

CommunityVoice

New Book On Tahiti In The 1920s Recalls Ties To Hawai‘i

It was a time when artists and writers traveled with typewriters or paint and canvas instead of laptops.

By [Simon Keable-Elliott](#)

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James Norman Hall Museum, Tahiti

My interest in 1920s Tahiti arose out of research into the life of my grandfather, Robert Keable.

I was particularly intrigued by his book “Tahiti, Isle of Dreams.” Keable arrived in Tahiti at the end of 1922 with his common-law wife Jolie Buck, having just separated from his newly converted Catholic wife Sybil. He spent the first few months completing a sequel to his first novel “Simon Called Peter,” a huge bestseller in America which is twice mentioned in “The Great Gatsby,” before he turned his attention to writing about Tahiti.

He certainly didn’t need to write the book. He didn’t need the money. The success of his first three novels, published in the space of 18 months had earnt him — in 1922 — at least 10 times his annual teacher salary.

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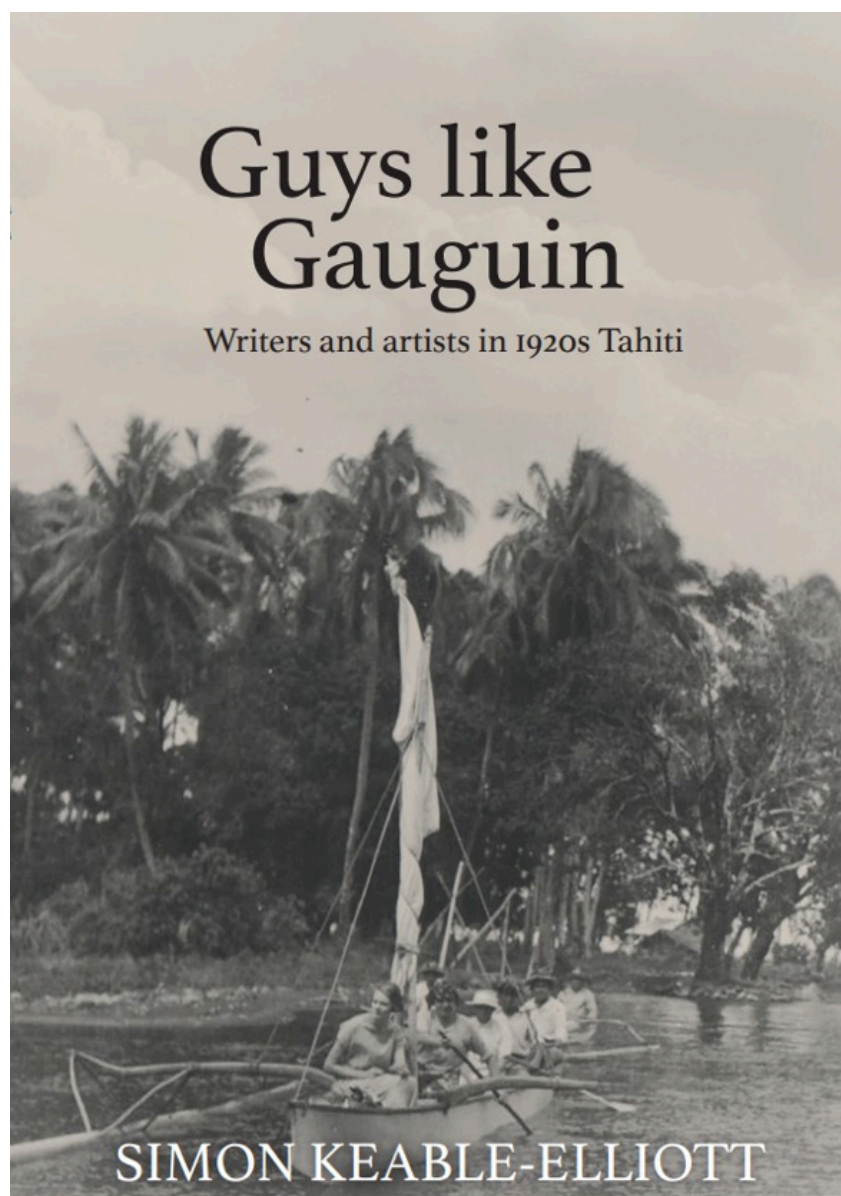
And he was fully aware that at the time there wasn’t, obviously, a need for another book about Tahiti. He wrote:

“Of the making of books upon the South Seas there is no end, and there probably will be no end for a long time ... of books about Tahiti in especial there might be thought to be enough ... It has been written up from the geographical, the historical, the missionary and the romantic standpoint — especially the romantic.”

However, he went on to suggest that there may be a gap in the market for a book looking at the dreams which attracted the great artists and writers like Loti, Gauguin, Robert Louis Stevenson and Rupert Brooke to come to the island and the reasons why they did not stay.

His intention from the start was to show that the island had been ruined by Western civilization. He argued throughout the book that visitors to the island were attracted by an unrealistic dream. And he explained the reality:

“The old Tahiti is as dead as the Middle Ages. Its people have been exterminated, its beauty has been ravished, and its very tradition almost obliterated. The tourist of a day or even of a month sees no



The book is set to be published this month.

more of the real Tahiti of the past than he would see at a well conducted Colonial Exhibition. If he wants amorous adventure he had much better go to Paris. If he wants primitive simplicity he had better go ... to Central Africa. And if he wants to get every material necessity for nothing he had better shoot himself [and go to] the Astral Plane.”

If that wasn’t damning enough, he went on to explain:

“The average young tourist who comes to Tahiti runs an even greater chance of contracting venereal disease than anywhere else in the world. The average lunatic in search of a simple life usually leaves in six months to rid himself of elephantiasis or something worse. The individual who, with the best will in the world, seeks in Tahiti an easy life, almost certainly departs broken-hearted in less.”

Not surprisingly Keable’s American publisher decided not to publish the book explaining to Keable’s agent “the book would not have sufficient appeal for the American public to warrant Putnams publishing it.”

Keable must have expected this. He explained earlier in the book:

“A friend of mine, a young and struggling author, recently sent home articles and photographs of Tahiti. His agent submitted his stuff to the magazines, and wrote to him of the result. In effect he said: ‘They say you write well and can easily market your goods. But if you photograph, your pictures must show no sign of a telegraph pole or a motor-car, and if you write you must not abuse that conception of a real South Sea island which recent writers have done so much to inscribe on the public mind and which the public wants.’”

One might expect, after all his negative comments, that Robert Keable would have copied his literature heroes, like Robert Louis Stevenson and Rupert Brooke, and after a short stay would have left the island forever. But he continued to live on the island, building his own house and eventually marrying the Tahitian princess, Ina Salmon.

Extraordinary Lives

My grandfather was not the only writer or artist to move to Tahiti in the 1920s. Some of them have a close association with Hawai'i.

Most famously there was the American artist Robert Lee Eskridge, who traveled to Tahiti in 1927 and stayed with my grandfather for a few weeks. He made three trips to Tahiti and eventually wrote and illustrated the glorious book “Manga Reva” about his trip to the Gambier Islands. Following his time in Tahiti, and Gambier, he moved to Honolulu where he became the face of Hawaiian modernism.



Dean Frisbie and Charles Nordhoff, center, in Tahiti in the 1920s. (Permission for use from the James Norman Hall Museum, Tahiti)

After designing and painting the mural for the Hawaiian Pavilion at the World Fair in Chicago, he was commissioned to paint the mural at the McCoy Sports Pavilion. Later he taught art at the Hawai'i University of Art and continued to work both as a muralist and illustrator. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he moved to Southern California, but he returned to Hawai'i after the war and continued to paint.

Caroline and Eastham Guild also moved to Hawai'i after the war. They had traveled to Tahiti in 1922, inspired by Frederick O'Brien's “White Shadows in the South Seas,” and ended up staying until the

outbreak of World War II. Caroline wrote the entertaining and informative book “Rainbow in Tahiti” about their time on the island. They arrived with Caroline’s daughter from her first marriage, Martha Heywood, who spent her early years on the island before going to secondary school in the states. Martha married a man from Honolulu, settled there and after the war Caroline and Eastham moved to live near her.



Robert Keable in Tahiti in 1927. (From “Guys like Gauguin”)

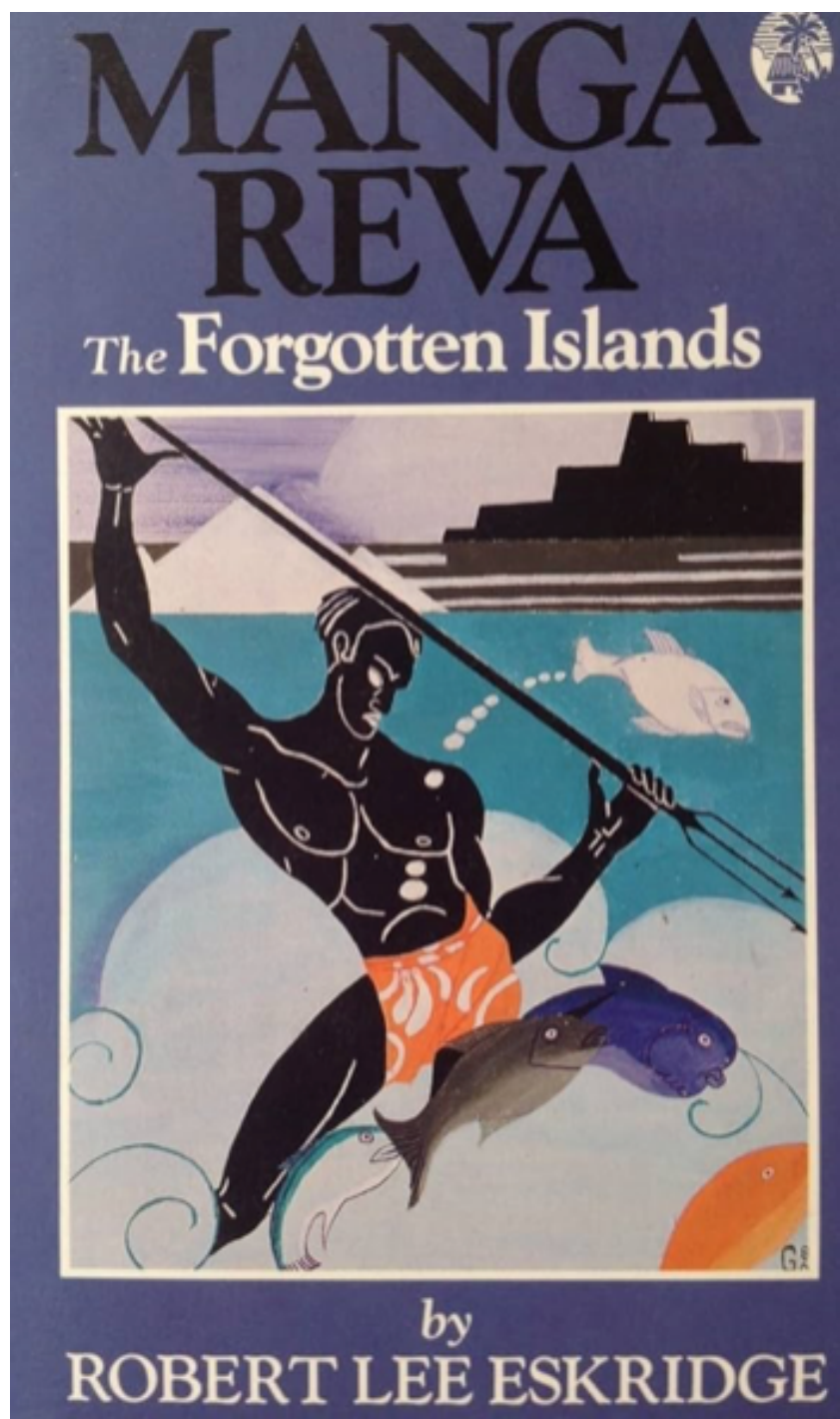
Another daughter of one of the men I researched is the legendary Florence “Johnny” Frisbie. Her father Robert Dean Frisbie travelled to Tahiti in the early 1920s, married a woman from Pukapuka island and spent the rest of his life in the South Pacific. Johnny published the wonderful book, “Miss Ulysses from Puka-Puka,” in 1948 when she was just 16, about her childhood adventures. Now 94, she lives in Honolulu.

It has been a joy researching the extraordinary lives of the many characters who lived on Tahiti in the 1920s. Others include Dean Frisbie’s great friends James Norman Hall and Charles Nordhoff, who wrote the “Mutiny on the Bounty.”

The Scottish painter William Alister Macdonald who, in his early 60s, ran away to the island with his mistress, half his age, and ended up staying 14 years. The mysterious Englishman who wrote about his scandalous time in the South Pacific under the pseudonym Asterisk. Viscount Jack Hastings, the English aristocrat who was disinherited by his parents for marrying an Italian socialite. And many more.

A Craze For The South Seas

Of all the islands in the South Pacific, Tahiti is only the 44th biggest. Why did they choose Tahiti?



As I further investigated, I started to realize there was a craze for the South Seas and particularly Tahiti in the 1920s, fueled by books, newspaper articles, photographs, movies and a tourist boom.

So, I had the basis for my book. How did Tahiti acquire and keep its isle of dreams or paradise island reputation? What was the 1920s craze? And who

were all these writers and artists who settled on the island in the 1920s?

And writing about these men and women now in the 2020s seems particularly apt. The coronavirus lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 have changed people's, and business's, outlook on work. Going into the office is no longer seen as essential for many workers and there has been a big increase in the number of people moving abroad and taking their work with them. It has been estimated that today there are over 35 million digital nomads.

Tropical islands are a popular location. To an extent this group of artists and writers were ahead of their time, traveling with typewriters or paint and canvas instead of laptops. Their desire was not to stay connected but instead escape from the rest of the world. But then again is that so different from what many of us would like to do today?

"Guys like Gauguin: Writers and artists in 1920s Tahiti" is scheduled to be published by Troubador on Aug. 28.

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About the Author



Simon Keable-Elliott

Simon Keable-Elliott is a writer and lecturer based in London, United Kingdom. His first book, “Utterly Immoral,” about his grandfather Robert Keable was published in 2022. He has written articles for, among others, The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, The Church Times and The History News Network. His latest book, “Guys like Gauguin, writers and artists in 1920s Tahiti,” will be published by Troubador on Aug. 28, 2026.

