

Reviews (Books)

Bligh: William Bligh in the South Seas. By Anne Salmond. Viking, Auckland, 2011. 528pp. NZ price: \$65. ISBN: 978-0-67-007556-0.

THE VERY NAME 'Captain Bligh' conjures up images of a domineering sea captain who drove the hapless Fletcher Christian to stage a mutiny. While there has been much ink spilt in documenting and justifying the characters and events of the mutiny, it is the pop culture references in films and novels that have been the most enduring. New Zealand is not immune to these influences. They find expression, for example, in themed streets in Christchurch. Bligh's Road was named after a local nineteenth-century businessman called John Bligh, but later city planners assumed it was William Bligh and over the years have added Bounty Street, Christian Street, Pitcairn Crescent and Resolution Place.

It is into this myth-busting mode that Anne Salmond brings her undeniable talent as an anthropologist and historian. In the acknowledgements, Salmond provides a succinct summary of the book and the surprises she encountered. Interestingly, this was not a book she planned. It was only after doing wider research for her study of Tahiti, the wonderful *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti* (2009), that Bligh came to her attention.

The narrative begins with Captain James Cook and his third and last voyage (1776–1779) to the Pacific. Bligh, then 22 years old and master of the *Resolution*, had an important role, but the loss of his journal has led to that role being understated. Moreover, much of his chart and survey work has been credited to others. While Salmond deftly narrates Cook's death in Kealakekua Bay, Hawai'i, in 1779, it was the aftermath that made an indelible imprint on the career of Bligh. Lieutenant James King, whose actions Bligh saw as avoiding the fighting when Cook was killed, was not punished. Yet, King's official account of the voyage was published, and Salmond notes a copy of this account has comments written in the margins by Bligh, vehemently disputing the version of events. Most of the officers on the voyage were promoted, with the notable exception of Bligh who had spoken his mind.

In the dark aftermath of these events, Bligh had a surprisingly happy period in his life, marrying Betsy Betham. Through her relatives he was able to continue his career at sea. Salmond uses a collection of personal letters that show a tender side that contrasts with his public image. It was Betsy's uncle Duncan Campbell who contacted Joseph Banks to give the outcast Bligh a chance. The outcome was Bligh commanding the *Bounty* to take breadfruit plants from Tahiti to the West Indies to feed plantation slaves.

The chapters dealing with the mutiny are given an excellent build-up by Salmond. All kinds of blame have been heaped upon Bligh and his temper. Bligh had a tendency to aim verbal abuse at anyone who did not meet his exact standards, but these tongue lashings rarely led to physical ones. It was the Banks-designed *Bounty* which had a major part to play as the renowned botanist had 'transformed the *Bounty* into a floating greenhouse, leaving little room for her crew and captain' (p.112). In addition, the ship lacked marines and Bligh was the only commissioned officer. All this was prophetically detailed by Betsy's family friend Lord Selkirk, whose letter to Banks criticised these arrangements.

Choices for the crew such as Fletcher Christian and the usual suspects are well documented. Where Salmond deviates from the standard narrative is her focus on the background players in this doomed voyage. The Pacific Islanders that Bligh and his crew encounter are not simply one-dimensional 'natives' or 'exotic' island women who provide a bit of entertainment or sexual favours for the crew. Salmond is at her best when unravelling the ceremonial life of the locals as well as dealing with the myriad of island

relationships and local politics. She skilfully contrasts Bligh enjoying the friendship of Tu, the paramount chief in the Society Islands, and his wife 'Itia, with the deteriorating relationship with his crew.

This friendship and his repeated visits to the islands meant Bligh's language proficiency increased, as well as his knowledge of island life. Indeed Salmond states that Banks has been called 'the father of Pacific ethnography', yet Bligh's records of Tahitian life 'are more detailed and astute than anything Banks was able to accomplish' (p.169). It is here that Salmond's account of Bligh contrasts with other writers who have focused more on his relationship with the crew and his incredible navigation skills. Bligh was able to fully exploit his *taio* or bond relationship with Tu and 'Itia to obtain answers to in-depth questions about Tahitian culture and life. Bligh had numerous opportunities to observe island rituals and mix with the locals.

The mutiny and all its details are well covered by Salmond. Equally intriguing is the aftermath. The mutineers eventually split into two groups: one, headed by Fletcher Christian, eventually found its way to Pitcairn Island; the other stayed in Tahiti. Salmond does not simply recount the events but continues to imbue them with her knowledge of Pacific Island culture to provide a clearer context. Episodes involving Christian and his group's fate on Pitcairn Island are all here. Equally interesting, though, is the fate of the others who stayed in Tahiti. The wretched treatment they received on the ill-fated *Pandora* is tragically portrayed, as well as their life while living in Tahiti.

Unfortunately, the lives of the mutineers after they set Bligh adrift are so well illustrated from Chapter 13 onwards that by the time the narrative returns to Bligh in Chapter 18 I had almost forgotten it was a biography about him. This lapse seems indicative of Bligh's return to the Pacific. He was not as intrigued by Tahitian culture anymore and after watching a *heiva* or sacred dance rather grumpily commented there was 'not anything new in the performance' (p.380). In the same way, near the end of the book, there is a sense that the best had gone before and the later career of Bligh is not quite as exciting or even interesting as his earlier voyages. The trial of the mutineers, his naval career with Lord Nelson and his brief stint as Governor of New South Wales are well covered. The only bright spot was his successful second breadfruit voyage where he completed what he was meant to do with the *Bounty*, which was to take breadfruit to the West Indies.

There is certainly no shortage of material on Bligh. Yet, Salmond has produced a superb biography of a much-maligned figure and provides so much more than a standard analysis. Bligh is now given a truly Pacific focus that also adds not only to his well-documented navigation skills, but also to his role as an ethnographer and devoted husband. In *Bligh*, one of New Zealand's foremost anthropologists and historians breathes new life into an already well-researched subject.

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Fairness and Freedom: A History of Two Open Societies, New Zealand and the United States. By David Hackett Fischer. Oxford University Press, New York. xxv & 629pp. NZ price: \$56. ISBN: 978-0-19-983270-5.

THIS AMBITIOUS BOOK of over 600 pages comparing two open societies, New Zealand and the United States, begins more like a travelogue than a densely argued study of history. Reminiscent of so many other books about the antipodes, *Fairness and Freedom* reminds us that getting to New Zealand from the United States, even in the era of jet travel, necessitates crossing the equivalent of 17 time zones — 'more than to any other nation' (p.ix). The preface continues very much in the fashion so typical of travel guides