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0521467187 - Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty

Greg Denning

Excerpt

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Prologue

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The voyage of this book, like Bligh's voyage in the *Bounty*, has ended in theatre. By long tradition, theatre needs a prologue. The prologue is more than just a beginning. The prologue fills that marginal space between the conventionalities of everyday living and the conventionalities of being in the theatre. The prologue mediates one and the other, educates the audience to its own role, blinkers the audience to its different way of seeing, prepares it for reflexivity and criticism, and, most dangerously, liberates the audience's interpretive skills. By tradition, too, the deliverer of the prologue enters by a 'stage door' that is not part of the scenery but marks a special entry place of someone who for the moment is neither actor nor audience, but in between, distant by being a didact, dangerous by being an ironist, disturbing by being a relativist. On him or her there traditionally focused a deep antitheatrical prejudice. The imagination he or she sparked was dialogic and by that the audience was enticed into the conspiracy of its own engagement in making realism. For those convinced by religion or politics or philosophy that realism was not of their own making, this representative of representing was a very dangerous clown.

Let me begin my prologue by saying I love prefaces and overtures. Prefaces have the courage of ignorance before the event and the clarity of hindsight after it. Overtures anticipate the whole. My notes are full of prefaces of books I have never written. For *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*, there are no less than three prefaces, each written at a bicentenary moment – December 23, 1987, the anniversary of the *Bounty's* sailing; April 28, 1989, the *Bounty's* mutiny; March 14, 1990, Bligh's return to England. They are critical entries in the log of my voyage and a prologue for yours.

December 23, 1987. On December 23, 1787, the *Bounty* sailed from Portsmouth. As she did, William Bligh cursed the Admiralty for losing him three weeks of fair winds by delaying the delivery of his orders. By that, the *Bounty* was thrown into an Atlantic storm with seas so high that

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the crew and Bligh had to risk their lives to repair the damages and rescue ruined supplies. The three weeks' delay lost them a passage round the Horn, put out the fine timetabling of their circumnavigation, made them stay five long, disturbing months at Tahiti. Who knows? Had it been December 2, not 23, when she left Portsmouth, I would have no bicentenary to celebrate, not of all that the *Bounty* has come to mean, at any rate.

I am on vacation. It is my summer task to complete this ethnographic history of the *Bounty*. This summer is full of celebrations, although the aboriginal Australians are rightly protesting that they have nothing to celebrate; 1988 is the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia. The fleet carrying convicts for the first settlement at Botany Bay had left England six months before Bligh and would arrive at Botany Bay on January 26, 1788. The *Bounty* and the convict settlement were the first exploitation by the British of their Pacific discoveries. The *Bounty* joined east and west hemispheres by bringing breadfruit from what was seen to be a Tree of Life in the islands of Paradise to feed slaves, the living dead of the Caribbean. The First Fleet joined north and south hemispheres with an expedient solution of a social problem that gave an imperial presence in an empty sea as well. Now there is a 'First Fleet' re-enacting the voyage from Portsmouth to Botany Bay. There are Tall Ships, as well, rendezvousing for a spectacular entry into Sydney Harbour. My desk, as I write, looks out over Bass Strait. Bass Strait is the seaway that separates the island of Tasmania from mainland Australia. Perhaps I shall see some of the Tall Ships and the 'First Fleet' as they sail past my window. A 'Bounty' is part of this born-again 'First Fleet'. This 'Bounty' has an auxiliary engine and a steel hull. No use being fussy about detail in this sort of symbol making. No use asking what the 'Bounty' is doing in a 'First Fleet'. No use saying that the last time we saw this same 'Bounty' was on television as Cook's 'Endeavour', and then as his 'Resolution'. This 'Bounty' is a sort of Platonic idea, a Kantian noumenon of 'sailingness'. It is a theatrical prop, plastic enough for comedy, tragedy, irony – any mode of history that one would like to make of it.

I am not much for re-enactments. Re-enactments tend to hallucinate a past as merely the present in funny dress. They give modernity and fashion a fillip by making the past look quaint. They patronise the human condition in hindsight superiority. They remove the responsibility of

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remedying the present by distracted, unreflective search for details of a past whose remedying will make no difference. I have an ambition in this history of the *Bounty* to be ethnographic. I hope this ethnographic history is not considered a re-enactment.

If I were asked what ethnographic history may ultimately be, I would answer that it is an attempt to represent the past as it was actually experienced in such a way that we understand both its ordered and its disordered natures. We live in a world already made for us but also of our own making. We live in a world that has its clarities and its ambivalences. We live in a world that is at the same time full of meanings that are simple and of meanings that are multiple. These qualities of the world of the present, we must assume, were qualities of the world of the past. If I ambition to tell what actually happened, I must ambition as well to describe the painful mix of force and freedom that life tends to be. I will begin with the trial and execution of the *Bounty* mutineers. Their court martial and death can be a parable about all I want to say – about history, about power, about symbol making, about force and freedom, about theatre.

For all my queasiness at grand historical re-enactment, I have my own re-enactments, of course. What historian does not? I re-text the already texted past. I have no experience of the past that I re-present other than that past transformed into words, symbolised. The past I experience is shaped by the genres of its expression and the ways of its preservation. That past for me now, on December 23, 1987, is a facsimile reproduction of Bligh's log, the transcriptions of the mutineers' trial, my files of notes taken after hours of chasing old newspapers, reminiscences and letters. For that matter, that past is the images I have made of Bligh and Christian and the *Bounty* in the lectures I have given and the articles I have written. It is the images made for me by Charles Laughton and Marlon Brando.

That past will even be the wooden model of the *Bounty* I have set myself the summer relaxation of completing. But will this model be the *Bounty* of the Deptford Naval Yard plans or the adaptations made of them? When was the *Bounty* the *Bounty*? Will I set the mainmast a little lower following Bligh's plan to lower the power of her sails, or shall I raise it following his second thoughts at the Cape of Good Hope? Even the *Bounty* was process. At what moment shall my model freeze it and falsify it for what

it was at every other moment? What model will ever catch process? What text? An ethnographic history that claims to re-present symbolic realism must surely catch process – not just change, but the changing too.

That past I re-present is my microfilm-reader glaring at me now with the *Bounty's* muster roll on its screen. The muster's column headed 'D., D.D. or R.' stands out. D. (Discharged), D.D. (Discharged Dead), R. (Ran). There are many 'Rs' on the *Bounty* muster. The mutineers all 'Ran'. But others 'Ran' before the voyage began – John Charlton, John Cooper, George Armstrong, John Swan, Samuel Sutton, James Kainey, Charles Page, William Bell, Robert Barclay, William Ray, Luke Dods, Alexander Tyre, John McTaggett, Alexander Johnston. They presumably got wind of where the *Bounty* was going and made their choice. I cannot chase these fourteen, now that I am about to begin. They 'Ran' out of my history too. But I would have liked to know how they counted their fortune in having run from the *Bounty* – good or bad? And I would have liked to have heard them narrate the ironies of that experience in their sailors' yarns. With such a trope for such a past they must have made fine ethnographic history. Maybe I should begin again.

April 28, 1989. The Mutiny is over. Bligh has been thrust into his launch. It rocks unsteadily in the smooth sea as the eighteen men with him settle over the piles of clothes and provisions that have been thrown into her. These are galling, frightening moments. The launch is still attached to the *Bounty* by its painter. The men do not know how far the jeers and curses and threats being poured over them will go. They do not know whether they are being played with as the *Bounty* drifts ahead and pulls them along.

Bligh is hoarse from his own angry shouting. He is conscious, too, of pain, now that his hands have been untied. He has made the awful decision to cut the painter. It was an acknowledgement of the finality of what had been done. Possibly the decision was made easier by the sight of a column of steam rising over the horizon from the volcano on Tofua. Bligh and all the *Bounty* crew had watched the volcano's reflections in the clouds the night before, never dreaming that some of them would count on it for a beacon. Now they have nine or ten hours of rowing and sailing to make a landfall. They take a north-east tack. The *Bounty* continues on her west-north-west course. How often the men in the launch looked back at her, or if they did, we do not know. But we know that they saw young Tom

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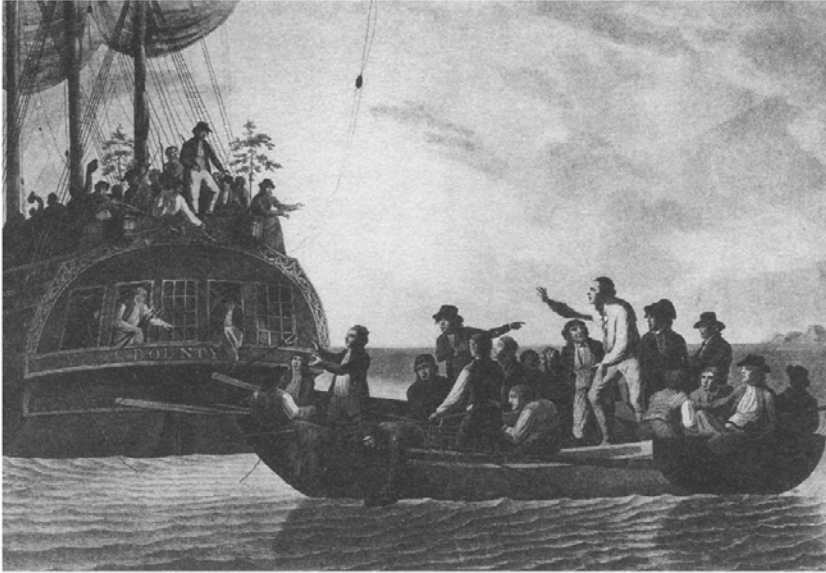
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Figure 1.

Robert Dodd, *Lieutenant Bligh Leaving the Bounty*, Aquatint, July 1790. (Russell Grimwade Collection, The Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne.) Robert Dodd's aquatint of the mutineers turning Bligh adrift in the launch was published just three months after Bligh's return to England. Fletcher Christian is depicted standing on the railing behind the *Bounty's* flag box. The painter of the launch is still attached to the *Bounty*. The four swords, allowed the launch people only at the last moment, are being thrown to them. Details are so correct that a viewer might wonder whether the faces of the crew are recognisable.

Ellison scamper to the shrouds and loosen the sails. Their memory of the sprightly way he performed an act that seemed so wanton of their lives would one day be his death sentence.

Bligh thought the *Bounty's* west-north-west course was a blind. She would turn for Tahiti. Tahiti, Bligh thought, was the cause of his mutiny. In his mind he had already begun to write his *Narrative of the Mutiny*. Suspicious even of his companions in the launch, he began days of questioning them about the conspiracies against him. He called up the names of every man still on board, one by one. We have the records still: the water-stained and blotted pages of this description of the mutineers, the notebook he began to keep of this new voyage of discovery in his launch, and the journal into which he transcribed his thoughts.

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Of his mutiny he wrote: 'Just before Sunrise Mr Christian and the Master at Arms came into my cabbın while I was fast asleep, and seizing me tyed my hands with a cord and threatened instant death if I made the least noise. I however called sufficiently loud to alarm the officers, who found themselves equally secured by centinels at their door. There were now three men at my Cabbın door and four inside (a) (Fletcher Christian, Alexander Smith, John Sumner, Mathew Quintal) Mr Christian had a Cutlass and the others were armed with Musquets and Bayonets – I was now carried on deck in my Shirt in torture with a severe bandage around my wrists behind my back, when I found no man to rescue me. I ask'd the reason for such a violent act but I was threatned to be put to death if I said a word.'

Of the causes of his mutiny, he speculated: 'It is certainly true that no effect could take place without a Cause, but here it is equally certain that no cause could justify such an effect – It however may very naturally be asked what could be the reason for such a revolt, in answer to which I can only conjecture that they have Idealy assured themselves of a more happy life among the Otaheitianas than they could possibly have in England, which joined to some Female connections has most likely been the leading cause of the whole business.

'The Women are handsome – mild in their Manners and conversation – possessed of great sensibility, and have sufficient delicacy to make them admired and beloved – The Chiefs have taken such a liking to our People that they have rather encouraged their stay among them than otherwise, and even made promises of large possessions. Under these and many other attendant circumstances equally desirable it is therefore now not to be Wondered at, 'tho not possible to be foreseen, that a Set of Sailors led by Officers and void of connections, or if they have any, not possessed of Natural feelings sufficient to wish themselves never to be seperated from them, should be governed by such powerfull inducements but equal to this, what a temptation it is to such wretches when they find it in their power however illegally it can be got at, to fix themselves in the most of plenty in the finest Island in the World where they need not labour, and where the alurements of disipation are more than equal to anything that can be conceived.'

That debate on why there was a mutiny on the *Bounty* has been long. Who can – who would want to – end it? Not I. I am a coward for causes but a professor of parables. Bligh, some of his contemporaries would have

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said, was no gentleman. Power without a gentleman's authority created contradictions. Bligh, his later defenders have countered, has been slandered, and with him, the British navy. An age of indiscipline, like our own, the argument goes, will slander men and institutions of power. Now, late in the twentieth century, when the battlefields of life seem not to be about power and authority or about discipline but about gender relations and sexuality, there are those who know the true cause of the mutiny on the *Bounty* to be in the secret recesses of Bligh's and Christian's psyches. And I? How can I not be product of my times? Look to Mr Bligh's bad language, I say, and all that that may mean. Our lives are a double helix of past and present. We are the language of our representations. We are caught in our webs of significance.

March 14, 1990. Bligh landed at Portsmouth ten months and fifteen days after his mutiny. The Dutch ship on which he had travelled from the Cape of Good Hope dropped him there on the very day that London discovered from France by way of a faster vessel that there had been a mutiny on the *Bounty*. Bligh had only his secretary and his servant with him. The others of the launch he had left in the East Indies. Four of the men had not been strong enough after their ordeal to withstand the fevers of Batavia and were already dead and buried. Hatred and fear among the rest had broken out into drunken fury, mutiny, legal threats and affidavits. Bligh was filled with a blazing energy to defend himself and had spent the leisure time of his homeward voyage writing drafts of his narrative, composing letters of explanation to officials, and calculating his personal losses down to the last stolen nightcap.

Bligh was home before all his letters describing his disasters. His wife, Elizabeth, his patron, Sir Joseph Banks, his superiors in the Admiralty heard from his lips what he had carefully rehearsed on paper. He wrote notes to an anxious group of relatives of the men of the *Bounty*. To Mrs Tosh, mother of Thomas McIntosh, he wrote tenderly, explaining that he had asked her son to stay on board the *Bounty* after the mutiny. To Mrs Heywood, mother of Peter Heywood, midshipman, he wrote savagely that her boy was undeserving of any care. Bligh had grown to hate Peter Heywood, a boy of sixteen, as much as he had grown to hate Christian.

Bligh's energies in vindicating himself held him high. His health did not break, nor did reaction to the traumas of his escape set in until he was on his way back into the Pacific on his second breadfruit voyage to Tahiti.

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Within six months of his return to England, the admirals sent him back to Tahiti on the *Providence* to do what he had failed to do on the *Bounty*. A few weeks into this second voyage, he thought he was near to death. Those around him thought he had gone insane.

In the first days back in England, there was nothing but praise for Bligh's extraordinary achievements and nothing but condemnation for all that had been done to him. But he must have been given pause by a report in the London *Times*, March 26, 1790. It pointed to three circumstances 'unparalleled in the annals of mutiny': 'one, [that] out of forty-seven men, eighteen should suffer themselves to be pinioned and put on board a boat at the almost certainty of death without the least resistance; two, [that] the secret of the conspiracy should be so well kept by twenty-seven men (most of them very young) as not to give the least suspicion to the rest of the crew; three, [that] after having carried through this successful mutiny, the question might be asked – cui bono? as in those seas there was no possibility of plunder or committing the smallest act of piracy.'

The *St James Chronicle* or *British Evening Post*, March 20–23, also gave pause to those who might have been tempted to condemn the mutiny too loudly. 'The perpetrator of the outrages on the *Bounty*', it reported of Fletcher Christian, 'is of respectable connections. His mother is a most worthy woman. He has two brothers resident in London, both respectable characters of legal professions.'

Fletcher Christian's family was indeed respectable. A long line of Deemsters of the Isle of Man stretched behind him, and his own generation had married well. He numbered, among his first cousins, two bishops and three Members of Parliament. He had an uncle who was High Sheriff of Cumberland. Another uncle was Bishop of Carlisle. His own immediate family had fallen on hard times, but not before his mother had educated his elder brothers, John and Edward, at Peterhouse and St John's College, Cambridge University. Not sizars they, or poor scholars – at least not John – but fellow commoners, a somewhat giddier brand of gentleman scholar. Edward Christian was a professor of law at Cambridge—a 'sixpenny Professor', Bligh called him. He served as professor of law at the East India College in Hertfordshire as well. He was to become a rather eccentric Chief Justice of Ely, operating, one of his relatives would nastily note, 'in the full vigour of his incapacity'.

For a short time, Bligh could bask in the fame of his courage, but he would quickly begin to know who had been touched by his mutiny and

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resented the shame of it. Edward Law, later Chief Justice of England, first cousin of Fletcher Christian, was one. Law was the defender of Warren Hastings, whose epic trial stretched all through these years. John Christian Curwen was another. He had just taken the name of his wife, the heiress Isabella Curwen. (There are those who still believe that Fletcher Christian returned to England after the mutiny and that he hid out on Isabella's Belle Isle in the middle of Lake Windermere. Christian named his Tahitian wife 'Isabella'. There is a suspicion that Christian went to sea disappointed that his uncle, John, had married his ward Isabella. Isabella was much nearer Fletcher Christian in years.) Indeed, it seems that the County of Cumberland felt itself shamed by the mutiny. Cocker-mouth, the birthplace of Fletcher Christian, probably stirred as few imaginations as to its historical importance then as it does now. But between 1790 and 1795 a sort of Cocker-mouth connection proudly found its roots through Fletcher Christian and the *Bounty* – through Fletcher Christian because the community knew him in his family as something other than a mutineer, through the *Bounty* because the mutiny scored the basic paradox: the *Bounty* was transporting the breadfruit tree, the very symbol of a free and unencumbered life, from the island of freedom, Tahiti, to the islands of bondage, the West Indies and their slave plantations. The Cocker-mouth connection included William Wordsworth, who at one time attended the same school as Fletcher Christian and at another time studied under the headmastership of his brother Edward. In these years Wordsworth was beginning to discover his disenchantment both with St John's College, Cambridge, and also with his brief but heady radicalism towards the French Revolution. He was, with his sister Dorothy, also indebted to Edward Christian's legal skills in winning them their rightful inheritance. Through Wordsworth the Cocker-mouth network finds its way to his uncle, Canon Cookson, of Windsor, Preceptor of the king's sons; to Dr Fisher, also Canon of Windsor and intimate friend of Edward Law; to his cousin Captain John Wordsworth of the East India Company; to his friend James Losh, a sympathiser with the Revolution and saved by Marat in Paris in 1792; to tutors and associates at St John's – Dr Freire, a friend of Wilberforce, and the Reverend M. Antrobus, chaplain of the Bishop of London. It was a formidable connection in family and politics. In an age of antislavery and in the first triumphs of the French Revolution, they were on the edge of radical politics.

Bligh had his connections, too. They made an apt opposition to the