

Charles Christian and His Contributions to Pitcairn History

By Donald Patrick Albert

While Fletcher Christian has become widely known as the chief mutineer of the HMAV *Bounty* and subsequent leader of a nascent community on the remote and isolated Pitcairn Island, his progenies no less have enjoyed their 15 minutes, give or take, of fame.

Thursday October Christian (1790-1831) appeared often in the diaries, journals, and reports greeting and entertaining sea captains visiting Pitcairn Island. He is the focus of an amusing anecdote involving a name change from Thursday to Friday or Friday to Thursday, depending on the arguments one way or another. Mary Ann Christian (1793) attained worldwide fame as heroine of Mary Russell Mitford's (1811) *Christina: The Maid of the South Seas*. She gifted Levi Hayden a Bible from the *Bounty* during the visit of the *Cyrus* in 1839 (Ford, 1996, 21-22). Known as the Pitcairn Bible, it resides at the Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room for Rare Books and Manuscripts of the New York Public Library.

Charles Christian, (1791 or 1792-1842), the middle child, has received less attention, but careful review of the historic record finds that he too, like his older brother and younger sister, distinguished himself. He became an antagonist of Joshua Hill, the dictator or, per Nechtman (2018), the pretender of Pitcairn Island who resided there from 1832-1837. Hill exerted a harsh, cruel, and brutal control over the political, social and religious affairs of the Pitcairners. His treatment toward three "outsiders," Nobbs, Buffett, and Evans, reached unforgiving proportions, even though he was a foreigner himself.

Background: Mutiny on the *Bounty*

No introduction of the mutiny on the *Bounty* is necessary for *Log* subscribers; however, for others not as familiar, here is a synopsis. On April 28, 1789, Fletcher Christian, Acting Lieutenant, deposed Lieutenant William Bligh of the *Bounty* and 18 men

in a launch near Tofua in the South Pacific. Awaiting Bligh was a 3,618 nautical mile open boat adventure of survival to Coupang, Timor (Nicolson, 1997, 13). After a failed settlement on Tubuai (Taahuaia) and a final trip to Tahiti, the *Bounty* with Christian, eight mutineers, and 19 Polynesians circuitously reached the mischarted, remote, isolated, and at the time uninhabited Pitcairn Island in January 1790 (Albert, 2018). Here the mutineers lived through an arduous and violent decade, after which John Adams (Alexander Smith), the last enduring mutineer, the surviving Polynesian women, and their progeny began a path toward religious conversion and redemption.

Charles Christian

Charles was the middle child of Fletcher Christian and Maimiti, a full-blooded Polynesian. So, like Thursday October and Mary Ann, he was considered one-half European and one-half Polynesian. His name honors Fletcher's father, Charles Christian (b. 1729 - d. 1768) (Nicolson, 1997, 47; Christian, 2005, xv). Charles Christian was born circa 1792 (perhaps 1791). Charles' nickname was "Hupper," sometimes-spelled "Hoppa," meaning sickly according to Ian Ball (1973, 204-205) or a reference to a clubbed foot per Glynn Christian (2005, 420, 442).

He married Sarah (b. 1789), or Sully as otherwise known, a full-blooded Tahitian, in 1810. According to Belcher (1871, 176), Sarah was 10 months old when she arrived at Pitcairn Island. She was two to three years older than Charles. Being close in age, one might imagine that the couple shared a lifetime of experiences from toddlers through adulthood. Charles and Sully were married at the ages of 18 and 20 years, respectively. In quick succession, eight children came from this union, these included four boys and four girls. Charles and his older brother, Thursday October Christian, were the only sons of the mutineers that married full-blooded

Tahitian women (Wahlroos, 1989, 242-243). Their children were three-fourths Polynesian as opposed to one-half for the other first generation offspring (Christian, 2005, 5).

When Sully died in 1826, the eight children ranged in age from one to 15 years (Wahlroos, 1989, 318). While Charles survived almost 16 years longer than his wife, he died on January 14, 1842, less than four months after his mother (Christian, 2005, 340; Nicolson, 1997, 219). His daughter Sarah married one of the early "outsiders" to settle Pitcairn Island. She married George Hunn Nobbs, who arrived in 1828 and served, excepting some of the Joshua Hill interlude (1832-1837), as minister, surgeon, and teacher on Pitcairn until relocation to Norfolk Island in 1856 (Wahlroos, 1989, 333-334). Charles was about 50 years old when he died on January 14, 1842 (Nicolson, 1997, 220). Glynn Christian was astonished to learn that Charles' grave is under the Courthouse on Pitcairn Island (Christian, 2005, 392-393).

Charles was likely one of a trio who canoed out to meet Captain Mayhew Folger of the *Topaz* during this historic first post mutiny visit in 1808 (Nechtman 2018, 22). Charles was recorded paddling one of several canoes going through the surf to welcome Captain Raine of the *Surry* in 1821. He was described as being virtually naked except for a wrap-around loin cloth, the common attire during those early years (*The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, no. 268, 425). Charles survived the disastrous immigration to Tahiti in 1831, and shortly afterwards returned to Pitcairn Island where he resided until his death in 1842 (Wahlroos, 1989, 242-243). His brother, Thursday October, was among 16 who had succumbed to a "malignant fever" during the Tahitian episode (Young, 1884, 72-73). With this unfortunate situation, Charles became the oldest member of the community, at least until the arrival of his would-be nemesis, Joshua Hill in 1832.

According to Barrow (1831, 330) the sons of the mutineers were "ignorant, uneducated men." While this may seem like an insensitive assessment, limited schooling and worldly experience made this a truthful, rather than malignant statement. Barrow wrote that as sons of Fletcher Christian, Thursday

and Charles might have claimed leadership over outsider George Nobbs had either "possessed a moderate share of talent" (Barrow, 1831, 330). Charles, however, irrespective of education and talent, would have had a challenge competing with the authoritative Joshua Hill. He said the British had sent him to lead this small island community, to the naive islanders Joshua Hill seemed to be official. Hill's superior education, experience, and cleverness, and above all an overbearing demeanor, allowed him to dictate life on Pitcairn Island (Nechtman, 2018).

Deposing a Despot

On searching the historic record, there are just a handful of mentions to Charles Christian; however, these almost all relate to confronting Joshua Hill (Wahlroos, 1989, 318). Several examples follow, and together support the notion that Charles proactively challenged Hill. Charles is one of eight signatories appearing in a petition claiming that Mr. Nobbs had conducted himself in a satisfactory manner since arriving in 1828. It further indicated that Nobbs's dismissal as the island's teacher was unrelated to "his manner of keeping school," but because of a "disagreement between Mr. Nobbs and Mr. Joshua Hill" (Brodie, 1851, 178-179).

Another incidence was triggered by a conversation after one worship service. During the service, Hill informed the men that the next day their services would be required cutting timber for one of the elders. Charles' response to Matthew Quintal was "that they might as well get their axes, for there was not much difference between talking about cutting timber on Sundays and doing it" (Nicolson, 1997, 137). Hill and two of the elders wanted to flog Charles, but the other elders disagreed. For this innocuous statement, Charles' punishment was to "work on the public road" (Nicolson, 1997, 137). I have found no evidence to suggest whether he served this sentence.

In the next example, Charles objected to the flogging of John Buffett who had been penalized for opposing Hill, and for past transgressions that produced two illegitimate children with the unmarried Mary "Big Melly" Christian (Nicolson, 1997, 138; Kirk, 2008, 69). Rosalind Young described

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how Charles came to Buffett's defense: "When, by Hill's order, Buffett was publically flogged, this true friend, hearing of the unjust and cruel treatment, hastened to the rescue, and by his unflinching bravery and manly courage, succeeded in delivering the unhappy man from his hard hearted and wicked tormentors" (Young 1884, 77). For attempting to assist Buffett after his punishment, Charles "was brutally treated, and turned out of his house" (Brodie, 1851, 187).

In 1837, Charles was among those in three canoes that boarded the HMS *Actaeon*. Captain Lord Edward Russell had been dispatched by the Admiralty to conduct a public hearing on the scuttle buzzing around Joshua Hill. The inquiry confirmed that Hill was a great pretender, and had fabricated an elaborate charade to fool the islanders. Captain Russell banished Joshua Hill, and ordered him to leave at the first opportunity (Nicolson, 1997, 148; Ford, 1996, 19). On December 6, 1837, Captain Henry William Bruce of the HMS *Imogene* escorted Hill off Pitcairn Island and deposited him in Valparaiso, Chile (Ford, 1996, 20). From there, Hill eventually returns to England and fades into obscurity. How much credit should Charles receive for helping rid this egomaniac from Pitcairn Island? He certainly received support from Buffett, Evans, and Nobbs who had predated Hill's arrival on Pitcairn Island. It is interesting to imagine the extent that Hill's departure brought Charles peace and serenity during his three years of remaining life.

Legacy

Rosalind Young described Charles Christian as a person whose "many noble qualities endeared him to all" (Young, 1884, 77). Joshua Hill arrived on Pitcairn Island without authority and proceeded to dominate all aspects of life including political, social, and religious. Hill though, not without some experience and education, treated the islanders with contempt. Charles Christian contributed to sounding the alarm that eventually resulted in the removal of this horrid person from Pitcairn Island. Charles Christian has appeared haphazardly in the early accounts of life on Pitcairn Island. Herein, the disparate events of his life, including his struggle with Joshua Hill, have been brought together under one title. My hope is that this synopsis will stimulate

historians, sociologists, psychologists, or other specialists to more fully contextualize Charles' contribution to the annals of Pitcairn Island.

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