Caroline Alexander, ***The Bounty: The True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty***. (New York: Viking / Penguin, 2003) 491 pp.

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The well-known story of the 1789 mutiny led by Fletcher Christian against Lieutenant William Bligh, commander of HMAV *Bounty*, has been the subject of three Hollywood movies and dozens of books, the most famous and readable being the magnificent historical novel *The Bounty Trilogy* (*Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Men Against the Sea*, and *Pitcairn's Island*) by American authors Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall. Indeed, the Pitcairn Islands Study Center of Pacific Union College in Angwin, California lists on its website literally hundreds of books and articles written about the *Bounty* story. Alexander's is the latest in this long line of works, one that now crosses four centuries.

The very short shrift Alexander gives to Bligh's stupendous and perilous journey in the *Bounty*'s 23-foot launch over nearly four thousand miles on the Pacific, sometimes through cannibal-infested waters, is puzzling and troubling. Indeed, Alexander makes only the briefest and most incidental mention that the launch actually had a *sail* (it was not *rowed* across the Pacific), and none at all that it had a tiller (almost always manned by Bligh himself). Bligh's greatness is revealed in this open boat journey more than in anything else, but unaccountably she jumps, almost directly, from the mutiny in the waters of the Friendly Islands (Tonga) to courts-martial in England.

But after this historiographical leap across the Pacific (and indeed the Indian and Atlantic), Alexander rebounds with detailed and absorbing accounts of the trial proceedings for Bligh himself and for those *Bounty* mutineers who were eventually captured by His Majesty's warships in the South Pacific. Her accounts of these trials and their aftermaths constitute in many ways the heart of her book. She vindicates Bligh and endeavours to show that the odious historical reputation popularly attaching to him today stems from the powerful and influential Christian family's pamphleteering campaigns, aimed at vilifying Bligh and assassinating his honour.

Alexander's book is, then, a sustained attempt at rehabilitating Bligh's historical reputation. She is by no means the first writer to challenge the commonplace view of Bligh as the heartless and mindless disciplinarian whose meanness of spirit drove good men to distraction and lesser men to mutiny, but popular reaction to her book (including a recent piece in the *Atlantic Monthly*[1]) seems to indicate that many people think she is. In Alexander's book Bligh was a great man, and she stands up on her hind legs in high dudgeon against anyone who thought otherwise of him at the time. Relations on the

[1] Christopher Buckley, "Scrutiny on the Bounty: Captain Bligh's Secret Logbook." *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2003, 102-03.

Bounty's launch between "Master and Commander" (sailing master John Fryer and Lieutenant William Bligh respectively) were strained, to say the least. She waxes indignant, and perhaps even a bit loquacious, in her condemnation of Fryer for daring to cross her hero:

> Somewhere in Fryer's brain there appears to have been lodged the fancy that he was Bligh's equal with respect to all things nautical; that a mere quirk of command had placed one man on a higher footing than the other; that he, Master Fryer, was entitled not only to his own opinion on every observation and duty of ship life, but to the right to air and advocate that opinion. In Bligh's handling of his cockleshell of a ship around the Horn; in his zealous and unremitting application of Cook's most enlightened sea practices; in his successful transplanting of the breadfruit; in his excellent relations with the Tahitians, conducted over a demanding five-month period; in his abilities, widely acknowledged, to survey and chart and navigate; in the fact that at the age of twenty-one he had performed, with distinction, as Cook's sailing master; above all, in his extraordinary leadership during a voyage by open boat so attenuating it had robbed men under him of their wits -- in none of these accomplishments had Fryer perceived a man above his own modest and unremarkable stature. He, John Fryer, was not William Bligh, and against this adamantine fact the imperceptive master battered himself like a moth against a lighted windowpane. (pp. 159-60)

Alexander is quite conscious that she is wrestling with the compelling power of a good story, and her knowledge that she will never definitively overturn the Bligh myth, while not strongly stated, can be read between the lines. She is passionate in her conviction that Bligh was wronged, but to her credit this passion, far from cluttering up her writing, is by and large restrained and dignified. But myths do live lives beyond their origins; they span centuries. She has ably traced the origins of the Bligh myth, but what of its maturation and development? Decades ago Marc Bloch inveighed against "the obsession with origins" as the "idol of the historian tribe." Warning against "the danger of confusing ancestry with explanation," he criticised "embryogenic obsession" in historical research. "Great oaks from little acorns grow," he observed, "But only if they meet favorable conditions of soil and climate, conditions which are entirely beyond the scope of embryology."[2] Alexander's abandonment of the myth as a newborn babe in the historiographical woods is, then, inexplicable.

That the Bligh myth is as alive and well today is evidenced by a recently published nautical reference work, which has Bligh's tyranny goading Fletcher Christian into mutiny,[3] and by a popular introduction to sailing which offers the following caution to modern would-be skippers:

2Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft (New York: Vintage Books / Random House, 1953), 29-30, 32.

3Robert McKenna, The Dictionary of Nautical Literacy (Camden, Maine: International Marine / McGraw-Hill, 2001), 68.

> The one name you don't want to be called is "Captain Bligh," as in Captain Bligh from *Mutiny on the Bounty*. An interesting psychological phenomenon can happen when a seemingly normal person gets behind the wheel or tiller of a sailboat -- he or she can turn into a power-hungry maniac, screaming orders and treating everyone on board like scum. If you don't want a mutiny on board your boat, make sure that you treat your crew the way you'd want to be treated.[4]

So the myth about Bligh (if that is indeed what it is) has lived across the centuries. It is precisely for this reason that Alexander's refusal even to mention Nordhoff and Hall is so surprising and odd. If much of what we think we know about Bligh is myth, are these two novelists partly responsible for perpetrating or perpetuating it? Did Hollywood's first two movies on the *Bounty* story take unwarranted liberties with their novels, with historical facts, or both? Just how responsible is the famous two-man novelist team for the Bligh myth today?

Not all depictions of Bligh as a temperamental taskmaster are the products of pamphleteering campaigns or deductive thinking based on Hollywood movies and historical novels. Bligh might have unconsciously indicted himself. The first book I ever read about the Bounty story was a rewritten condensation for children of Bligh's account of the mutiny and his perilous trip on the launch. I read this before I had seen any motion pictures on the *Bounty* saga, and I clearly remember thinking that in it, Bligh came across as something of a martinet.

Alexander's sympathies are clearly with Bligh and the men loyal to him, and not with the community of *Bounty* mutineers, their Tahitian "wives," and the handful of Tahitian men who eventually settled on lonely and desolate Pitcairn Island, just beyond the southeast edge of modern French Polynesia's Tuamotu Archipelago. She does not mention that Pitcairn had apparently been home to previous generations of Polynesians; although uninhabited when they discovered it, the *Bounty* settlers eventually found several *marae* or religious sites on Pitcairn. Breadfruit trees, which required transplanting as the *Bounty* mutineers well knew, were flourishing on the island.

Alexander does not relish retelling the dark, bloody history of the first generation of Pitcairn Islanders as they slid into murderous chaos over the politics of sexual access, land tenure, and personal status. She does, however, see John Adams (a.k.a. Alexander Smith), the sole surviving *Bounty* mutineer on Pitcairn Island who famously met up in 1808 with Mayhew Folger (the Yankee seal skipper who finally discovered the Pitcairn community),

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4J. J. and Peter Isler, Sailing For Dummies (New York: Hungry Minds, 1997), 88.

as a shifty liar and possibly the murderer of Fletcher Christian. She obliquely accuses young Thursday October Christian (Fletcher Christian's son born on Pitcairn) of racism, a vice virtually uncondemned in the early nineteenth century. And she cares not at all to note that the entire Pitcairn community of 193 souls was evacuated from the island in 1856 and removed to Norfolk Island, a former penal colony a thousand miles east of Australia, or that in 1859 a group of sixteen homesick Pitcairn Islanders returned to their island and resettled it, followed five years later by four more returning families. (Their descendants populate both Norfolk and Pitcairn Islands to this day.)

Alexander's sensitivities and instincts are those of a litterateur, and her prose is limpid and neat. She is at her best when she describes the texture and tenor of the backgrounds and interpersonal relations on the Isle of Man between the Fletcher and Bligh families, which were surprisingly intertwined. Her coverage of the trials is solid and absorbing, and her detailed attention to Joseph Banks's patronage of Bligh and his breadfruit runs is an important contribution to *Bounty* lore. One of her most remarkable insights, one that may incite some discussion in the literary world, is her contention that Fletcher Christian might have been more of an arch-romantic Byronic hero than Lord Byron himself. From the long-term perspective, perhaps Bligh's single greatest misfortune was not Fletcher Christian's mutiny but the era or age Christian seemed to typify and even commence:

> It was Lieutenant Bligh's ill luck to have his own great adventure coincide exactly with the dawn of this new [Romantic] era, which saw devotion to a code of duty and established authority as less honorable than the celebration of individual passions and liberty. Coleridge's Ancient Mariner was a crude forerunner of the full-blown Romantic hero to be glamorized by Byron; but Fletcher Christian was the forerunner of them all. And in the clumsy, erratic testimonies of his "Appendix," Edward Christian had unleashed the most irresistible elements of the story now known as "The Mutiny on the *Bounty*." (p. 345)

In this story, Alexander would intuit, Byron should side with Christian. But quite counter-intuitively, "...in a role reversal of breathtaking unexpectedness, Byron championed William Bligh." Why? "Perhaps Byron's uncharacteristic disapproval of so romantic a figure," she speculates parenthetically, "arose from pique, a wounded sense that Fletcher Christian -- his long hair loose, his shirt collar open -- had out-Byroned Byron." (pp. 374-75)

While undeniably a great man and an extraordinarily competent navigator, Bligh was in fact wildly unpopular with several of the eighteen loyalists on the *Bounty*'s launch. (Their numbers were later reduced by one, after quartermaster John Norton's death on Tofua at the hands of Tongan savages in the spectacularly misnamed Friendly Islands.) In addition to his difficulties with Frye, Bligh also locked horns with William Purcell (the ship's carpenter) and was abominated by quartermaster Peter Linkletter, cook Thomas Hall,

butcher Robert Lamb, midshipman Robert Tinkler, and surgeon's assistant Thomas Ledward. Subsequent to his exoneration at the Admiralty's court-martial for the loss of the *Bounty*, Bligh was appointed governor of New South Wales in 1805. There he faced another mutiny, this time by soldiers during the so-called Rum Rebellion. The spectre of rebellion seemed to haunt his posts. Why?

While these observations do not necessarily add up to a reluctant vindication by Alexander of Bligh's reputation for shipboard tyranny and abusive excess, they do present thorny biographical and historiographical issues. A definitive account of Bligh and the *Bounty* mutiny might never be written, perhaps because it would ruin all the fun and mystery of the saga. But even a merely authoritative work will need to be more balanced and nuanced in its view of Bligh than Alexander's.

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