Abramson quotes extensively, are both in the Bishop Museum). Abramson labels her book "Volume One," which gives us hope. My only major criticism of this book is that the photographs themselves, astonishingly, have been treated as high-handedly as in the other books. Some standards for reproduction and captioning need to be established. In my opinion, a book on the history of photography should reproduce as accurately as possible the historical appearance of the materials discussed, even if it does not conform to contemporary fashions. A close-up may be more striking for us today, but, if it is obtained by cropping, the impression produced by the original is modified, and history is falsified. If a miniature portrait *must* be enlarged, the original dimensions should be given in the caption. And so on. All this will help us learn from the past.

Studying in the Bishop Museum, I have learned from the two previously unpublished photographs which illustrate this column. In the long stillness of the pose, the spirit of the hula begins to shine through the features of a young dancer. The photo, not well-known to date, is from the collection of Ray Jerome Baker. It could become a classic. J.G. McCallister photographs a native informant for his *Archaeology of Oahu* and creates the only image I know of Pua Ha’aheo of Kahana Valley — chanter, hula master, one of the few precious links of his time to the ancient schools. As one looks at his portrait, the dusty clothes begin to disappear, and his body is invested with its cool ornaments of fern.