

The Illustrated Travelogue and John La Farge's Vision of Hawaii

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On Saturday, August 30, 1890, the American artist John La Farge stepped off the luxury steamer *Zealandia* in Honolulu. He was fifty-five and famous throughout the art world of the day. He was as patrician and erudite as any American could be at the time. He also was known to have a messy personal and professional life. His twenty-five year-old marriage was locked in bitter estrangement that extended to some of his children. He had often been on the front page of every New York newspaper for all the wrong reasons. Business debacles and bankruptcies had dogged him for decades. He had even been arrested in 1885 for grand larceny at the instigation of disgruntled business partners.

Yet, in spite of it all, he remained one of America's most admired painters and decorators. He was a master of many different art forms, with his innovative opalescent glass eliciting the most praise in his time. It remains his greatest claim to fame today. John La Farge was nothing if not complex and unique—and that is why what he left behind in terms of his vision of Hawaii is so interesting to explore.

La Farge was not alone as he stepped off that steamer and onto the dock at Honolulu. He had come to the Pacific at the behest of another famous American, Henry Adams. Descended from two Presidents, Adams too was distinguished and unusual. He had taught history at Harvard College before moving to Washington, D.C. to build a massive mansion directly across from the White House. It was actually a double mansion shared with the family of Adams's close friend, John Hay, who had been Abraham Lincoln's personal secretary. It was also the site in December of 1885 of a macabre death when Adams's wife of thirteen years committed suicide by drinking chemicals that she used to develop photographs.

It hence was a lonely, restless, and very wealthy Henry Adams who conceived of a Pacific tour—and who paid La Farge's way on what turned out to be a fifteen-month trip around the world. By train from New York to San Francisco and then to sea, Hawaii was the first stop on a Pacific crossing that included Samoa, Tahiti, and Fiji, and then continued around the world to Australia, Indonesia, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), through the Suez Canal, and on to Europe—and then back to New York via the Atlantic Ocean.

Throughout this long and ambitious exotic journey, La Farge created what he called his "records of travel." He drew and sketched constantly, all the while keeping a detailed journal. After returning from this trip in late 1891, he mined these pictures and writings in many ways for the rest of his life.

The focus here is on the month from August 30th to September 27th, 1890 when John La Farge roamed the Hawaiian archipelago—along with the products related to that stay, with special attention paid to his illustrated travelogue article on Hawaii.

A day after arriving at Oahu, La Farge and Adams moved into a house in the Nuuanu Valley just above Honolulu. This belonged to Judge Alfred Stedman Hartwell, the representative of the Public Ministry at Hawaii and an old Harvard chum of Henry Adams. Hartwell was absent on business back in the States and lent the travelers the residence to use as a center of operations while in the Hawaiian Islands. La Farge found the tropical atmosphere of the valley iridescent with mist and rain. Using watercolor washes, he painted in the English manner with many varied wet and dry effects. His style was greatly indebted to one of his youthful artistic heroes, the great English watercolorist Joseph William Mallord Turner. It is

telling to look at a watercolor study painted by La Farge from Hartwell's backyard, showing the surrounding mountains under a rainbow, and then to switch to a watercolor painted in the open air by Turner fifty years earlier. La Farge used many of the same overlaid washes to evoke the complicated effects of mist and clouds. This is not surprising given the artist's background and admirations. When he was twenty-two, La Farge had seen a large collection of Turner's watercolors of this sort on a youthful trip to England. He later remarked that he kept Turner in mind whenever "rendering the out-of-doors."

The front of the house opened onto a distant view of the beach at Waikiki. La Farge painted this perspective one day from the verandah, using a sober, factual approach. He then painted the view again at night from a different angle, illuminated by bright moonlight and starlight. In his journal, he described the scene before him on this particular night as having the dramatically artificial effect of a stage set.

On Friday, September 5th, La Farge and Adams took the first of three trips by horse drawn carriage to the *Pali*, a favorite tourist spot on the far side of the Nuuanu Valley. According to Adams, the view from this great volcanic cliff overlooking the ocean "absolutely smashed La Farge." La Farge drew in a sketchbook and painted two elaborate watercolors of the *Pali*. One was a detailed view in a vertical format, conveying the soaring profile of the cliff that he had first captured in the drawing. The second used a horizontal format as an arena for laying down brilliantly colored, generalized washes. "No more astounding spread of color could be thought of," he wrote in his journal. "Here I had the misfortune to find that the usual trick of bad work and poor paper . . . would prevent me from making an adequate record. (I say adequate—what I mean is plausible.)" It was perhaps dissatisfaction with the medium of watercolor that led La Farge to try the subject again in oil laid down on board. But whether he painted in this medium while at the *Pali*, or more likely after the fact at Hartwell's house or even back in his New York studio, is unknown.

On Friday, September 12th, the travelers left their baggage behind at Hartwell's house and boarded a crowded steamer bound for the Big Island of Hawaii. Their plan was to spend ten days traversing the five volcanoes that make up the Big Island. The only active volcanoes, then as now, were Mauna Loa, the largest volcano in the world, and the very active Kilauea. La Farge and Adams knew a great deal about these volcanoes from at least two sources. The first was Clarence King, a renowned geologist and close friend of Henry Adams. King had headed up a U.S. Geological Survey of the West from 1867 to 1873, and had visited Hawaii in 1872. The second source was a recently published tome on volcanoes by the scientist James Dwight Dana. Adams actually had a copy of this book along with him.

The two-day steamer trip from Oahu to the Big Island was rough, making both passengers seasick. They finally debarked on the southern tip of the Big Island on the evening of Saturday, September 13th. The next morning they traveled inland, first on a jostling tourist train and then in a covered wagon pulled by mules and horses. They eventually arrived later that day at the Kilauea Volcano House hotel, where they stayed until Wednesday, September 17th.

From the hotel's verandah, La Farge sketched the Kilauea crater that stretched out over several miles. Each attempt at painting resulted in dramatically different results. Pale yellows and neutral colors characterized a morning view done at 10 A.M. on Monday, September 15th. In his journal, La Farge recorded his frustration at the "curious sheen" cast over everything by the volcanic vapors. He felt especially confounded by "the unearthly look that the black masses take under the light."

Vivid violet and mauve dominated a second view of the same scene painted, according to inscriptions, between noon and 2 P.M. While the precise date is not specified, it probably was also on Monday, September 15th. In annotations, La Farge described conditions of both rain and sunlight, with the “lava shining like sea. Distance perhaps bluer.”

La Farge painted another view of the crater during sunrise the next morning, showing flames spitting from the crusted lava. Once again, he used the handling and style of English watercolorists such as Turner to attack these challenging ephemeral effects.

On the evening before this, La Farge and Adams had heard about an eruption in a particularly active lava bed. This was called Dana Lake, named after James Dwight Dana, and was several miles into the crater floor. Led by guides, they set out the next morning hoping to witness a spectacular eruption at the site. Their trek was across the hot crater surface with flowing lava visible through cracks and with steam spewing from fissures. They arrived at Dana Lake towards evening but were disappointed not to find the anticipated grand spectacle. As the sum of the experience, La Farge described “sulphurous fumes” and “little vicious blots of fire.” His view of the scene painted as twilight fell featured one of the more prominent plumes of sulfur wafting over Dana Lake.

Giving up on seeing anything more spectacular, the party headed back to the Kilauea Volcano House hotel as night fell. At one point, La Farge made a pencil drawing of the guides replenishing or repairing gas lanterns on the floor of the crater. On Wednesday, September 17th, the travelers left on a five-day trek on horseback across Mauna Loa. They were headed for the other side of the Big Island in order to catch a steamer back to Oahu. Just before leaving, La Farge painted another view of the crater from the verandah of the Kilauea Volcano House hotel. This featured pink and turquoise hues that bled across the paper.

During the crossing of Mauna Loa, La Farge and Adams grew disillusioned with indigenous Hawaiian culture. American sugar-cane plantations had stripped the land and altered native life, while Christian missionaries had diluted native religion. The real impact of these changes hit home when the travelers arrived at Hilo. After visiting this locale in 1872, Clarence King had written glowing letters about “primitive” native life there. He particularly told tales of what he termed “old-gold girls” sliding naked down waterfalls, embodying primeval innocence and beauty. But upon arriving at Hilo, La Farge and Adams found the waterfall deserted. They then were informed that, for a price, natives would come to slide the waterfall just as they had done two decades earlier. In his journal, La Farge lamented: “So passes the glory of Hawaii and the old-gold girl—woe is me!”

Later that day, the party reached Onomea, an oasis where natives seemed oblivious to modern ways. Both La Farge and Adams momentarily felt that their romantic expectations to witness uncorrupted indigenous life had been fulfilled. But this and one additional encounter with natives who seemed untouched by modernity did little to assuage the overall disappointment. Henry Adams concluded that Clarence King’s “illusions of 1872 belong to a region of youth and poetry which no longer exists in 1890.”

La Farge painted his last watercolor on the Big Island at Waimea while waiting for the steamer at 2 P.M. on Monday, September 22nd. It presented a spare and abstract series of color planes rendered in light watercolor and thick gouache on tan paper. With time on his hands and a scene of arid stillness before him, La Farge leisurely inscribed color notes in the lower margin: “Waimea. Sept 22d 2 PM. / The yellow & green not bright enough. / The little volcano mound not sunny enough. / This was a little too bright in shadow & the ascent as marked was bluish/ but on further to left was very rosy. / There was a general glitter to everything. / Past the yellow

colour was nearly pink 1/4 of mile/ The mound probably 1 mile. / The glitter was on the large surface colored / green but which is too green/ It had hardly a real color. / A volcanic glitter was over all & in a glass [some sort of looking glass] recalled the moon. / Otherwise it / was infinitely delicate & sweet when not seen through the glass. / All divisions & scalings were slightly bluish."

Until the two travelers steamed out into the Pacific on Saturday, September 27, 1890, there was little additional painting or writing.

After finally returning to his New York studio in late 1891, La Farge began generating a number of products related to the voyage. The first was an exhibition of pictures accompanied by a catalogue containing excerpts from his travel journals. La Farge formulated this initially in early 1893 to present in Boston at the gallery of his primary dealer, Doll & Richards. The exhibition became more ambitious after the spring of 1894 when he received a prestigious invitation from the French Academy in Paris. This invitation specified that La Farge would be honored by presenting a one-man exhibition as part of the Salon of 1895. The Parisian Academy actually hoped that La Farge would mount a large exhibit of his stained glass. Instead, La Farge delivered his "Records of Travel" exhibition consisting of over two hundred watercolors and a few oil paintings. The selection included works both from an earlier trip to Japan in 1886 and from the entire South Pacific circuit.

Paul Durand-Ruel, the dealer in Paris for the French Impressionists, became the agent for the exhibition. Before showing the works in Paris, Durand-Ruel mounted them in his New York gallery, accompanied by a catalogue in English—and then at the Salon of 1895 in Paris with a catalogue translated into French. The sixteen Hawaiian pictures in the show included views of the Nuuanu Valley, the *Pali*, and the Kilauea volcano. Many pictures still bear stickers containing the catalogue numbers placed on them as part of the exhibit. For example, number 56 was La Farge's watercolor depicting the rainbow over the mountains behind Hartwell's house in the Nuuanu Valley. The sticker with that number is still adhered to the bottom margin of that watercolor.

The exhibition did not go over well in Paris, but the prestige of the occasion nevertheless greatly elevated La Farge's worth at home. Until his death in 1910, La Farge's travel pictures sold at extremely good prices and became a mainstay of his reputation.

The second product in the wake of the trip was a series of travelogue articles published in one of the most popular journals of the day, *Scribner's Magazine*. The first installment on Hawaii appeared in May 1901 and opened with a halftone engraving of one of La Farge's watercolors of the *Pali*. The relatively new halftone process, using minuscule dots, produced more faithful facsimiles than preceding forms of illustration. In the article, La Farge blended a factual travel account with melancholy musings on the disappearance of indigenous Hawaiian culture.

Another illustration was a halftone engraving of the watercolor depicting natives bathing at Onomea. La Farge's discussion of Onomea began with enthusiasm over the fulfillment of his romantic vision of uncorrupted Hawaiian natives. It concluded, however, with disillusionment that the Hawaiian Islands generally had succumbed to the onslaught of industry and modernity.

Two illustrations related to the stay at the Kilauea Volcano House hotel and the trip to Dana Lake. One was a halftone reproduction of the watercolor that La Farge had painted at 10 A.M. on Monday, September 15th. The other was the depiction of the guides repairing lanterns on the crater floor during the nighttime return from Dana Lake. La Farge probably chose to

illustrate this image because the stark black-and-white contrasts reproduced effectively in halftone engraving.

There was one more major halftone illustration in the Hawaiian travelogue, and it was by any standard distinctive. It depicted neither a real event nor a real person, but rather was a visualization of a literary character created by Herman Melville. This was Fayaway, a fictional native from the Marquesas Islands who symbolized indigenous culture uncorrupted by the modern Western world. In Melville's 1846 novel *Typee*, Fayaway innocently removed her garment to use as a sail in the breeze, unashamed of her naked beauty.

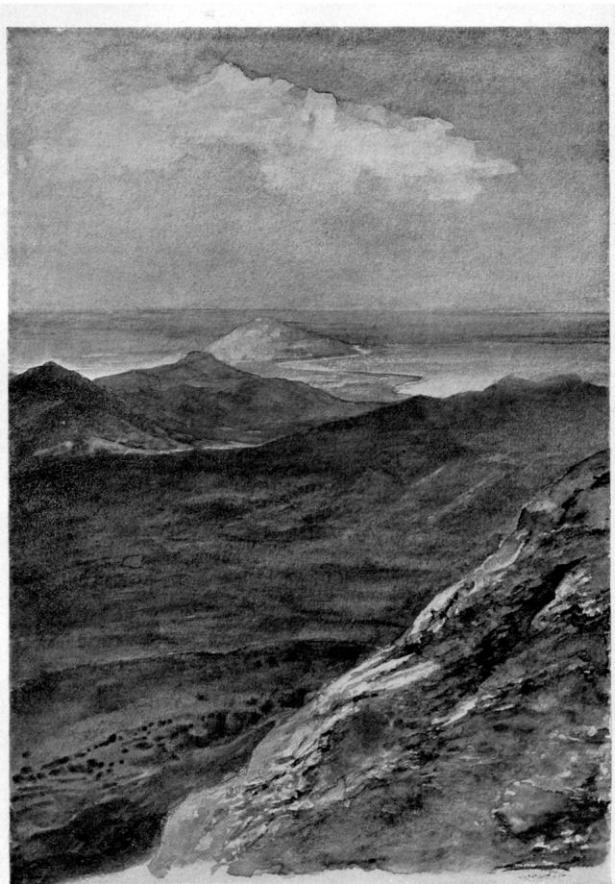
The halftone of *Fayaway* reproduced one of La Farge's most highly refined exhibition watercolors with a South Sea subject. Invoking this idyllic image of primeval South Sea innocence was La Farge's way of bemoaning what he had not found in Hawaii. La Farge not only made *Fayaway* a visual centerpiece of his article on Hawaii, but he also closed the travelogue invoking her name. His last sentence was a wistful yearning to encounter a real Fayaway somewhere further along in the Pacific. He in fact got his wish when he reached Samoa, his next stop on the Pacific tour.



John La Farge
The Old Philosopher, 1880-82
 cloisonné stained glass
 Thomas Crane Public Library
 Quincy, Massachusetts



John La Farge
The Great Pali, 1890
 watercolor and gouache on paper
 William Vareika Fine Arts, Newport, Rhode Island



Drawn by John La Farge.
 VIEW FROM THE GREAT PALI
 (The great precipice on the Island of Oahu, a short distance inland from Honolulu.)
 —"Passages from a Diary in the Pacific."

PASSAGES FROM A DIARY IN THE PACIFIC

HAWAII

By John La Farge

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM SKETCHES BY THE AUTHOR

We got off on Saturday, not at noon, as stated, but waiting for a couple of hours in dock, the little steamer filled with people and with very pretty girls, who, alas! were not to accompany us. But we have a circus troupe "à la Buffalo Bill"; an impressario with the nose and figure-head of the "boy," and his wife, or lady—the usual "variety blonde" to match, joining, like the telegraph (through the seas and continent of America), farthest Australia and the Singing Hall of London. Long-haired cowboys see them off, one of them fair-haired and boyish, and "sixty-two." There are Indians, one of them long-haired, saturnine, and yet smiling, with the usual length of jaw and hair (so that his back runs up from his waist to his hat), who sits with some female, perhaps a dancer, and talks sentiment evidently, in his way, to my great delight—and hers, too, whatever she might say. They sit with one blanket around them, and he points gracefully, and puts things in her hair—and draws presents out of his pockets, wrapped up in paper, and puts them back to pull them out again. She sits against him, and smiles at him ironically, and laughs, and generally looks like a pretty cat lapping cream.

The cowboys meander about and go to the bar-room too frequently, especially one, a fair-haired one, who feels the first attack of seasickness and sits with his head on his hand—and resents his comrades' begging him to come below, telling them that they have mistaken the man he is, that he is a Pawnee medicine man, he is, and that he will wipe the floor with them; and then he subsides again—so that my expected row does not occur.

And everybody subsides, even the cheerful young Englishmen and old Englishmen, and the middle-aged Englishmen,

who pervade a good part of the ship and utter all their small stock of remarks with slowness and power. And there are others—the teacher going back for her vacation, to the seminary at Hawaii—the young German I suspect of being an R. C. priest, and the Scotchman who has carefully talked for the last hour on the advantage of our system of "checking" baggage, which, as he says, allows you to go on without getting off at any station to see if the "guard" has the things all right.

Friday, August 29th.

Last night the sun set in those silver tones that I associate with the Pacific and with Japan. The horizon was enclosed everywhere, but through it every here and there the pink and the rose of sunset came out and in the East lit up the highest of the clouds in every variety of pink and lilac and purple and rose, shut in with gray. But the moon, "O Tsuki San," had her turn—then I realized where we were. All was so dark that the horizon was quite veiled; the light of the moon, in its full and high up, poured down on what seemed a wall-embroidery of molten silver slanting to the horizon. Itself was partly wrapped in clouds or veils or wraps like those that protect some big jewel, and when unveiled or partly covered it had the roundness—the nearness of some great crystal "with white fire laden." The clearness was so great at places open through the clouds that I thought I could see Jupiter's satellites, and decided it was he by this additional glitter. There is no way of telling you all that the moon did, for she seemed to arrange the clouds, to place them about her or drive them away, to veil herself with one hand of cloud. It was like a great heavenly play—and played in such lovely air! If I could write on for pages, I could only say that I had no idea of what the moon could be

Scribner's
 Magazine
 May 1901

