

# Mutiny, Mayhem, Mythology



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*Bounty's Enigmatic Voyage*

Alan Frost



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*For Michelle,  
who somehow emerged  
from the unfathomable depths  
of our departed time.*



# Contents

List of Figures	ix
List of Plates	xi
List of Tables	xiii
Preface	xv
Introduction: The Troubled History of <i>Bounty's</i> Story	1
<b>Part I History's Shrouds and Silences</b>	
1 A Serious Affair to Be Starved: The Resentment of Sailors When Not Properly Fed	57
2 A Soul in Agony: Fletcher Christian's Torment	95
3 Somewhere Between Sea and Sky: The Enigma of Fletcher Christian's Death	127
<b>Part II The Making of <i>Bounty's</i> Story</b>	
4 Discovering Nature: The Rise of British Scientific Exploration, 1660–1800	185
5 Information and Entertainment, Image and Archetype: The Cardinal Points of the Exploration Narrative	225
6 Men Who Strove with Gods: James Cook, William Bligh, Fletcher Christian	253
Conclusion: The Enduring Intrigue of <i>Bounty's</i> Voyage	293
Acknowledgements	299
References	301
Index	317



# List of Figures

Figure 1 The voyage of the <i>Bounty</i> to Tahiti, 1787–8.	xxii
Figure 2 Wordsworth's Lake District.	94
Figure 3 The conjectured routes of the <i>Bounty</i> in 1789, after the mutiny.	128
Figure 4 The Pitcairn settlement in the 1790s.	162
Figure 5 Mary Christian's headstone on Norfolk Island.	169



# List of Plates

- Plate 1 *The Bread Fruit of Otahytey* by George Tobin, from Tobin's sketches on the HMS *Providence*, 1791–93.
- Plate 2 William Wordsworth, aged twenty-eight, by William Shuter, 1798.
- Plate 3 Fletcher Christian's signature.
- Plate 4 William Hodges, *The Resolution and Adventure among Icebergs*.
- Plate 5 George III posthumously awarded James Cook with a coat of arms in September 1785, six years after Cook's death.
- Plate 6 The frontispiece of Thomas Bankes's *System of Geography* (1787) shows Cook ascending to glory.
- Plate 7 The author's daughters, Melissa and Clea, beneath a breadfruit tree, Tahiti, 1976.



# List of Tables

Table 1 The ages of the alleged mutineers.	29
Table 2 Standard weekly ration for a seaman in the 1780s.	71
Table 3 'Proportion of each species of provisions', as set out by the Victualling Board.	73



# Preface

Anyone watching HM Armed Vessel *Bounty* sail out from Spithead (Portsmouth) under the command of Lieutenant William Bligh on a wintery day in December 1787 could have had no expectation that the voyage would take on a momentous significance. True, its purpose, to bring a cargo of breadfruit and other food plants from the islands of the central Pacific Ocean and the East Indies to the West India islands, was unusual. Still, this was by no means the first large-scale transfer of plants between hemispheres that Europeans had undertaken; and in itself *Bounty's* voyage simply could not have had the global impact of Christopher Columbus's voyages to the Americas; Bartholomeu Dias's and Vasco da Gama's to the Cape of Good Hope and India; Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation; and James Cook's three very lengthy voyages of survey, charting and collecting. No one could ever have expected to write, or be justified in writing, of *Bounty's* voyage as Abbé Raynal wrote of the pioneering ones to America and India:

No event[s] [have] been so interesting to mankind in general, and to the inhabitants of Europe in particular, as the discovery of the New World, and the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope ... [They have given] rise to a revolution in the commerce, and in the power of nations; and in the manners, industry, and government of the whole world.<sup>1</sup>

And yet.

---

1 Raynal 1776, vol. 1, p. [1].

What with the arduousness of its passage outwards to Tahiti, the idyllic (for the Europeans) stay on the island, the mutiny by Fletcher Christian and part of the crew in April 1789, and the colony established on isolated Pitcairn Island by nine of the mutineers and their Polynesian companions, *Bounty's* voyage has become the stuff of legend to a degree that the earlier, much more geographically, economically and politically significant voyages have not. It is estimated that more than 3000 books and articles (running to millions upon millions of words) about *Bounty's* voyage and its various aftermaths have been published. It has been the subject of novels, poems and plays, feature films and documentaries.

However, legend is not necessarily conducive to good history; and as I show in the Introduction, despite all the attention paid to *Bounty's* voyage and its attendant circumstances, there has been little fundamental increase in our historical understanding of these things in the past 225 years. Indeed, much of the history of the voyage has been seriously flawed.

There are a number of reasons for this. One is that writers have often failed to read the documentary sources with sufficient care and wariness, but rather have taken statements at face value. This has been especially true where William Bligh's various accounts are concerned. When these accounts do not contain outright falsifications, they are often either 'economical with the truth' or blind to any details detrimental to the upright character that Bligh strove to project to the Admiralty, his patron Sir Joseph Banks, the public, and self-righteously to himself.

A second is that, surprisingly, writers have shown inadequate understandings of conditions of naval service towards the end of the eighteenth century, and of sailors' expectations and their tenacity in clinging to what they conceived to be their 'rights', in particular where the allocation of food was concerned.

A third is that, generation after generation, commentators have perpetuated earlier views, sometimes even simply repeating what previous writers have said. Depending on whether they have been for or against Bligh, the uncritical acceptance of such writers has meant that a pair of binary images has dominated analysis: either Good Bligh/Bad Christian or Bad Bligh/Good Christian. Even diligent writers with sound scholarly methodologies have found it difficult to avoid this trap, which has had the effect of crimping analysis. An associated problem has been the reliance on clichés, entailing long-discredited psychology.

It is in the nature of things that historical explanations should vary according to the predilections of writers and the preoccupations of their age. For example, in the first half of the twentieth century, in the contexts of rampant capitalism and the Great Depression, Charles Beard's economically focused histories of the making of the United States constitution and of the nation more generally held sway. In the second half of the century, when attention had turned to the extensive seventeenth- and eighteenth-century considerations in Britain and Enlightenment Europe of the nature of individual and political freedoms and of the rights and responsibilities of states and citizens, Bernard Bailyn's intellectual and demographic studies came to prominence.

So it has been with the history of *Bounty's* voyage. In 1936, Owen Rutter titled his account *The True Story of the Mutiny in the Bounty*. The title of the English edition of Alexander McKee's 1961 version was *The Truth about the Mutiny on the Bounty*. Bengt Danielsson wanted to call his 1962 publication *The True and Complete Story of All That Happened on Board the Bounty on Her Voyage to the South Seas 1787–1789 with an Account of What Happened after the Mutiny to the Protagonists in the Drama*. Caroline Alexander subtitled her 2003 account *The True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty*.

Danielsson's publisher did not allow him to use his preferred title. This was a wise decision, and not only because it was impossibly clumsy. It would have been good if the other authors had also eschewed their claims to truth. For none of their tellings of *Bounty's* story is either complete or, within its limits, of unblemished truthfulness. Each is flawed in a number of ways, but especially by a too-ready acceptance of Bligh's versions of events.

In his writings, Bligh was an inveterate suppressor of adverse circumstance and a prevaricator, endeavours in which he was abetted by his editors. Nonetheless, it may be that he believed some of his self-serving assertions, for, as historian Rolf Du Rietz has remarked, in moments of crisis he was prone 'to believe what he wanted to believe, thus forming those deceptions and illusions apparently forming such an indispensable support for his self-confidence'. Either anticipating challenges to his veracity or responding to them, Bligh repeatedly asserted that he had told the truth. He wrote to Banks from Batavia:

I can however Sir promise to you that my honor and character is without a blemish, & I shall appear as soon as I possibly can before the Admiralty that my conduct may [be] enquired into, and where I shall convince the World I stand as an officer despising mercy & forgiveness if my conduct is at all blameable.

Later, he told Banks, ‘Captain Bligh declares every thing in his *Narrative* to be sacred truths, & defies the utmost Malice to pervert them.’<sup>2</sup>

However, what was ‘sacred truth’ for William Bligh was manifestly not so, but rather a melange of despicable distortions and lies, for John Fryer and James Morrison, for Fletcher Christian and William Purcell, and for the rest of *Bounty*’s crew. In stating this, I am not adopting the postmodernist stance that recognises only indeterminacy. Even given the inevitable variations in perception exhibited by the major participants in the events of the voyage, the mutiny and the Pitcairn aftermath, I think it is possible to offer a sounder history than we have previously had.

There are four things above all others that we must do to have this. The first is to abandon the long fixation on the binary sets of images of Good Bligh/Bad Christian and Bad Bligh/Good Christian. Harry Maude’s sixty-years-old comment remains applicable to much of what has been written on the subject since: ‘the protagonists of Bligh and Christian are still engaged in apportioning the blame; an exercise which one feels at times tells us more about the personality of the writer than [about] the characters and motives of the two opponents.’<sup>3</sup>

In order to get beyond this impasse, we need to assess the events of the voyage with a better understanding of the realities of late-eighteenth-century naval life. Then, we need to undertake a rigorous re-examination of the primary sources, not accepting their accounts at face value but rather questioning and comparing them one with another, to see if some sort of consensus emerges.

Finally, we need to face openly the awkward difficulty – awkward from the point of view of presenting it – that there is much in the history of *Bounty*’s voyage that we now cannot either know or be sure about. It is much

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2 Du Rietz [2003] 2009, pp. 24–5; Bligh to Banks, 13 October 1789, Bligh 1989, p. 30; Bligh to Banks [December 1792], Bligh Miscellaneous, p. 19.

3 Maude 1968, p. 4.

## Preface

better to acknowledge the gaps and silences of the past than to seek to fill them with supposition, dubious theory, discredited psychologising and false consciousness, all of which obscure more than they enlighten.

\* \* \*

In Part I (Chapters 1–3) of this book, I do not offer yet another account of the physical progress of *Bounty's* voyage. Rather, I consider three aspects that, despite all that has been written, have not yet received proper attention. The first of these is how Bligh's practices as purser violated the crew's customary expectations and thereby created an atmosphere in which mutinous thoughts might fester. The second concerns the difficulties of knowing nearly as much as we need to in order to understand what moved Fletcher Christian to rebel against his commander. Here, given the paucity of records about Christian's life, I invoke the example of William Wordsworth's to suggest the likely nature of Christian's childhood. This is not so far-fetched as it may initially seem. Both were born in Cumbria in the middle decades of the eighteenth century; both lost their fathers when they were young; both received a good education; and both then attempted to make a way in the wider world – with the consequence that the one failed miserably and the other succeeded. In contemplating this conundrum, we may perhaps gain some insight into Fletcher Christian's motivations. The third is how anachronisms, conflicts and uncertainties in the source materials make it impossible to know precisely what happened on Pitcairn Island in the first ten years of the mutineers' settlement; and in particular, whether Fletcher Christian did indeed die on this isolated island, or rather returned to England. Together, these chapters present reassessments and new arguments, and thus advance our understanding of important, but little understood, aspects of the voyage.

However, if close textual analysis and rigorous argument can help us to a better understanding of some of the obscure circumstances of *Bounty's* voyage and its aftermaths, in themselves they can do little to explain the public's enduring interest in the voyage and its principal protagonists. To understand this interest better, we need to see that there is another level of discourse present in the central records of the voyage, as indeed there is in other narratives of sea and land explorations of the time.

In Part II, I am concerned to show how, while it remained grounded in scientific observation and was presented to the public in a plain style, the exploration narrative in its fully developed form encapsulated modes of discourse that were decidedly unscientific; and how this feature has distorted our understandings of the history they purport to convey. To put it bluntly, many of the exploration narratives published in the last decades of the eighteenth century were as much literary creations as they were scientific records. In the case of William Bligh's *A Voyage to the South Sea* (1792), this was much more of the first characterisation than the second; and this has had the very unfortunate consequence of giving us a false sense of *Bounty's* voyage for more than 200 years.

I start by sketching the stages by which the principles of the dawning Scientific Revolution were applied to exploration (Chapter 4). When it first began to take form in the middle of the seventeenth century, the exploration narrative was intended to be written in a plain, unadorned style, so as to be a straightforward record of times and courses, latitudes and longitudes, coastlines, lands and their geographical features, their produce and peoples. This chapter is not a detailed examination of the daily work of naturalists at sea or on land, such as Iain McCalman offers in *Darwin's Armada* (2009) and Glyn Williams in *Naturalists at Sea* (2013). Rather, I intend it to provide a context for an examination of how, in the course of the eighteenth century, the character of the exploration narrative was transformed.

We may see beginnings of this transformation in William Dampier's *A New Voyage round the World* (1697), and in Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins's account of George Anson's circumnavigation, *A Voyage round the World* (1748). John Hawkesworth developed it fully in his account of James Cook's first voyage, which formed part of his amalgamation of the journals of John Byron, Samuel Wallis, Philip Carteret, James Cook and Joseph Banks, *An Account of the Voyages ... for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere* (1773).

In Chapter 5, I indicate the kind of changes that John Hawkesworth made to original records he worked from. His narrative became a model for later ones, including those of Cook's second and third voyages (1777, 1784). I then examine four other narratives in detail: William Bartram, *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia,*

*East & West Florida* (c. 1791); Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay, to the Northern Ocean* (1795); James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790); and Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799). I show that, in common with Dampier's and Hawkesworth's, each of these narratives exhibits the motif of the hero who braves adversity and leaves the familiar world for a strange, unknown one, who faces the threat of personal dissolution, and who either dies tragically or returns home. That is, I show that the figure whom Joseph Campbell called 'the hero with a thousand faces' and the narrative structure that Mircea Eliade termed 'the myth of the eternal return' inform the exploration narrative in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

The incorporation of both these tropes into the exploration narrative reflected publishers' and editors' (and in some cases also the explorer's) judgement about what would interest the public. In Chapter 6, I analyse their presence in the published narratives of Cook's second and third voyages, and of *Bounty's* voyage. The geographical circumstances of James Cook's second voyage meant that he and Canon Douglas, his editor, found it comparatively easy to represent him as a mythic voyager, while keeping closely to his original manuscript. However, Douglas did embellish the records significantly when he again portrayed Cook as such in the account of his third voyage.

What with pervasive rearrangements of details, distortions and omissions, Bligh's *A Voyage to the South Sea* was a much more consciously 'constructed' work again, with the aim of elevating Bligh to the status of naval hero. And, as I show, the various piecemeal representations of Fletcher Christian, together with the silences that attend his life, are also intended to lead us to see Christian in this light. In the published narratives of Cook's, Bligh's and Christian's ventures, history has been transmuted into myth.

We need to make four advances, then, if we are to enlarge our understandings of what happened on the voyage and at Pitcairn Island, and of the public's enduring interest in the whole story of *Bounty's* voyage.

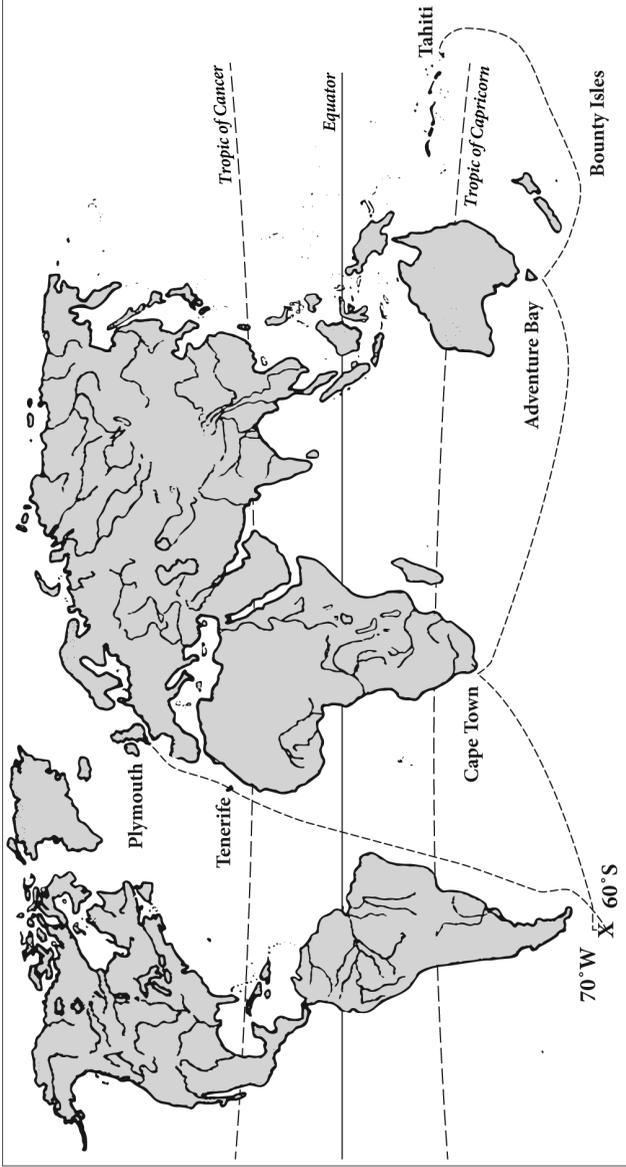


Figure 1 The voyage of the *Bounty* to Tahiti, 1787–8.