

The Curious Case of DAVID DOUGLAS

Even 180 years later, the circumstances of
the great botanist's death remain a mystery

STORY BY **SUSAN HAUSER** | PHOTOS BY **JEFF DePONTE**

In the summer of 1834 the Scottish botanist David Douglas set out from Kohala, headed east to Hilo on a ninety-mile walk-about that took him across the slopes of Mauna Kea. The terrain he passed through was largely barren, nibbled bare by a scourge of wild cattle roaming the hills of the volcano. The cattle had arrived four decades earlier, a gift from Captain George Vancouver to Hawai'i's King Kamehameha I, the first cattle to ever appear in the Islands. The animals quickly multiplied and, in the wild, became a menacing and destructive herd. When a royal ban against killing them was lifted, an industry was born. By the 1830s bullock hunters had dotted the slopes of Mauna Kea with deep, camouflaged pits. Cattle would fall into the pits and be captured, then sold for their hides and tallow. It was this environment into which Douglas walked.



On July 12 his mangled body was found at the bottom of one of those pits, with a bull standing atop him. Ned Gurney, a bullock hunter who just hours earlier had shared his breakfast with Douglas, became a suspect but in the end was not accused of robbing and murdering the plant collector. Instead the accepted story, bolstered by a noncommittal post-mortem conducted on Douglas' month-old corpse by doctors in Honolulu, was that the 35-year-old intrepid traveler was gored to death after stumbling into an occupied trap.

Douglas' death created shock waves internationally; he was no ordinary plant collector. The botanist had spent years combing the wilds of the Pacific Northwest and shipped thousands of plant specimens back to London, including more than two



The prolific and intrepid Scottish plant hunter David Douglas first saw the conifer that now bears his name in April 1825, when his ship arrived at the Columbia River in Washington. Douglas was just 35 when he died on Mauna Kea in July 1834; the Douglas firs seen here were planted at the site of his death one hundred years after his passing by Hawai'i forester Leicester Bryan.

hundred species then unknown in the Old World. Those plants and seeds had had a major impact, transforming the gardens of Great Britain and Europe. Seeds from the tree known colloquially today as the Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) along with seeds from the Sitka spruce, grew to create vast new forests in Scotland.

After his death Douglas was buried in a plot near Honolulu's Kawaihao Church. His grave was never marked, and its exact location remains unknown. For a hundred years the site of the fateful pit—named Kaluakauka, “the doctor's pit”—was also unmarked. But a century after Douglas'

death Leicester Winthrop “Bill” Bryan remedied that. In the spring of 1934 Bryan got down on his knees and planted two hundred Douglas fir saplings in a glade near the then-overgrown pit where Douglas had died. It was not an unusual act for Bryan. In the course of his forty-year career as a forester in Hawai'i, Bryan personally planted or supervised the planting of more than ten million trees in the Islands before his retirement in 1961.

But the David Douglas memorial he created for the centennial of the Scotsman's death was a personal project; Bryan was himself a botanist and a Douglas enthusiast.

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The Curious Case of David Douglas



Last October a few of Douglas' modern-day admirers marked the 180th anniversary of his passing by adding a new plaque to the lava rock cairn memorial built in 1934 at the site of the botanist's death. Top, left to right, are Doug Magedanz, Lois Leonard, Gordon Mason and Hawai'i forester Chris Graper, seated at the monument. Above left, Magedanz secures the new plaque.

For funding he turned to his own Scottish social club, the Hilo Burns Club, which claimed among its members several other foresters, botanists and plantation managers. The club agreed to pay for the planting of Douglas' namesake trees and the construction of a pyramid-shaped lava rock cairn that would be adorned with brass plaques on two of its three sides: one commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Douglas' death and the other listing the guests at the memorial's dedication.

On the morning of July 12, 1934, a hundred years to the day after Douglas' death, Bryan and his seven guests, including his nine-year-old son, Jack, mounted horses in Hilo and rode for hours up Mauna Kea and then along the old Mānā Road that

skirts the volcano's northern flank. Gathered around the new memorial, the guests listened as Judge David McHattie Forbes delivered a passionate address. A former botanist and forester himself, Forbes felt a kinship to Douglas, he explained, for he himself had apprenticed in the gardens of Scotland's Scone Palace, where Douglas had begun his botanical career over a century earlier.

David Douglas was born in Scone in 1799, left school at age 11 and went to work as a garden boy at Scone Palace. He consumed knowledge about the natural world voraciously, advanced in his gardening career and at 19 won a position at the Glasgow Botanic Garden. One of the perks

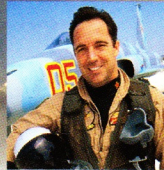
of the job was free attendance to William Jackson Hooker's botany lectures at the University of Glasgow. Despite his own truncated education, Douglas was soon Hooker's star pupil. The professor allowed Douglas to join him and his students on expeditions in the Scottish Highlands.

Before long Hooker judged Douglas' knowledge of botany and plant collecting sufficient for the ambitious young man to graduate to a new career, that of scientific traveler. Through Hooker, Douglas landed a job as a plant collector for the Horticultural Society of London. His first trip, in 1823 to the East Coast of the United States, was such a success that a more challenging assignment was his reward: an excursion to the unexplored wilds of the Pacific Northwest.

Douglas first set foot on the shore of the Columbia River on April 8, 1825 and immediately scooped up his first plant, *Gaultheria shallon*, known as salal. He described the thrill of discovery in his journal: "So pleased was I that I could scarcely see anything but it." Subsequent plants were not so easy to grasp, but he overcame all obstacles to experience that thrill again and again. About a year later he noted in his journal, "When my people in England are made acquainted with my travels, they may perhaps think I have told them nothing but my miseries. That may be very correct, but I now know that such objects as I am in quest of are not obtained without a share of labor, anxiety of mind and sometimes risk of personal safety."

Douglas' zeal knew no bounds. He learned Chinook, the trade language of the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, to deepen his knowledge about plants and their uses. He learned enough French to question the French Canadian fur trappers of the Hudson's Bay Company, with whom he often traveled. He learned Spanish for a botanical expedition to California and spoke Latin in conversations with mission priests. He almost certainly learned some Hawaiian during his two brief collecting sojourns, in 1832 and 1834, on the islands of O'ahu and Hawai'i.

Within a week of his arrival on Hawai'i Island in January 1834 he organized expeditions to Mauna Kea, Kīlauea and Mauna Loa. Climbing Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, both higher than thirteen thousand feet, took him more than two weeks each. Along the way he collected and pressed plants and, with the sixty pounds of instruments he carried on his back, made scientific measurements.

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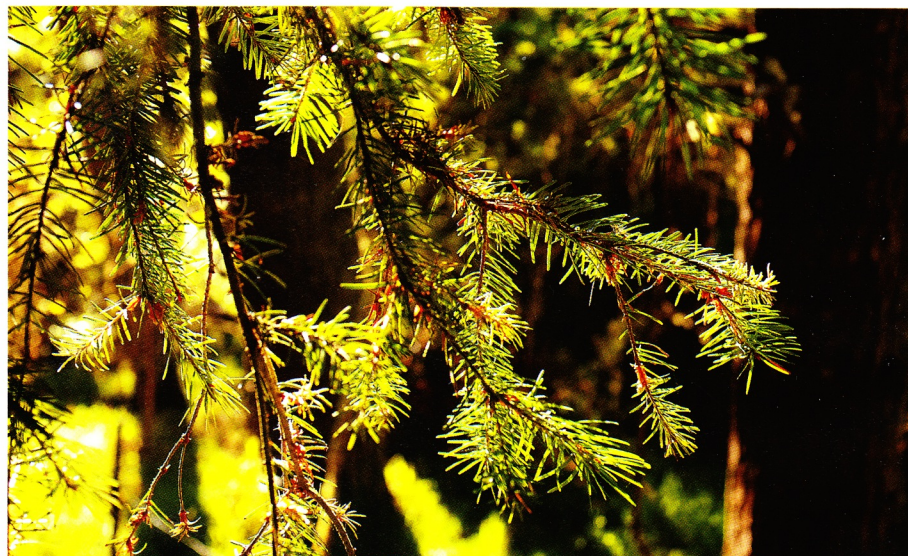
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The Curious Case of David Douglas



A sign bearing Douglas' name marks the trailhead to Kaluakauka, the fateful “doctor's pit.” Few of the two hundred Douglas firs Bryan planted there remain, but those that do still stand tall and bear their distinctive cones. Douglas described the tree, which can grow taller than three hundred feet, as “one of the most striking and truly graceful objects in nature.”

Douglas was almost delirious with pleasure over the plethora of native and endemic plants he found on Hawai'i Island. The lush flora was like nothing he'd ever seen. Ferns in particular enchanted him. He collected more than fifty specimens on Mauna Kea alone, and when he encountered a variety that also grew in Scotland, *Asplenium viride*, he described the moment of discovery as “a circumstance which gave me inexpressible pleasure, and recalled to my mind many of the happiest scenes of my early life.” A number of the plants Douglas collected in Hawai'i were given his name. They include a species of hala, *Pandanus douglasii*; the mule's foot fern, or pala, known as *Marattia douglasii*; and a flowering heather, pūkiawe, or *Styphelia douglasii*.

After reaching Kīlauea's crater Douglas sat up all night and watched the lava with awe. He wrote to the wife of Richard Charlton, the British consul in Honolulu, “One day there, madam, is worth one year of common existence.” After his time on

Hawai'i Island, Douglas returned to Honolulu to wait for a ship that would take him back to London. Months passed. When an acquaintance named John Diell remarked that he would like to see Kīlauea, Douglas offered to return to the volcano and be his guide. The two, along with Diell's wife, sailed for Lahaina, where the Diells disembarked, intent on visting Moloka'i. The trio made plans to reunite in Hilo and head to Kīlauea. Douglas sailed on alone to Kohala, but when the schooner from there to Hilo was delayed, he made a fateful decision. Too impatient to wait, Douglas set out on foot to traverse a ninety-mile trail across Mauna Kea and meet the Diells in Hilo. That walk ended at Kaluakauka.

Only about a dozen of the two hundred Douglas firs that Bryan planted eighty years ago survive, but their drooping green branches provided a graceful backdrop to a ceremony held last October at Kaluakauka to dedicate a new brass plaque for the Douglas memorial. I was there with

Lois Leonard, a documentary filmmaker, and Gordon Mason, a British botanist and historian. Mason had met Leonard in 2001 while he was retracing Douglas' footsteps: One day he walked into the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site in Washington state, a place that had once been an outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company and which Douglas had used as his base of operations in the Northwest. Mason asked a passing historic interpreter, Doug Magedanz, whether anyone there knew anything about Douglas.

Magedanz took Mason to meet his wife: none other than Lois Leonard, who was then working as education director of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust. For years Leonard had harbored a desire to make a film about Douglas. When she met Mason a creative partnership was born, and Leonard's documentary, *Finding David Douglas*, was released in 2012. Mason was one of the on-camera Douglas experts; I was the scriptwriter.

Now we were all gathered at Kaluakauka to honor the 180th anniversary of Douglas' death. Two days before, Magedanz had affixed a new plaque to the stone memorial that Bryan created. It reads in part: "Honoring the life of David Douglas on the 180th anniversary of his untimely death and the 100th anniversary of the publication of his journal."

At this dedication there was no Scottish judge to intone a passionate address, but there was a guest of honor: Lucy Douglas, David Douglas' great-great-great-great niece, born seventy-three years ago in Tennessee. She grew up hearing stories about her famous relative from her father, Robert John Douglas. "I can really see a look of Douglas in you, Lucy," said Mason. In fact, Lucy's resemblance to her long-lost relative is uncanny. A contemporary account described Douglas as "a sturdy little Scot; handsome, rather; with head and face of fine Grecian mold."

After the plaque was unveiled our group of seven climbed back up a steep hill to the road, casting one last look at the peaceful setting. The grass around the memorial is now long and thick, and koa trees grow nearby; the wild cattle are a thing of the past, and young seedlings suffer little risk of being cut down by teeth or hooves. I recalled the words that Bryan wrote in an article about Kaluakauka published in 1934: "We have had the pleasure of erecting a monument to [Douglas'] memory in a pleasant spot that would gladden the heart of any naturalist." HH



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