

Pandora History and Mysteries

Here, we explore some of the stories and histories, myths and mysteries that surround the sagas of the *Bounty* and HMS *Pandora*...

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- What happened to the ship's cat? She survived the wreck. What became of her after that?

Why the mutiny?

The reasons for the *Bounty* mutiny have long been debated, sometimes passionately. Discussion typically focuses on such questions as: "Why did the mutiny happen?" or "Who caused the mutiny?" or "What was the *Bounty* doing in the South Pacific in the first place?"

The easiest or most straight-forward answer is to the last question. The *Bounty* had been sent to Tahiti on a special mission to collect breadfruit plants, and to nurse them until they were resilient enough to transport across the sea to the West Indies. The plants were to be taken there in pots so they could be transplanted and cultivated as a staple food source for slaves working on sugar plantations.

Other frequently asked questions are: "Why does the mutiny still stimulate debate and historical analysis?" or "Why has the mutiny taken such precedence over grander and more important events in the annals of Pacific maritime history?"

Several reasons for the *Bounty* mutiny have been suggested ...

1. The mutineers had lived on Tahiti for several months while the breadfruit seedlings were growing. During this time they had been seduced by the lure of Tahiti, where they thought they could lead a life of ease in a tropical paradise with beautiful women. Captain William Bligh held this view:

"It will very naturally be asked, what could be the reason for such a revolt? In answer to which I can only conjecture that the mutineers had assured themselves of a more happy life among the Otaheitians ... which, joined to some female connections, have most probably been the principal cause ...

"... their female connections on the island has most likely been the cause of the whole business ... the women there are handsome and have sufficient delicacy to make them beloved. So it seems the men were happily entrapped by their seduction."

2. Bligh was a hard task master, a stickler for discipline, perhaps even a bully. Fletcher Christian eventually "cracked up" under relentless criticism and bullying from Bligh-he had simply been driven too hard and was no longer prepared to stand it.
3. Bligh was not a good leader, not a good "people person". He had lost the respect and support of his petty officers and crew. So when someone "cracked up" and incited other disaffected crew to mutiny, no one helped Bligh restore his authority. The *Bounty's* master John Fryer said the crew "did not like their captain".

Conflicting perspectives on Bligh and Christian

People who witness famous/infamous events can be selective about what they remember, and how they remember it. They want to present their perceptions and interpretations in the best possible light, especially where their own actions or those of their friends are concerned.

The following opinions were expressed by two men who knew Fletcher Christian, having served under his command.

Bounty midshipman and mutineer Peter Heywood-having received the King's pardon in October 1792-wrote an open letter to Fletcher Christian's brother Edward. This letter was published in a newspaper in Whitehaven, the Christians' hometown.

"Excuse my freedom Sir ... I will do myself the pleasure of waiting upon you and endeavour to prove that your brother was not the vile wretch, void of all gratitude, which the world has the unkindness to think him; but, on the contrary, a most worthy character ... beloved by all who had the pleasure of his acquaintance."

John Hallett, another *Bounty* midshipman (this one, however, loyal to his captain), wrote in defence of Bligh, whose reputation was being attacked by Fletcher Christian's family and friends:

"[I am] uninfluenced by any personal animosity to Mr Fletcher Christian, whose memory I wish had been quietly committed to oblivion; as I am convinced that the stain will be deeper impressed on his name, by the endeavours which his friends have exerted in vindication of his character."

In light of the character assassination that Bligh has been subject to in most versions of the *Bounty* saga, it seems that Hallett's opinion has largely been ignored. The usual characterisations of Fletcher Christian (as a sensitive soul or foolish romantic) seem far kinder than those assigned to Bligh (especially in Hollywood movies, where he is portrayed as tyrannical, harsh, authoritarian, stubborn and self-serving). Incidentally, Bligh had a poor opinion of John Hallett's abilities as a naval officer! As did Fletcher Christian apparently, who was keen to get rid of Hallett as well as of Bligh and, for that matter, as keen to be rid of fellow midshipman Thomas Hayward (Alexander, 2003:238).

An enduring story of timeless appeal

A number of reasons can be put forward for the continuing appeal of the *Bounty* mutiny story-especially the fact that it has provided such rich subject matter for historians to ponder.

1. The *Bounty* mutiny is an unusual, exotic and "racy" story.
2. The story was controversial from the start. Soon after the first reports, eyewitness accounts had appeared which conflicted with Bligh's version of events.
3. Some of the key players had influential defenders-e.g. Peter Heywood and Fletcher Christian-to plead their cases against Bligh's version and try to present mitigating circumstances for their actions.
4. There are varying, historicising interpretations-especially concerning Fletcher Christian, who has been trotted out by some historians as a proto-revolutionary hero. The seed for this interpretation may have been sown by Surgeon Hamilton:

"That unfortunate man Christian has, in a rash unguarded moment, been tempted to swerve from his duty to his King and country. But because he is in other respects of an amiable character and respectable abilities, should he elude the hand of justice, it may be hoped he will employ his talents in humanising the rude South Seas savages, whose remote situation from European powers has deprived them of the culture of civilised life."

Mythmaking-the mutiny at the movies

In the various films about the mutiny some of the saga's aspects have been given greater prominence, leading to portrayals which are often biased or one-dimensional. Here historical accuracy has been sacrificed to poetic licence and the interests of telling a good story.

Films have focused on specific events and incidents. The same incidents have been portrayed, often in a somewhat biased manner. This has resulted in stereotyped perceptions-for instance, of William Bligh as a stern, ogre-like disciplinarian, or of Fletcher Christian as a sensitive, romantic and revolutionary hero. In the case of the *Bounty* saga, the stereotypes have even become proverbial, especially where William Bligh is concerned.

When will Hollywood's fourth *Bounty* effort appear? Hopefully, when it does, much of it will be devoted to some of the equally compelling and dramatic aspects of the Pandora's story!

Keifer Sutherland or Russell Crowe as Bligh? Heath Ledger or Ioan Gruffudd as Christian? Eric Bana as Heywood? Halle Berry as Peggy Stewart?

Prospective scriptwriters and producers looking for a story consultant are encouraged to contact the Museum.



A poster from a 1935 Hollywood production.

After the mutiny

Having deposed Captain Bligh, the mutineers' catch cry was "Huzzah for Tahiti". On Fletcher Christian's orders, the *Bounty's* cargo of breadfruit plants-the reason the ship was in the South Pacific in the first place-was thrown overboard. The mutineer crew set sail for Tahiti, no doubt eager to be reunited with the women they had befriended or cohabited with during six months of breadfruit farming.

However, not all the men who stayed onboard supported the mutineers' cause. Some had wanted to go with Bligh, but had been prevented because there was not enough room in the launch. They were waiting for an opportunity to retake the ship or to escape.

James Morrison:

"... I had reason to believe from the countenance of affairs that the Ship might yet be recovered if a party could be formed and as I knew that several onboard were not at all pleased with their situation ..."

From the outset then, relationships were tense between the committed mutineers and some men who had apparently stayed onboard against their will. However, both groups banded together initially in spite of their differences. Settling with their Tahitian consorts and friends on Tubuai, one of the Austral Islands, they built a fort to protect themselves against a hostile local population with whom they later had several bloody battles.

Eventually, Fletcher Christian's best efforts to keep the Bountys together came to nothing. After three months of bloodshed fighting the Tubuaians, and discord amongst themselves, the men had had enough. A decision was made to abandon Fort St George on Tubuai.

James Morrison:

"... on a call for a show of hands, sixteen appeared for Taheite; when it was agreed that those who went on shore should have Arms and ammunition and part of everything on the ship."

On 22 September 1789 the *Bounty* was last seen on the northern horizon, after dropping off 16 Bountys and their consorts, all of whom had elected to return to Tahiti. Fletcher Christian sailed off with eight *Bountys* and their Tahitian wives and friends.

Their fate was to remain a mystery until an American sealing ship happened on tiny, uncharted Pitcairn Island 19 years later. The *Topaz* (under Captain Mayhew Folger) stumbled upon Pitcairn Island in 1808. By then, all but one of the mutineers (John Adams aka Alexander Smith) were dead. Most had died violently, including Fletcher Christian.

The first 10 years of settlement on the previously uninhabited Pitcairn Island had witnessed a violent confrontation between the mutineers and the eight Polynesian men who had accompanied them from Tahiti. When midshipman Edward Young died of asthma in December 1800, he was the first male to die of natural causes. Fifteen other adult males on the island had been murdered or had chosen suicide. Only Adams, several of the Polynesian women and numerous children had survived. Among the children was "Thursday October Christian", Fletcher Christian's son.

This early period of absolute isolation is characterised by the presence and skills of the Polynesian women, who are probably largely responsible for the survival of the community. Adams is credited with bringing Christianity and stability to the community. When he died in 1829, the tiny island's population was 77. Their descendants still live there today.

The mystery of the *Pandora* figurehead

No one knows what the *Pandora*'s figurehead looked like. Unfortunately, no sketches or drawings of it have come down from the 18th century.

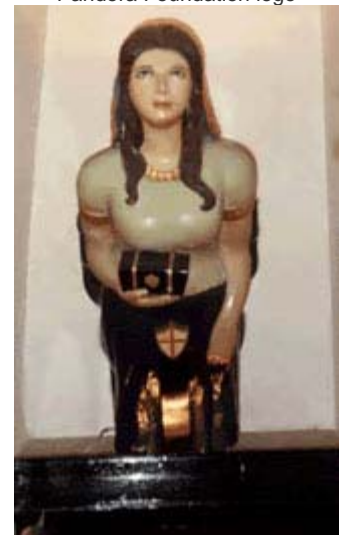
Stylistically, the figurehead may have resembled the one depicted in the *Pandora* Foundation's logo. Museum designer Robert Allen, who created the logo, was inspired by sketches of figureheads of 18th century Royal Navy frigates built by the *Pandora*'s builders after they had transferred their yards from Deptford on the Thames to a new location at Buckler's Hard in Hampshire.

Many late 18th century figureheads on RN ships depict bare-breasted women in flowing robes, each carrying an object popularly associated with their mythical persona. So, it is quite probable that the *Pandora* figurehead was carved carrying a box-this being the only instantly recognisable object associated with her name.

However, unless some new illustration is found, it is unlikely that we will find out what the *Pandora*'s figurehead really looked like. Unfortunately it probably has not survived the harsh environment underwater at the wreck. But, it cannot be ruled out that maybe some day a sketch will be discovered in an archive somewhere.

Reports of a figurehead, said to be based on the original from the *Pandora*, reached the museum in 1995. This stirred up some excitement at the time. Located in the stairwell of the Pandora Inn near Restronguet Creek in Cornwall in the UK, the reported figurehead was said to be a copy of the *Pandora*'s, based on the original. However, upon seeing a picture of the figurehead, some doubts arose about its authenticity as a copy of the original. To date, the claim that it is based on the original still appears somewhat fanciful.

Enquiries museum staff made about it have determined that the inn's figurehead was probably carved around 1965. The claim that it is based on the original is probably as doubtful as a text on a publicity brochure-published by the Inn's owners in the late 1980s-informing visitors that the Inn was once owned and managed by the *Pandora*'s Captain Edwards, after he had retired from the Royal Navy. Unfortunately for this piece of creative advertising, an association between Captain Edwards and Cornwall cannot be established historically.

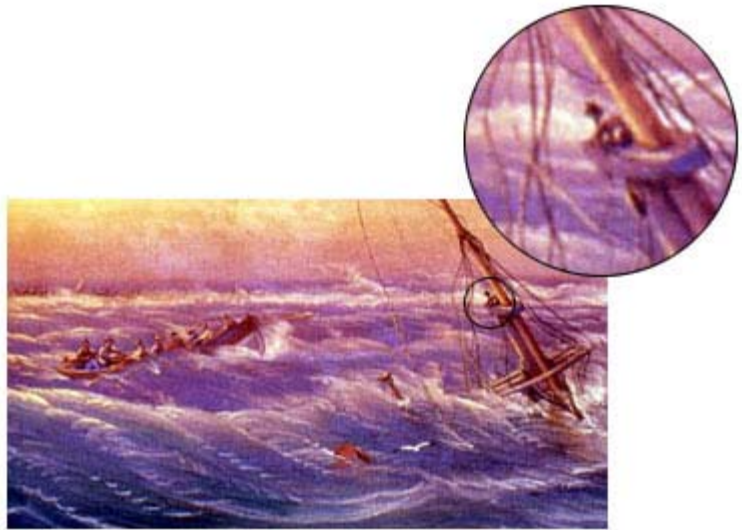


Figurehead in the stairwell at the Pandora Inn

What happened to the *Pandora's* cat?

The day after the wrecking, George Passmore, the *Pandora's* master, was sent back to the wreck in one of the boats to see if anything useful could be salvaged. He returned with several pieces of the masts, some lightning chain, and the ship's cat-found perched in the main masthead.

The cat isn't mentioned again, so her fate can only be guessed at. But no doubt, cat lovers would hope she didn't end up in a stew made by the hungry survivors during their gruelling open-boat voyage from Escape Cay to Timor. Perhaps a more acceptable alternative for cat lovers would be that puss ran away a few days later-when the survivors landed at Freshwater Bay on Cape York to look for water. (Perhaps she became the first feral cat in North Queensland!)



Detail from a painting attributed to William Tobin, possibly based on sketches by *Pandora's* midshipman George Reynolds. The cat is perched in the main topmast cap. Escape Cay can be seen in the distance.