Preface

Claus Spreckels, who built a sugar empire in California and in the Hawaiian Kingdom, died over half a century ago. Much of what has been written about his Hawaiian career makes him out to be a scoundrel. Beyond question he was a man of consequence in the islands. How much consequence? And for good or evil? That is what I have tried to find out.

Spreckels became a card-playing crony and financial backer of Hawaii's last king, the merry David Kalakaua, who reigned from 1874 to 1891. He formed an alliance with that monarch's "evil angel," Premier Walter Murray Gibson. For a time, the unlikely Kalakaua-Gibson-Spreckels triumvirate controlled the kingdom. Later, after the overthrow of King Kalakaua's sister, Queen Liliuo-kalani, who reigned from 1891 to 1893, Spreckels attempted to put her back on the throne.

In Hawaii his reputation for rascality lives on. In many ways, as the following pages will show, the reputation was well earned. But his contributions to the development of the island kingdom remain largely unsung. This book tries to throw some light on these.

The story deals with Spreckels' rise and fall in Hawaii. It tells of the clash of a mainland entrepreneur with an island community. It records his initial warm reception, his gradually tightening grip on the Hawaiian Kingdom, his spreading monopoly of the sugar industry, his conflicts with the conservative businessmen, his sudden

fall from political power, and the consequent decline of his economic power.

In the islands Claus Spreckels was the outlander in the Veblenian sense, the invader, the interloper. He was unfettered by the Hawaiian culture or by that culture as modified by the missionaries from Boston. His own cultural heritage was rather akin to that of the lusty whalers who were constantly at odds with the Hawaiian missionaries, or to that of contemporary robber barons, whose rapaciously acquisitive age nevertheless brought startling material progress to the common man.

Historians may argue whether economic development in the United States would have taken place rapidly without the moguls. As to Hawaii, there is less room for argument. Spreckels towered over the Hawaiian sugar industry; there was no one else of comparable stature. Without him the island sugar industry could hardly have gone forward as fast as it did.

In the minds of many islanders Spreckels strides through the pages of Hawaiian history as an opportunist who drained the island kingdom and gave nothing in return. It is easy to remember his ruthlessness, his arrogance, his corruption of king, cabinet, and legislature; and easy to forget his contributions to the development of the kingdom.

Economic development is a complicated affair which includes thousands of things—not all strictly economic—and thousands of persons, from industrial giants to menial laborers. Within a given period of such development it may be a fruitless task to choose "the most important person." Yet, if for late nineteenth-century Hawaii a choice were to be made, the title might well go to Claus Spreckels. In the islands, sugar was a dominant fact of economic life, and in sugar Spreckels was king.

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