

Another Couple of Books About *Bounty* (and Pitcairn Island)?

Mutiny, Mayhem, Mythology: *Bounty's Enigmatic Voyage*. By Alan Frost. Sydney, Sydney University Press, 2018. 336 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. ISBN 9781743325872 (pbk), 9781743325889 (ebook). AU\$40.00 (pbk), AU\$15.99 (ebook).; *The Bounty from the Beach: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Essays*. Edited by Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega. Acton, ANU Press, 2018. ix + 262 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography. ISBN 9781760462444 (pbk), 9781760462451 (ebook). AU\$48.00 (pbk), ebook free of charge.

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REVIEW ESSAY

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In December 2018, I participated in a panel about Pitcairn Island history titled “‘Strangers’: Placing Insiders, Outsiders and the Microcosmic in Pacific Language and History’ at the Pacific History Association (PHA) conference in Cambridge, England. Apart from a single conference in 2012 at Angwin College, California, it is likely that this was one of few occasions in which three academics who have been to Pitcairn Island had ever assembled a conference panel. We were gathered to present at the intersection of a breadth of topics ranging from empirical history, history of science, linguistics, film, and inter-island relations with Mangareva, all with Pitcairn Island as fulcrum-subject. Aside from myself, the other panellists were Alexander Mawyer, Tillman Nechtman and Adrian Young. We drew a decent crowd and it was enlivening to realize that Pitcairn Island history is a ripe topic within broader trends in Pacific history.

The panel also served as a reminder that the names and motifs around *Bounty*, Captain William Bligh, Fletcher Christian, and the lived experiences of Pitcairners themselves, have long been and remain mythical tropes in Pacific history. A five-kilometre square domain of South Pacific rock and sea, and the events and seafaring imaginings which surround it, have presented and represented an endless number of (broken) dreams and (lost) memories evident in many thousands of books and articles.

So why the need for two additional volumes? Having read the extensive historical, ethnographic, archaeological, and linguistic canon before commencing my fieldwork on Pitcairn Island, I admit my scepticism regarding the proposed contribution of any new work. Thus, I was pleasantly surprised to find these two volumes are tackling *Bounty* as a concept from completely different perspectives.

Alan Frost’s *Mutiny, Mayhem, Mythology* is an empirical account of how newly claimed and found lacunae (and supposedly wronged writings) have coloured and even tainted the historical record of *Bounty* and what effect such versions have had on generations

Acknowledgements: I acknowledge feedback from Martin Gibbs, Alexander Mawyer, Tillman Nechtman, and Adrian Young on an earlier version of this review essay, and for their professional interaction, which has given rise to several of the speculative directions presented herein about the future of pan-disciplinary research involving Pitcairn Island in Pacific history.

of work about the persons and nature of the vessel. Rather differently though occasionally intersecting, Largeaud-Ortega's *The Bounty from the Beach* is a speculative and discursive journey across the Pacific Ocean, insular cognition, Polynesian islands, and, reinterpreting Greg Dening, to everyday people 'on both sides of the beach' (p. 2). Where Frost's work is staunchly historical, Largeaud-Ortega's edited collection enables more diverse musings on the cultural and speculative qualities of *Bounty*. As such, these two books represent two distinct sides of the fascination with the famed ship: the countable and discoverable (purportedly replicable) versus the discursive and the storied (most likely non-replicable). These are two different perspectives lying on distinct points on the empirical–speculative spectrum. Dualities abound. Together the volumes emphasize that *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island are both near and far.

FROST

Frost, an Emeritus Professor of History, seeks to look beyond previous and possibly inaccurate narratives 'to shed new light on the infamous expedition and its significance' (back cover). 'Legend is not necessarily conducive to good history' (p. xvi) tells Frost, and he argues that historians have hitherto either been lax as regards reading up on the status of late 18th-century naval service or by perpetuating historical falsehoods or both.

Starting with the introduction, 'The troubled history of *Bounty*'s story', Frost weighs in by problematizing who Fletcher Christian was, what role he played in the event, what the function of Captain Bligh was, and how we historians and *Bounty*-enthralled thinkers and buffs should take a sideways glance at the evidence at hand to arrive at a less troubled and more rounded history about the ship and its men. The writing meanders, leading the reader through a number of likely and plausible signposts where previous historians have gone wrong and where and how the record can be set straight, especially as regards the (inter)personal and the role of narratives as heuristic tools.

LARGEAUD-ORTEGA

The seven chapters well edited by Largeaud-Ortega, Associate Professor of Anglophone literature and postcolonial Pacific studies at University of French Polynesia, Tahiti, enplace *Bounty* within a collective, greater Pacific mindset. Such a world is expanded through astute and creative musings on maritime culture, the Polynesian versus Anglo body (for example, the tattoos of the mutineers and their relation to *tapu* and *mana*), and how relics traverse and travel liminalities, with the pertinent here principally being interpretations of Dening's *beach as a place of encounter*.

The work provides nuanced perspectives on how the region and its people have been represented across a range of media, including literature, material culture, and film. In a collective effort to think of this world in its multitude complexities, the volume aims to reorient the *Bounty* focus away from the West, here largely Australasian scholarship; distanced from viewing Pacific Islands as mere backdrops for a(ny) mutiny (intellectual or nautical), and open this thinking to a much larger Oceanic frame. Largeaud-Ortega's overarching aim is well achieved; the gauntlet has been thrown down for a deeper problematizing and re-reading of *Bounty*'s, 'the beach's', and, from a distance, Pitcairn Island's cultural history from a more critical and cross-disciplinary point of view. In fact, the chapters point securely towards there being several probable and achievable *Bounties*, a congregation of possibilities brought about through varied approaches to posing and perceiving this book project's famously lauded (and densely wooded) research object.

CRITIQUE AND FUTURE

With these two contrasting approaches in mind, I now wish to segue into a discussion of future prospects for *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island directed (historical) research, which myself and the participants of 2018's PHA panel, have recently proposed.¹

Frost's narrative melds people, boat, and the insatiable intrigue between sea and sky with the efforts of the historian to untangle the horribly long-term tangled. And *Bounty* is ensnared. This unravelling is an ambitious project and something Frost does not quite achieve in these six chapters bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. The account is somewhat followable, although some of the implications and involvements, including Christian's connection to William Wordsworth and any number of interpretations of Bligh's personality, leave the reader a little lost. By the final chapter I was left with the feeling that this book is a pastiche of ideas – good ones, no doubt – of long-term individual interest to Frost. Some of these feel particular, personal, even gripe-like.

I doubt it is possible to provide an answer to one of the book's overarching issues – 'why this continuing fascination?' (p. 295) – in a 320-page account. While the task is noble and, indeed, perennially romantic, and Frost offers an impressive think-tank of consumable possibilities that would satisfy empirical historians, the outcome nonetheless lacks cohesion and comprehension. Still, Frost's thinking will remain an important part of the critical catalogue of *Bounty*-focused opinion.

A critique of Largeaud-Ortega is perhaps more relevant considering contemporary and impending directions in Pacific historiography. Here, the editor has applied contemporary intellectual approaches – unhemming the seams, so to speak – to produce a modern-day consideration of *Bounty* that is fruitful. The boat does not just represent history or (maritime) archaeology or any number of other disciplines. Rather, it is all and none of these, a singular and plural flotilla, a frigate of dreams made true and lost forever. We can thank Largeaud-Ortega and the volume's eight other authors for bringing us up to speed on the seafaring nature of *Bounty*'s present scholarly import.

That said about Frost's and Largeaud-Ortega's analyses, there is still much to consider about the impacts of *Bounty* (and Pitcairn Island) on Pacific history. First, as Mawyer et al. raise in their consideration of 'The Outremer of Europe's Outremer', is what the island can offer to the discipline in terms of doing history in remote environments. Pitcairn Island is special because it *is* remote, yet it has a huge documented history arising from a small geographical place. Because of these contradictions, *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island research (pr)offers the sort of multipositionality enabled by a multi-disciplinary approach, an upending of deranged (and deranging) history/histories, historical uneasiness and uncanniness, and an entrance to what Pitcairn Island as research object can do and does.

The Bounty from the Beach is suggestive of similar approaches. Archaeologist assistant on Pitcairn Island in 1963 Hardwicke Knight puts it thus: 'To know more about Pitcairn is to know more about human nature'.² Further, to know (about) Pitcairn Island is to know the limits of knowing humanity. Other Hardwicke Knight quotes such as 'Pitcairn Island is the

¹ Alexander Mawyer et al., 'The Outremer of Europe's Outremer: Pitcairn Island, Mangareva and the Persistence of Interaction between Îles Oubliées (Italian: "Oltremari" dell'Europa d'Oltremare: Pitcairn, Mangareva e le Persistenti Interazioni tra Isole Dimenticate)', in *L'Europa d'Oltremare*, ed. Adriano Favole (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2020), 93–109.

² Hardwicke F. Knight, 'Preface', in 'Preliminary Report', Papers of Hardwicke Knight, Hocken Library, University of Otago, MS-4118-107, 1 cited in Adrian Young, 'Mutiny's Bounty: Pitcairn Islanders and the Making of a Natural Laboratory on the Edge of Britain's Pacific Empire' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2016), 2.

most knowable place on earth' and 'history-ing' the margins are crucial for appreciating the emplacement of contemporary Pitcairn Island and *Bounty* historical research.

Just as there are several possible *Bounties*, there are distinctive Pitcairn Islands, and even several variegated 'Pacifics'. The very smallness of islands like Pitcairn across the Pacific gives rise to diverging meanings and interpretations. Frost's and Largeaud-Ortega's volumes are proof of the way that *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island accounts are returned to again and again. As such, these are useful and productive *wr*-stories (core and key exposés), where personal, historical, and academic recursion – the reapplication and reconsultation of past ideas – and intellectual purchase – that is, observing scholarly footholds – are required or at least on offer. Let us hope that the lingering shadows, the margins of the margins, and the entangling of historicities of ships and places continue to be worthy locales of exchange for Pacific history and historians.

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