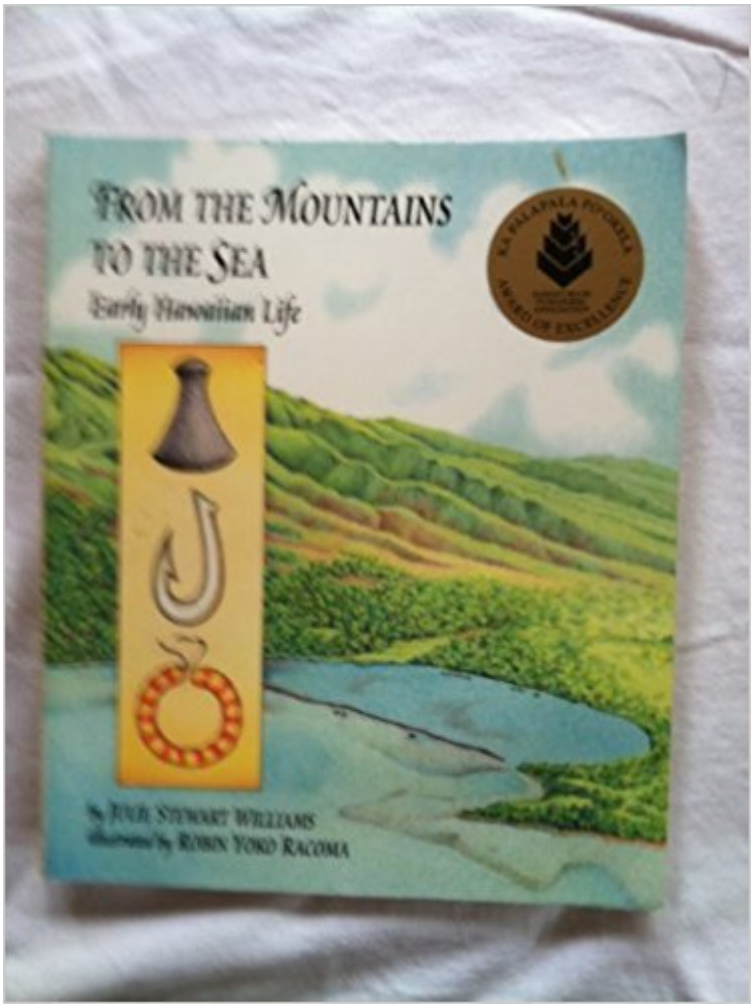
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From The Mountains To The Sea: Early Hawaiian Life



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Synopsis

by Julie Stewart Williams. Illustrated by Robin Yoko Racoma. This award-winning book describes and illustrates the life, activities and natural environment in the Hawaiian Islands before Western contact. Accessible to students yet informative for adults. “…an engaging introduction to the original Hawaiian civilization…” Herb Kawainui Kane. 1997. 191 pp., 7" x 8 1/2". Acid-free text, softcover.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

*****Although this is a book for students (young adults), I bought it as a mature adult and found it at an appropriate level for me. There are many Hawaiian words used and explained in the text (and I do not speak or read Hawaiian), thus I found the easier reading level to be perfect for me!This book won an award from the Hawaii Book Publishers Association---the Ka Palapala Po`okela Award of Excellence. It is well-deserved. This is a fascinating book about early Hawaiian life--life on the ahupua`a. The black and white drawings are also excellent.I found this to be a wonderful early book for readers with some light familiarity with the Hawaiian language and with a strong interest in Hawaiian history.Highly recommended.*****

One of the horrible legacies of European contact with the Hawaiian people, contact which led to a devastation of both Hawaiian culture and the pre-contact population levels (from up to a million

people to less than 100,000), is the loss of specialized kahuna, or experts, in all segments of Hawaiian society: medicine, navigation, religion, fishing, and more. Since there was no written language, knowledge and wisdom were handed down, generation to generation, via oral traditions. When 90% of the Hawaiians died, it's not too difficult to imagine that Hawaiian society also lost 90% of its traditional wisdom.For example, a Hawaiian man named Kepelino, educated by missionaries in the mid-1800s, wrote in another book (Kepelino's Traditions of Hawaii): "There were many kinds of dances in Hawaii: There was the chest-slapping dance, the dance in which time was beaten with sticks, the dance with marionettes, and so on. All these things were sinful. Eyes, hands, feet and body ensnared the onlooker. The dance taught the young people to sin. He who had known no wrong would quickly learn it in the dance. There was no dance, not a single chant of Hawaii, that was not filthy. Hawaiian chants were all bad, even the name chants. They were all filthy. But the calling chants and some of the genealogical chants of gods and chiefs contained no double meanings, and the ancestral chants were almost free of them. All the rest of the chants were made by Lucifer."I think it is easy here to see the contaminating influence of Western contact.From The Mountains To The Sea: Early Hawaiian Life, by Julie Williams (and beautifully illustrated by Robin Racoma), is an attempt by Kamehameha Schools to describe pre-contact Hawaiian life based on the ahupua'a, a section of land usually running from a volcanic ridge to the ocean, and ruled by an ali'i, or chief. An ahupua'a should contain everything a community needed to survive and prosper: land and sea-based foods, fresh water, medicinal plants, clothing, shelter, religious sites, and trees for canoes. If they didn't have it or couldn't produce it, then they would trade with another ahupua'a.In addition to describing society's organizational structure, Williams also described a number of other aspects of early Hawaiian life:"Men and women did not eat together because men, and not women, were considered sacred. Food was also thought to be sacred. Men would lose their sacredness if they ate with women" (p. 41)."The ali'i made sure that men of special ability memorized their genealogies, making sure their descent from the spirits would be remembered" (p. 47).The chapters focus on the arrival of the first colonists, social structure, religion, farming, fishing, the craftsmen, language and literature, music, and games.There are some hints that life was better than it probably was: "Wise ali'i treated their people with respect and provided them with a sense of security" (p. 50). Slaves, on the other hand, were not treated with respect. The death penalty was common for violating the rules set by a priest or an ali'i. And this book was produced in 1997, so I'm surprised that women and girls in the drawings are all wearing clothes from armpit to knee. This might have to do with the audience (school children) more than reality.There are also numerous hints, common with other Native Peoples, that they were exceptional stewards of the local natural

resources: "Hawaiians believed that wild growth and weeds contained some of the essence, or important qualities, of the land. They believed that this essence should not be wasted. Farmers today understand that decaying plant matter contains many of the nutrients needed to fertilize new crops" (p. 99); and "Lawai'a caught only what was needed. Greediness or waste would have angered both the ali'i and the spirits. This helped to conserve the supply of fish" (p. 119). There are many examples of Native Peoples throughout the world exploiting wildlife to the point of extinction or land to the point of unproductivity.Williams concluded, "We have visited an ahupua'a and traveled from the mountains to the sea. We have seen how our kupuna worked diligently to provide clothing, food and shelter for their 'ohana [family]. We have heard how creative and ingenious these early Hawaiians were in using the natural resources of their environment. We have been reminded of their deep love and respect for the 'aina [land]" (p. 169).From The Mountains To The Sea is a very nice doorway into getting a sense about what early Hawaiian life might have been like. I suspect it is pretty accurate when it comes to social structure. governance, and the various crafts.Williams dedicated this book to a member of my 'ohana, Beatrice K. H. Krauss.

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