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Professor A. S. C. Ross on Pitcairnese and the Pronunciation of “Pitcairn”

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In the latter part of his career British academic Professor Alan Strode Campbell Ross turned his hand to researching Pitcairnese, the Pitcairn Island language:

My own connection with Pitcairnese is the following. Some ten years ago I noticed, in *The Times*, that the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific had visited Pitcairn [Island]; he said that the inhabitants spoke a form of English but that much of what they said was incomprehensible to him; he gave me a specimen sentence which was incomprehensible to me also. I wrote to him and he kindly put me in touch with the then schoolmaster on the island, A. W. [Albert Wadkins] Moverley. I found that the latter was extremely interested in Pitcairnese and had made large linguistics collections. He came to Birmingham, with a scholarship from the University, so that, working under my direction, he might submit a Ph.D. thesis on the subject. It is very sad to record that, after a year's hard work in Birmingham, he died very suddenly in the autumn of 1953. He had worked so hard, both on the island and in Birmingham that, at the time of his death, his thesis was very far advanced. It had always been our intention that we should publish a joint work on Pitcairnese which should consist, essentially, of his thesis, elaborated on the General-Linguistic and Tahitian sides by myself. Aided by grants from the University of Birmingham and the French Government, I therefore went to Paris to try to learn to talk Tahitian from the Tahitian colony living there. I thought that, despite Moverley's death, our joint project should still be adhered to. The book is now almost ready for press and is to be published by Messrs. André Deutsch in 1962.¹

To this day, Ross and Moverley's resultant edited edition published in 1964, the complete title of which is *The Pitcairnese Language with Contributions by E. Schubert, H. E. and Alaric Maude, E. H. Flint and A. C. Gimson*, is the most comprehensive grammatical and historical treatment of the Pitcairn Island language.² This language has also been referred to as “Pitcairn” and “Pitkern” in more recent published sources.³

My task in this piece is twofold: first, to outline briefly a part of the background of Ross's philological methodology into Pitcairnese involving writing to newspapers and journals to garner responses to historical linguistics questions (several of these responses informed the content of the final publication of *The Pitcairnese Language*); second, to assess Ross's methodology in order to evaluate the outcome of his 1960 query in the journal *Notes and Queries*. I do this specifically regarding the idiosyncratic and possibly aberrant pronunciation by Pitcairn Islanders of their language and island name as [ˈpɪtkæ:n] instead of the more common [ˈpɪtkɛ:n].

Because of the untimely death of his PhD student in 1953, and having never traveled to the Pacific or heard Pitcairn spoken save for the single tape-recording of Moverley,⁴ in order to complete the “joint project” Ross was forced to adopt a methodology based primarily on expanding his largely Australian and Pacific contact base through letter writing. Ross corresponded with many expert scholars, language enthusiasts, and several interested public during the years he was involved in publishing *The Pitcairnese Language*. The work involved the specialized input of linguists, historians, botanists, and zoologists who had knowledge and experience of the places and languages of Pitcairn Island, and, to a lesser extent, Norfolk Island, and of Tahitian language, culture, and environment.

A record of Ross's correspondence about Pitcairn Island and what he and others at that time had dubbed as the language “Pitcairnese” is preserved in the archive “Ross, Alan Strode Campbell (1907–1980), Professor of Linguistics: correspondence; notes. Finding Number US29, Cadbury Research

Library Special Collections, University of Birmingham.”⁵ The Finding Number US29 itemizes letters addressed to Ross dated from January 30, 1956 to November 7, 1961. The archive reveals the responses of others based on the requests begun by the reaching out of Ross. As a linguistic scientist and primarily a theoretical philologist, who did not possess great knowledge of the lie of the land of the Pacific, Ross comes across as searching for ways to make public a work that Moverley had begun after he arrived on Pitcairn in 1948. The publication, more than a decade after Ross and Moverley began their collaboration, had suffered several delays.⁶ The eventual publication, including historical and linguistic sketches of both Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island, a detailed vocabulary-cum-glossary of Pitcairnese, grammatical analyses, an annotated conversation text in Pitcairnese, and a comprehensive listing of Pitcairn Island’s “pristine place names,”⁷ was obviously testament to Ross’s ambition to honor the work of his late student and to carry out his own academic promise.

What is of particular interest to Ross’s methodology is how he finessed his professional contacts, the way he invited scholars to contribute to *The Pitcairnese Language*, and how he reached out to a greater public beyond the realms of academia. Along with his professional correspondents who were generous, magnanimous, and punctual in sharing their knowledge, intellectual resources, and offers of collaboration, Ross used the popular press in New Zealand such as the *New Zealand Listener* and *The Press* to garner significant amounts of etymological information about Pitcairnese. A short passage of one of these short queries, which bore intellectual fruit, is worth excerpting to give a clue as to the thoroughness of the philological methodology Ross employed:

Word from Pitcairn: Sir—Most of the word of the language of Pitcairn Island are, naturally enough, either or Tahitian or of English origin. Those of the subjoined list (which appear in a collection of linguistic material compiled by the late A. W. Moverley, sometime schoolmaster on Pitcairn), seem to be of neither of these origins, and it occurred to me that they might be quite recent importations from New Zealand English. I wonder if any of your readers know any of them in New Zealand; I should be so grateful for any information. (In the list, I print the Pitcairnese words in *italic*, their meaning in roman [sic, no capital]—as *shipmate* meaning “a kind of bird”; if the meaning is fairly obvious, I omit it—as in the case of *asparagus-fern*, which does, in fact, mean “a kind of fern” [sic, no period] PROFESSOR ALAN C. S. ROSS, University of Birmingham, Edmund Street, Birmingham 3, England.⁸

Both the *New Zealand Listener* and *The Press* letters are mentioned in the Preface to *The Pitcairnese Language*; in the same mood of thanking his professional colleagues, in a footnote Ross writes: “Also to (i) all those who kindly answered the two letters which I published in New Zealand about possible newzealandisms in Pitcairnese (“Words from Pitcairn,” *New Zealand Listener*, June 17, 1960, and “New Zealand Idioms” [sic], *The Press*, June 28, 1961).”⁹

In a similarly directed query in the September 1960 issue of *Notes and Queries*, Ross put the following to that journal’s readers:

PITCAIRN.—Pitcairn Island was discovered on 2 July, 1767, by “a young gentleman, son to Major Pitcairn of the marines” during Carteret’s Voyage (J. Hawkesworth, *Account of the Voyages . . . by Byron, Wallis, Carteret, and Cook* (1773), i, 561). Today, the islanders pronounce the name of their island with the second syllable to rhyme with *burn* ([ˈpɪtkə:n]). Pitcairnese phonology supplies no explanation of this pronunciation, and a possible solution might be that the surname *Pitcairn* was so pronounced. I wonder if any who today bear it do pronounce it in this way?

ALAN S. C. ROSS.
The University, Birmingham.¹⁰

Because there is no reference to this 1960 note in the 1964 *The Pitcairnese Language*, whereas there is mention and acknowledgment of responses to his *New Zealand Listener* and *The Press* letters in Ross’s Preface (13, fn 15), and because there are no letters in Finding Number US29 at the Cadbury Research Library Special Collections, University of Birmingham, whereas there are responses to the New Zealand letters, I believe this is evidence enough that Ross never received responses to his September 1960 *Notes and Queries* query. It seems a great shame to linguists working on Pitcairnese that Ross was never sent any responses to this query more than fifty years ago. In a similar vein of academic inquiry to Ross’s original query, and considering my present work

on the history and linguistics of Pitcairnese, I now wish to reconsider the Pitcairnese data at hand in terms of up-to-date specifics on English dialects.

The rationale for Ross's query is confirmed in an earlier statement by Roy Sanders, a teacher who worked on Pitcairn from 1951 to 1953: "The people call their dialect 'flat Pitkurn' and their home Pitkurn." Sanders apparently preferred the "u" grapheme as a better fit to describe the [ə:] in the local pronunciation of "Pitcairn."¹¹ I have researched the possibility that any number of variant pronunciations of ['pitkɛ:n] or ['pitkə:n] could be related to the vast array of spellings available to the Family Names of the UK project.¹² Among the many millions of family names and number of spellings in this comprehensive database, there are no spellings at all of the types "Pitkern" or "Pitcurn," which would testify to the Pacific pronunciation, which Ross queried. The closest deviance from "Pitcairn" is several occurrences of "Pitcarn." However, the [ɑ:] in "Pitcarn" is distinct enough from the [ə:] vowel for this possibility to be discounted.

Conducting a search for comparable information from other surnames in the database ending in *-airn* did not yield any fruit either. The surnames Fairbairn and Fairburn do exist, but they have different origins and histories, even though they may potentially be confused. "Freebairn" seems to be a variant of Freeborn and can thus be discounted. "Fairn" is sometimes found for "Fe(a)rn," especially in Scotland. None of these appear to come close to accounting for the [ə:]/[ɛ:] variation that Ross wished to discover.

Regarding the possibility of stress having a phonetic effect on the pronunciation of the island name of Pitcairn, Gimson's *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary* gives the pronunciation of the island name preferentially stressed on the second syllable, and with a diphthong in the second syllable in both pronunciations, that is, preferential [pit'keɪn] or nonpreferential ['pitkeɪn] but not ['pitkɛ:n] or [pit'kɛ:n]. *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* reverses the stress preferences for the name but says that second-syllable stress is preferred for the surname. Nothing is mentioned in this source about the vowel quality.

Based on this brief yet detailed enough research into the discrepancy identified by Ross in his query more than fifty-five years ago, there does not currently seem to be any way to put to rest this uncertainty or to offer any direction. If not, this idiosyncratic pronunciation of ['pitkə:n] "Pitkern," which Ross claims cannot be accounted for by the phonology of Pitcairnese, or I would think any other Pacific influence, may have to be put down to the result of some effects and quirks that developed on Pitcairn itself. It would thus not be associated with the more common pronunciation of ['pitkɛ:n] "Pitcairn" or any other aspects of English phonetics.

I would be most grateful to anyone possessing knowledge relating to Ross's original query and its importance to the research I am conducting into Pitcairnese to contact me through my university e-mail address. As Ross did, all help will be acknowledged fully in any resulting publications.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. A. S. C. Ross, "The Pitcairnese Language (Clayton Memorial Lecture)."
2. A. S. C. Ross and A. W. Moverley, *The Pitcairnese Language with contributions by E. Schubert, H.E. and Alaric Maude, E.H. Flint and A.C. Gimson*. London: André Deutsch. This volume was also published in 1964 in New York by Oxford University Press.
3. Apropos of the spelling of the language of Pitcairn Island as "Pitkern," which agrees with Ross's query on the phonology of the ['pitkɜ:n], Swedish medico Anders Källgård (1998) writes: "On 27 March 1996, I was back on Pitcairn and satisfied to witness the Island Council assent to my suggestion that the name of the local language should be "Pitkern." The term "Pitcairnese" (introduced by James Norman Hall, one of the two authors of the famous "Bounty" trilogy, see Hall (62) had been used only by linguists never by the Pitcairners themselves. It was decided that Pitkern should be declared an official language. This is planned to happen before the year

- 2000, and since the language policy will probably be simple and open rather than demanding and restrictive, Pitkern may well become one of the world's few official languages without any spelling convention" (Källgård 108). Although I prefer the glossonym "Pitcairn" and distinguish between the language and the island name "Pitcairn Island," in line with Ross's glossonym it is fitting to use Pitcairnese.
4. "Unfortunately, Moverley's tape-recording is not longer very suitable for playing to an audience; it has been very much worn with constant use." Ross, "The Pitcairnese Language (Clayton Memorial Lecture)" 32.
 5. A listing of the details of Finding No. US29 is accessible at <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/archives/university/staff-mr.aspx#r>. The contents of US29 are searchable at <http://calmview.bham.ac.uk/>.
 6. In his Clayton Memorial Lecture "The Pitcairnese Language" of 1960, published in *Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society*, 103, ii, 30–31, 1960/61, Ross writes: "The book is now almost ready for press and is to be published by Messrs. André Deutsch in 1962." The outcome obviously suffered a two-year delay.
 7. A. S. C. Ross, "Notes on some 'pristine' place-names of Pitcairn Island." In *Fifth International Congress of Toponymy and Anthroponymy: Proceedings and Transactions (Acta Salmanticensia: Filosofia y Letras, xl: 1–2)*. Ed. M. Cortés, A. G. Blanco, and A. Tovar, 333–37 (1958: Salamanca).
 8. A. S. C. Ross, "Words from Pitcairn" 11. Another query is A. S. C. Ross, "New Zealand Idiom" no pagination. After signing off from his "Words from Pitcairn" letter, Ross presents a list of around thirty words, phrases, and expressions, most of which along with several of the New Zealand readers' responses are published in the Glossary of *The Pitcairnese Language*, 212–69.
 9. A. S. C. Ross and A.W. Moverley, *The Pitcairnese Language* 13. In this footnote Ross mistakenly refers to his query as "New Zealand Idioms" instead of the correct "New Zealand Idiom."
 10. A. S. C. Ross, "Pitcairn" 347.
 11. R. Sanders, "Our island being a study of Pitcairn community in transition" 51.
 12. The website consulted was <http://gbnames.publicprofiler.org/> with the search term "Pitcairn," accessed 29 January 2016.

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