

The Pretender of Pitcairn Island

Pitcairn, a tiny Pacific island that was refuge to the mutineers of HMAV *Bounty* and home to their descendants, later became the stage on which one imposter played out his influential vision for British control over the nineteenth-century Pacific Ocean. Joshua W. Hill arrived on Pitcairn in 1832 and began his fraudulent half-decade rule that has, until now, been swept aside as an idiosyncratic moment in the larger saga of Fletcher Christian's mutiny against Captain Bligh and the mutineers' unlikely settlement of Pitcairn. Here, Hill is shown instead as someone alert to the full scope and power of the British Empire, to the geopolitics of international imperial competition, to the ins and outs of naval command, to the vicissitudes of court politics, and, as such, to Pitcairn's symbolic power for the British Empire more broadly.

Tillman W. Nechtman is Professor and Chair of the Department of History at Skidmore College. He writes extensively on the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and his previous works include *Nabobs: Identity and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2010).

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*Joshua W. Hill – The Man Who Would Be King
Among the Bounty Mutineers*

Tillman W. Nechtman
Skidmore College



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This book is dedicated to Laura – as always,
and forever

Sailors are the only class of men who now-a-days see anything like stirring adventure; and many things which to fire-side people appear strange and romantic, to them seem as common-place as a jacket at elbows. Yet, notwithstanding the familiarity of sailors with all sorts of curious adventure, the incidents recorded in the following pages have often served, when “spun as a yarn,” not only to relieve the weariness of many a night-watch at sea, but to excite the warmest sympathies of the author’s shipmates. He has been therefore led to think that his story could scarcely fail to interest those who are less familiar than the sailor with a life of adventure.

Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846)

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This was supposed to have been a small book. It was *supposed* to have been a chapter in a much different book. Stories, though, sometimes grow. History surprises us!

In writing a book that has unexpectedly come to encompass a global story, I have amassed a world of debts and obligations. Many I will never be able to repay in full.

It was in a casual conversation on the way to the Albany-Rensselaer Train Station that Peter Mancall first hinted to me that what I had here was a book and not a chapter. Thank you, Peter, for helping me to see what I had missed.

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When you write a book about tiny Pitcairn Island, people always ask you, "Did you go there? Are you planning to?" My answers have to be, no, I did not go there. And, no, I am not planning a trip at present. But, I confess that I would like to go. I still recall my first encounter with Pitcairn, in the fictional accounts authored by Nordhoff and Hall. I still have the book club edition of the books that I found on a shelf in my grandparents' house in McKenzie, Tennessee, when I was a very young boy. I have not been to Pitcairn, but it has been with me for some time. I have met many Pitcairn Islanders, though. Some I met while at a conference at the Pitcairn Islands Study Center at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California. Some I have communicated with via email. To all who live at Pitcairn, I wish you the best, and I send you my thanks.

I did get to visit Norfolk Island as I wrote this book. On Norfolk, my debts are unparalleled. First, I have to thank Ron and Maureen Edwards. Anybody who wants to write a book about Pitcairn would do well to consult with Ron. But, above all, it is for their hospitality that I thank

Ron and Maureen. I could not have been better cared for had my parents themselves hosted me on the island. Thank you both!

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conversations we had about that paper. They shaped my own thinking over the years that I have been working on this project. Devin Mellor and Ben Polsky both worked as my administrative assistants as I was writing this book. Devin was the first student I actually took into an archive with me, and he was there the day I first saw a ratty old letter with terrible handwriting on it – from Joshua W. Hill. What a day! Ben worked with me as a peer mentor in my Captain Cook course and offered thoughts and insights about this book, as he got to read large chunks of the manuscript as it was being written. I thank both Devin and Ben. If my two boys grow up to be anything like these two young men, I will have done a good job as a father.

Amalia (Molly) Krause was my assistant as this project entered its final editorial stages. Molly read this manuscript more closely, I think, than even I have done. She has an eagle eye for detail, and someday we will all be reading her book. I predict it will be a very good one, too.

Steve May, author of *The Governor*, a radio play about Joshua Hill's time at Pitcairn was gracious enough to send me a file with the production of his work. Raymond Nobbs, whose biography of his great-great-grandfather George Hunn Nobbs has been a vital source for this book, helpfully guided me to and through his family's papers around the globe and has offered thoughts and reflections on the Nobbs–Hill relationship that have been enormously valuable to my own thinking and arguments here.

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every student I send to graduate school from Skidmore is that they find in their PhD advisor somebody who starts off as a guide and teacher, who becomes a mentor and colleague, and who ends up as a friend. That has been my journey with Philippa, and this book, my teaching, and indeed all I do as an historian is better as a result.

It is impossible to write a book about the HMAV *Bounty* or the *Bounty*–Pitcairn saga without consulting the collections that Herb Ford has amassed at the Pitcairn Islands Study Center, held at Pacific Union College Library in Angwin, California. Herb has been astonishingly helpful to me at nearly every step of this journey. He invited me to speak at a conference on the *Bounty*–Pitcairn Saga at the Study Center. The invitation not only bought me a trip to one of the loveliest campuses in the United States, it also connected me with scholars (from within the academy and without) who have helped make this book better. Herb invited me back to address the administration and faculty at PUC later on, so I actually have to thank him for two trips to that Olympian mountaintop campus. But, I owe him so much more. He is a smart and good and generous man, as all who have met him will attest. One of the greatest pleasures of seeing this book in print will be that I get to give him a copy for the Study Center’s library. I hope that the book in some small ways shows Herb how much I appreciate all he has done to make this book a reality.

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these figures, only 6 percent of federal cancer research dollars in the United States goes to lung cancer research. The lopsided statistics are shameful. Despite it all, teams of doctors around the globe are working to fight this plague. They are, in that way, helping me to save my family, and I thank them all for their efforts. In particular and for their direct medical care, I thank Dr. Leena Gandhi, Dr. Yolanda Colson, Dr. Aileen Chen, Allison DiBiasco, Kathleen Boyle, Dr. Alice Shaw, and Dr. Jessica Lin.

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Any errors that persist in the book, of course, are of my own doing.

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Closest to home, there are my two astonishing sons – Rhys and Fletcher. And yes, dear reader, you read that correctly. We named the boy Fletcher. Even if they have not known they were doing it, these two

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boys have supported me and their mom more than two young boys ought to have to do. They have reminded us that life is worth fighting for even when the two of us were just flat out tired of the fight. Their smiles and giggles, their simple happiness, and their futures give us hope. But, they are young, and they are boys. And, as such, I confess, they have – from time to time – reminded their dad that a little bit of “mutiny” can be a whole lot of fun.

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Every life is a voyage. Every voyage needs a compass. In my life, Laura has been my compass.

Toady, as I sit typing this, Laura and I are celebrating our eighteenth wedding anniversary. With that – and so much more – in mind, I dedicate this book to her.

Abbreviations

ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
BM	British Museum, London
CMS	Anglican Church Missionary Society
GMS	Glasgow Missionary Society
LMS	London Missionary Society
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
NPG	National Portrait Gallery, London
PMB	Pacific Manuscripts Bureau
RA	Royal Archives, Windsor Castle
RGS	Royal Geographic Society, London
RHO	Royal Hydrographic Office
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales, Sydney
SMS	Scottish Missionary Society
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
Te Puna	Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
UKHO	United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, Taunton
WMMS	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society