

## Isabella Bird by Sheree Chase

Isabella Bird became famous in her lifetime as an adventurer and travel author.



She was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1831. Her father was a minister, and Isabella became a devout Christian. When she was 22, she was advised by her doctor to take a voyage in order to relieve a number of symptoms that included backaches, sleeplessness, and what today would be called depression. She toured Canada and the United States. On her return she recorded and published her impressions in a book called *The Englishwoman in America*, and began her career as the most popular female travel writer of her age. She took a second trip for her health to America in 1857. On her return, her father died, and Isabella suffered

terrible feelings of guilt. She felt that she had failed her father, and that if she had had stayed at home, somehow things would have been different. She resolved not to travel again, but to stay put and devote herself to good works and helping others. In 1866, Isabella was living in Edinburgh when her mother died. Though grief-stricken, she and her sister Henrietta set up house together and managed very well on family money and the income from Isabella's writing. But Isabella's old symptoms returned: and though she tried innumerable remedies, she found no relief from her headaches, back pains, sleeplessness, and general unhappiness. It was her sister Henrietta who finally convinced her to take a long voyage. In July of 1872, at 41 years of age, Miss Bird left Britain, bound for Australia, and once again became a traveler.

Bird left Auckland, New Zealand, aboard the mail steamer *Nevada* on January 19, 1873, and weighed anchor at Honolulu, Hawai'i, on January 26th. In a letter to her sister Hennie, Isabella wrote her first impressions of Hawai'i:

*"The coast line came into sight, fringed by the feathery cocoanut tree of the tropics, and marked by the long line of surge. The grand promontory of Diamond Head, its fiery sides now softened by a haze of green, emanated the wavy line of palms; then the Punchbowl...and then, indeed, its existence had almost to be taken upon trust, for besides the lovely wooden and grass huts, with deep verandahs, which nestled under palms and bananas on soft green sward, margined by the bright sea sand, only two church spires and a few grey roofs appeared above the trees."*

Before she sailed for Kona, Isabella made contact with the Greenwells.

*"Dora Greenwell has a brother, an orange planter there, married to a very nice wife. Bishop Willis was anxious that I should see them and I had written asking them if they cared to come on board the steamer but when we stopped I got a very kind note from Mrs. Greenwell saying that her husband was 15 miles off and she was too near her confinement to ride on horseback."*

Eventually she was able to meet them in Kona:

*"Dora Greenwell's brother has a store, orange, and coffee plantations here. He is a very gentlemanly and very intellectual man. He has lent me 3 weeks of the Evening Mail, the Quarterly, the British Quarterly, the Westminster, and Blackwood...He has a very sweet wife..."*

In a letter entitled Ridge House, Kona, Hawai`I, June 12, Isabella recorded the following first impression,

*“I landed in Kealakakua [sic] Bay on a black lava block, on which tradition says that Captain Cook fell, struck with a death-wound, a century ago. The morning sun was flaming above the walls of lava 1,000 feet in height which curve round the dark bay, the green deep water rolled shoreward in lazy undulations, canoes piled full of pineapples poised themselves on the swell, ancient cocoapalms glassed themselves in still waters—it was hot, silent, tropical.”*



The original buildings of Mr. Wall's sheep station, where Isabella Bird stayed, are still intact at Kealapu`ali.

Two weeks later, on July 28th she wrote,

*“I very soon left the languid life of Kona for this sheep station, 6000 feet high on the desolate slope of the dead volcano of Hualalai (“offspring of the shining sun,”) on the invitation of its hospitable owner, who said if I “could eat his rough fare, and live his rough life, his*

*house and horses were at my disposal.” He is married to a very attractive native woman who eats at his table, but does not know a word of English, but they are both away at a wool-shed eight miles off, shearing sheep.”*

Isabella left the mountain on August 1st and recorded these thoughts,

*“I left Hualalai yesterday morning, and dined with my kind host and hostess in the wigwam. It was the last taste of the wild Hawaiian life I have learned to love so well, the last meal on a mat, the last exercise of skill in eating ‘two-fingered’ poi. I took leave gratefully of those who had been so truly kind to me and with the friendly aloha from kindly lips in my ears, regretfully left the purple desert in which I have lived so serenely, and plunged into the forest gloom.”*

Isabella left the Kona district a few days later and recorded her last impression:

*“Kona looks unutterably beautiful, a languid dream of all fair things .... It is best to leave the islands now. I love them better every day, and dreams of Fatherland are growing fainter in this perfumed air and under this glittering sky. A little longer, and I too should say, like all who have made their homes here under the deep banana shade, ‘ We will return no more, ... our island home is far beyond the wave, we will no longer roam.’”*