



Guiding lights

Easkey Britton looks at the early waterwomen who inspired the explosion in women's surfing today.



Little is said and much has been forgotten, but some of the first surfers were women. Our ancient surfing ancestors were wahines and princesses from the South Pacific. The ocean was a playground where they could be equal to their male counterparts.

The first explorers from the western world often commented on how agile and skilled women were, riding the crests of waves in unrestrained beauty and joy. Many women were champion surfers and competed with the men for the honour and respect of the ocean with courage and skill. On the

RIGHT: women have enjoyed surfing from its birth in Polynesia.
FAR RIGHT: Isobel Latham not just the first woman to surf in Australia, but the first Australian to set foot on a surfboard!



Hawaiian Rell Sun, one of the most inspirational women surfers of all time.

TOM KECK



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Rell's surfing and way of life was so full of grace and grit. She challenged the male-dominated sport of surfing and the ocean, charging big waves at Makaha and Sunset.”

south shore of Oahu, at Waikiki, the surf spot now known as Outside Castles was called Kalehuaweke by the Hawaiians, to commemorate an incident in which a commoner dropped into the same wave as a Hawaiian chieftess, which was a major taboo. To save his own skin, he offered her his lehua wreath to placate her.

Unfortunately the missionaries were horrified at female surfers' naked 'sinful' freedom, their lack of subservience to men and their power in the ocean. Once again, Eve was banished from the Garden of Eden and surfing lost its heart...

As the kapu system crumbled, so did surfing's ritual significance within Hawaiian culture. The end of the kapu system also brought about the demise of the Makahiki festival, the annual celebration to the god Lono in which surfing played an integral role, and the other rites and festivals honouring the Goddess Pele. After 125 years of Hawaiian-European contact, surfing went from

a national pastime and way of life to a sport engaged in by only a handful. However, even on its death bed, surfing was still practised in its darkest hour by the very few.

One of these few was royal Hawaiian Princess Ka'iulani. In the late 1880s young Ka'iulani reportedly rode a 7-and-a-half foot alaia koa surfboard that turned out to be one of the few pre-twentieth century Hawaiian surfboards to survive the cultural extermination of nineteenth century Hawaii. This board has been housed at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu since 1922; part of the estate donated by Ka'iulani's father Archibald Cleghorn.

"By 1900," Duke Kahanamoku declared, "Surfing had totally disappeared throughout the Islands except for a few isolated spots

