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*What part do
these items play
in Pitcairn's
history?*



*Dr. Donald Albert explores
"a cornucopia of fruits and invectives"
beginning on page 4.*

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Mutiny on the Bounty: A Cornucopia of Fruits and Invectives

By Donald Patrick Albert

On April 28, 1789, the most infamous of mutinies occurred in the South Pacific Ocean within sight of an erupting volcano on Tofua. Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian deposed “Captain” William Bligh and 18 men in the *Bounty’s* 23-foot launch to an almost certain death. After an unsuccessful settlement attempt on Tubuai, 350 miles south of Tahiti, Christian and eight mutineers, together with 19 Polynesians (six men, 12 women and one infant girl), circuitously rediscovered Pitcairn Island on January 15, 1790.

Being 212 miles east of its recorded position, this remote, isolated, and deserted island was an ideal outpost for renegades of the British Admiralty (Albert, 2018). Miraculously, Bligh sailed the launch successfully to Coupang, Timor, and eventually returned to England on March 14, 1790. Whereas, Christian established a nascent settlement on a level patch of land above Bounty Bay accessible via an arduous path that became known as the “Hill of Difficulty.”

While the story of the mutiny on the *Bounty* is well known, this version focuses on fruits as backdrop and springboard to conflict occurring during and after the mutiny. *Bounty* enthusiasts know that the original purpose of this voyage was to secure breadfruit saplings for the British West Indies as a cheap food source for plantation slaves.

Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society in London and life-long supporter of William Bligh, spearheaded this economic-botanical expedition. Beyond breadfruit, other fruits including coconuts and pumpkins became the impetus for igniting Bligh’s explosive temper.

This account of the mutiny on the *Bounty* and its aftermath uses fruits as an unusual framework to view this romance on the high seas. Just note Richard Crane and David Essex’s concept album and musical about the HMAV *Bounty* in 1983 and 1985, respectively, which supports this notion (Maxton, 2008). The album/musical included songs

and scenes titled “Breadfruit” and “Pumpkin,” so the fruits motif is not an entirely off-the-wall association.

Surprisingly, even period accounts from Jenny (Teehuteatuaonoa, 1819, 1826), consort of mutineers Alexander Smith (John Adams) and then Isaac Martin, and from James Morrison, the *Bounty’s* boatswain’s mate, include numerous references to fruits, vegetables, and other plants and animals providing sustenance during their peregrinations (Morrison, 1792).

Primary and Contemporary Sources Mentioning Fruits

Teehuteatuaonoa, known as Jenny, was the only Polynesian consort to return to Tahiti on her own volition. She departed Pitcairn Island in October 1817 on the *Sultan*, a Boston whaler, travelling from the Marquesas to Chile (via Pitcairn Island) and subsequently returning to the Marquesas.

After three months in the Marquesas, she managed passage on the British ship, the *King George*, to Tahiti for a total return trip lasting around nine or ten months (Teehuteatuaonoa, 1819, 1826). During her remaining years at Tahiti, Jenny provided two interviews, and these accounts appeared in the *Sydney Gazette* and the *Bengal Hurkaru*.

Maude, a colonial civil servant and administrator, and later research fellow at the Australian National University, rediscovered these articles that have since proven useful in reconstructing the post-mutiny track of the *Bounty* and the early years on Pitcairn Island (Maude, 1958, 1968).

Jenny recounted that “(I)n their passage to Pitcairn’s Island they fell in with a low lagoon island, which they call Vivini, where they got birds, eggs, and cocoa nuts” (Teehuteatuaonoa, 1819). Maude considered Vivini to be Ono-i-Lau of the Southern Lau Group, Fiji, but the “numerous” inhabitants precluded this atoll as a suitable hideaway (Maude, 1958). On arriving on Pitcairn, Jenny noted the

presence of breadfruit trees and other Polynesian cultivars such as coconuts, plantains, taro, yams, paper mulberry and the ti plant (Teehuteatuaonoa, 1819, 1826).

Knowing the island had supported their ancestors in the past offered a certain comfort to the women. The other primary source is from the intelligent, astute, and resourceful James Morrison. His journal records pre-and post-mutiny accounts of his experiences, and is replete with references to victuals (sauerkraut, potatoes, peas, oatmeal), including fruit common to Polynesia. These primary sources (Morrison, 1792; Teehuteatuaonoa, 1819, 1826), along with Maude's contemporary writings (1958, 1968), provide valuable references involving fruit and the *Bounty* saga.

The *Bounty's* Cornucopia

Pumpkins

One of Bligh's first meltdowns had its roots during the *Bounty's* stopover at Tenerife (Canary Islands, Spain) in early January 1789. Even before the incident, Bligh might have already been bitter at the exorbitant prices paid for pumpkins and other fresh produce. Yes, the pumpkin is technically a fruit though often considered a vegetable per convention.

In his journal, James Morrison (1792) innocuously mentioned "a few pumpions" that were brought aboard the *Bounty* at Tenerife. After leaving Tenerife, and approaching the equator, the heat began to spoil the pumpkins. Bligh, as purser, sought to minimize losses and ordered his men given one pound of pumpkin for two pounds of biscuit.

When the crew refused to accept this substitution, Bligh went ballistic. After summoning all hands on deck, Bligh lets loose a tirade that would reverberate thereafter when historians described his mercurial temper, "You dam'd Infernal scoundrels, I'll make you eat Grass or any thing you can catch before I have done with you." According to Morrison, after Bligh's outburst, "every one took the pumpion as Calld, Officers not excepted." Ironically, the deteriorating pumpkins, albeit distasteful, would have offered a more nutritious option with its vitamin C than 18th century hardtack.

Breadfruit

While there is not a major Bligh verbal eruption

involving the breadfruit, there is an incident involving Bligh and John Fryer, the *Bounty's* master. Bligh's orders were to secure breadfruit saplings from Tahiti and transport these to the West Indies. It was thought that breadfruit would be a healthy and delicious, but more notably an inexpensive food for slaves toiling on island plantations in the British Caribbean.

While breadfruit did not initially become popular in the Caribbean, the fruit contains vitamin C and B1 (thiamine), two important nutrients. Deficiencies in vitamin C and B1 cause scurvy and beriberi, respectively, with the former a major illness amongst 18th century sailors. Further, breadfruit trees provided bark to produce tapa, a traditional Polynesian cloth, wood for planks, and pitch for caulking. James Morrison used the wood and pitch to construct a 35-foot schooner called the *Resolute* (Maxton, 2008).

Shortly after the mutiny, Fletcher Christian and company tossed Bligh's precious breadfruit saplings overboard -- five months of gathering, transplanting, and watering all for naught. "Breadfruit Bligh" immediately followed with a successful second breadfruit expedition to Tahiti on the HMS *Providence* and HMS *Assistant* from 1791-1793 with over 1,100 plants delivered to St. Vincent and Jamaica (Alexander, 2003).

On his return, Bligh's reputation had suffered public scrutiny for his maltreatment of Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian and others. His nickname changed from "Breadfruit Bligh" to "That Bounty Bastard" (Maxton, 2008). On leaving Batavia for England on October 16, 1789, on the *Vlydt*, a Dutch packet ship, Bligh delivered formal orders to Master John Fryer.

Bligh's nemesis was ordered to bring the remaining loyalists and follow the Captain to the Cape when permitted by the Governor General. Bligh instructs Master Fryer to document the expenses and draw funds from the Admiralty to settle with creditors. According to Fitzsimons (2018), Bligh also directs Fryer to ensure that three breadfruit trees arrive safely back in England.

Here Bligh is operating in a passive-aggressive mode, rather than his normal bombastic vitriol. Fryer has been suspicious of Bligh's accounting throughout the journey, and here Bligh dumps the remaining financial minutia on the Master. Whether

these breadfruit saplings ever made it to England is unknown to the author.

Coconuts

Coconut trees are ubiquitous throughout the tropical Pacific. Its geographic diffusion is the result of ocean currents and canoe voyages bringing coconuts to distant islands. During Bligh's voyage on the *Bounty*, the Polynesians offered coconuts as gifts or trade items to the visitors; these were stored as private and general food supplies for the long return trip to Jamaica and England (Fitzsimons, 2018).

This traditional staple continues to offer food and drink (copra, water, milk), shelter (lumber, fronds), and fuel to modern populations (Foale, 2003). Symbolic of the coconut's importance is Bligh's famous coconut cup from which he took his bread and water during the open-boat voyage from Tofua to Timor from April 28, 1789, to June 14, 1789.

In 2002, this surviving relic fetched £71,700 at a Christie's Auction (2002). Ironically, Thomas Ellison, one of three mutineers hung on the HMS *Brunswick* on October 27, 1792, earned the nickname "Monkey Ellison" for his ability to scoot up and down coconut trees (Fitzsimons, 2018).

The "coconut incident," occurred on April 27, 1792, on the afternoon before the mutiny. Perhaps it was the final straw (or coconut in this instance) that pushed Fletcher Christian into a mental abyss of despair, anguish, and desperation. While John Adams mentioned this incident to Captain Beechey during a December 1825 visit to Pitcairn Island (Beechey, 1831), Morrison (1792) recollects the scene and dialogue with amazing detail.

In the Afternoon of the 27th Mr. Bligh Came up, and taking a turn about the Quarter Deck when he missed some of the Cocoa Nuts which were piled up between the Guns upon which he said that they were stolen and Could not go without the knowledge of the Officers, who were all Calld and declared that they had not seen a Man touch them, to which Mr. Bligh replied 'then you must have taken them yourselves,' and orderd Mr. Elphinstone to go and fetch evry Cocoa nut in the Ship aft, which He obeyd. He then questioned evry Officer in turn concerning the Number they had bought, & Coming

to Mr. Christian askd Him, Mr. Christian answerd 'I do not know Sir, but I hope you dont think me so mean as to be Guilty of Stealing yours'. Mr. Bligh replied 'Yes you dam'd Hound I do—You must have stolen them from me or you could give a better account of them—God dam you, you Scoundrels, you are all thieves alike, and combine with the men to rob me—I suppose you'll Steal my Yams next, but I'll sweat you for it, you rascals, I'll make half of you Jump overboard before you get through Endeavour Streights'—He then Calld Mr. Samuel and said 'Stop these Villains Grog, and Give them but Half a Pound of Yams tomorrow, and if they steal then, I'll reduce them to a quarter.'

This passage demonstrates that Bligh could instantaneously go into a harangue over a seemingly minor offense, real or imagined. His diatribe consisted of personal invectives such as name-calling (*i.e.*, hounds, scoundrels, and thieves), retributions involving the stopping of grog and reducing yams, and a nonsensical threat of making half his men jump overboard. This three-pronged invective involving name-calling, stopping or reducing rations, and ridiculous threats is like Bligh's verbal abuse chronicled during the pumpkin incident.

These examples demonstrate that Bligh possessed narcissist characteristics and tendencies. Notwithstanding the ultimate power 18th century naval commanders exercised over their charges, Bligh was a bully extraordinaire. With a full quota of breadfruit saplings aboard, in retrospect, all Bligh had to do was "bite his tongue" and to avoid petty outbursts.

Oranges

After the *Bounty's* final departure from Tahiti (Society Islands), and after making a quick stop at Tetiatora 26 miles north, Christian and crew sailed southwest towards Tongatabu (Friendly Islands). On route the *Bounty* passed Rarotonga, a volcanic island in the Southern Cook Islands. Here, a visiting Rarotongan named Maia seized a large box containing oranges (Maude, 1958). According to local tradition, orange cultivation on this island literally traces its roots (seeds), pun intended, to this

pilferage (Gosset, 1940). Rarotonga has cultivated oranges ever since, and this fruit continues to be a major export of the Cook Islands (CIA World FactBook, 2020).

Conclusion

While linking Bligh's invectives to fruits might seem cavalier, his first sentence of *A Narrative of the Mutiny* explicitly mentions his obsession with breadfruit and other fruits (Bligh, 2007).

I sailed from Otaheite on the 4th of April 1789, having on board 1015 fine bread-fruit plants, besides many other valuable fruits of that country, which, with unremitting attention, we had been collecting for three and twenty weeks, and which were now in the highest state of perfection.

It is curious that fruits -- pumpkins, breadfruits, coconuts, and oranges -- became center stage objects in at least four tense scenes involving Bligh, Christian, or Fryer. So identified with the breadfruit, William Bligh's tombstone is graced with an ornament of this fruit. Existing postage stamps depicting Rarotonga oranges, Tahitian coconuts, and Pitcairn breadfruit, among others, provide philatelists an opportunity to collect along a *Bounty*-fruit theme. There is even a Pitcairn Islands stamp depicting William Bligh's breadfruit topped tombstone. The author, however, was unable to locate a stamp illustrating Tenerife's pumpkins.

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